

COLONIAL LANGUAGE DIVIDE STILL HARMS SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

People who speak 'non-official' languages in sub-Saharan Africa do worse in school and more are likely to be excluded from politics and less informed about health campaigns. Research by **Katalin Buzasi** and **Peter Foldvari**, to be presented at the annual congress of the European Economic Association in Mannheim, shows how the modern vitality of African languages has been influenced by European colonisation.

Regions like sub-Saharan Africa are full of language variety, some of which became more 'important' due to European colonisation. In some cases, the languages of the colonisers (such as French and Portuguese) became those in which administration and education were done; while in other cases, the local languages that were used for Bible translations were given more prominence.

Analysing 273 ethnic language groups in 44 countries, the new study finds that the languages that were encouraged or standardised first are now more widespread, developed and important. By contrast, languages that were not affected by colonialism were not made more or less important, showing that outside influence was the key factor. More importantly, the fact that this split has worsened a social divide shows a previously neglected angle of how Africa's colonial past still affects its wellbeing today.

More...

Language is one of the most naturally emerging human institutions. Although macroeconomics and development economics provide empirical evidence that high ethnolinguistic diversity is associated with slow economic growth and bad political institutions, other dimensions of the linguistic situation receive little attention.

This paper focuses on the historical roots of current language development (also known as language status or vitality) in sub-Saharan Africa. According to the sociolinguistic literature, language status has significant effect on individual wellbeing: the speakers of non-official and non-educational languages perform worse in school, are more likely to be excluded from political decision-making and are less informed about disease prevention possibilities.

The sample the study analyses contains 273 ethnolinguistic groups in 44 countries. Based on the language vitality index of the Ethnologue, languages are grouped into seven categories. The geographical distribution of sample languages and their status are shown in Figure 1.

The empirical analysis reveals direct and indirect channels through which the current pattern of language development was shaped in sub-Saharan Africa:

- First, the languages of those ethnolinguistic groups that had a more complex socio-economic structure during the colonial period, as attested by ethnographic sources, have a higher status now, and their respective ethnic groups have higher share within the population.
- Second, the degree of socio-economic development of indigenous ethnic groups was positively affected by the presence of European missions, measured by the number of missions per 100 square km.

- Finally, languages that were standardised earlier by Christian missions, as measured by the date of the first Bible translation, also appear to be more developed today.

One of the most well-known differences among European colonisers is how they treated local languages. While the British and Belgians promoted the standardisation and the educational use of indigenous languages, the coloniser's language was exclusively used in public administration and education in French and Portuguese colonies.

But this study finds no empirical evidence that African languages are generally more developed in former British and Belgian colonies. Belgian and British colonial policies supported the spread of missions to a greater extent, which again has a long-term indirect effect on the status of languages via the three channels.

Finally, the researchers use a counterfactual analysis to reveal how the current language status pattern would look like if there has been no European influence (Figure 2).

Colonial policies and missionary activities caused the linguistic polarisation of indigenous societies. If the distribution of language status in Africa had depended only on geographical factors and traditional socio-economic organisation (dark grey columns), no language would have an extremely high or extremely low status, and the variance of language development would be lower.

These results offer a new insight into the development effects of European colonisation: the authors identified a so far neglected causal link through which the colonial past still affects welfare in sub-Saharan Africa.

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The long-term roots of language development in Sub-Saharan Africa
Katalin Buzasi and Peter Foldvari
Utrecht University

Contact:

Katalin Buzasi: k.buzasi@uu.nl

Peter Foldvari: p.foldvari1@uu.nl; +31659599592 or +36702633044

Figure 1
 Current languages status (language development) in Sub-Saharan Africa

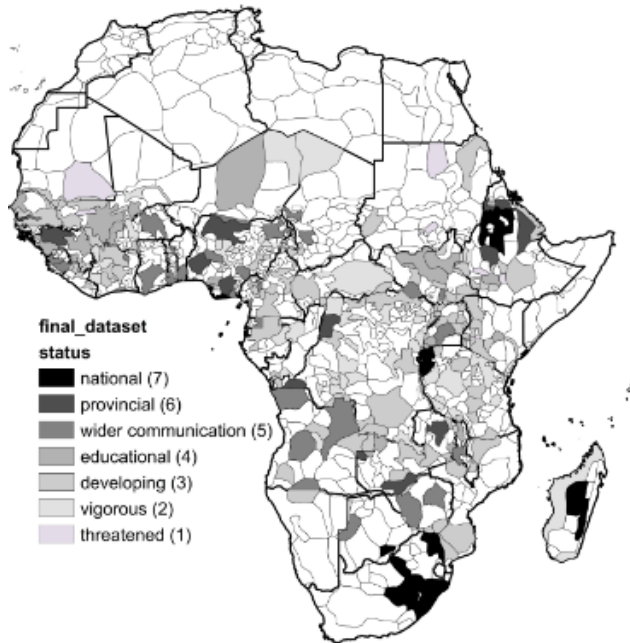


Figure 2
 The distribution of observed and counterfactual language status

