

Linguistic Policies in Former British Colonies and the Status of English in Them

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The expansion of the United Kingdom from the XVII to the XX century created a vast colonial rule in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and the Pacific regions, leaving a huge linguistic legacy. Nowadays English functions as an official or dominant language in numerous former British colonies, particularly in Africa. The study analyses the linguistic policies in former British colonies, the status of English in them and the attitude of African people to the English language today.

In spite of the fact that the colonization period was ended in 20th century, a lot of states of Africa, especially those in the south of the continent, have made the English language their state language. These countries are Uganda, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, etc. However, the question of saving numerous local languages from extinction, keeping African culture as it is remains one of the most important issues for the government of each country. The linguistic situation in African countries is often complicated by several factors. For example, by estimates of UNESCO, the number of languages in Africa varies from 1500 to 3000, and there are no monolingual countries in this region[3]. Therefore, it is technically impossible to provide learning of all native languages in schools. In elementary school students initially learn their native language, but the choice of language is made by government, often arbitrarily. The English language is taught only after 2-3 years of studying the native language. Anyway, English is the global language, which is used in politics, business, cultural cooperation etc. That is why using such a lingua franca is necessary for African developing nations in order to establish friendly international relations.[5] The English language is often considered the best choice for developing countries, but the problem of the extinction of the local languages often provokes heated debates. Therefore, some countries pursue special linguistic policies.

Uganda's language policy is based on a combination of English as the official language, the recognition of Swahili as a second official language, and the active integration of native languages into primary education. The country's Constitution states the need to respect and support all languages of Uganda. English is the main language for government, legal, and educational purposes, inherited from the colonial era. In 2005 Swahili was proposed as a second official language to foster regional integration, particularly within the East African Community, although its implementation has faced historic resistance (since 2017, it has been taught as an optional subject in secondary schools). While the policy aims to promote local languages, 41 distinct living languages exist which makes implementation even more complex. Luganda is the most widely spoken local language and serves as the de facto lingua franca in the central regions and the capital, Kampala[6].

Anyway, in some states English is the only dominant language. English is the sole official language of Nigeria, chosen to facilitate unity among the country's over 500 diverse indigenous languages. While English is used for government, education, and business, major recognized languages include Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo. Nigerian Pidgin is also widely used as a lingua franca[7]. In 2022, the National Language Policy (NLP) was introduced. The policy required

that the first six years of education be conducted in the child's native language. Previously the use of the mother tongue or the language of the surrounding community was required for only the first three years of primary school. However, an extremely big number of languages in the country makes it impossible to train enough teachers and create teaching materials for all groups. In November 2025, the federal government canceled the NLP. The Minister of education Tunji Alausa announced a radical change to its language policy, abolishing mandatory mother-tongue education. English is now the official language at all levels of learning (from kindergarten to university), improving students' academic performance and global competitiveness.

One more example to be explored is linguistic policy in Kenya. Kenya established English and Swahili as two official languages. In spite of the fact that Swahili is the compulsory language for studying at school, a lot of educational programs in the English language have become increasingly popular [2]. This postcolonial state has reinterpreted English pragmatically (as a tool for national unity, global integration, and participation in the Anglosphere).

As we can see from statistics, a lot of young people prefer speaking English in their daily life rather than their native language. It causes concerns for the future of African culture.

The linguistic situation in African countries remains challenging. Most governments aim to balance decolonization efforts and the pragmatic socio-economic status of English. It seems that the trend for using English in daily life by young Africans is due to continue.

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