

ENGLISH AND THE DISTINCTLY AFRICAN UNIVERSITY: THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS?

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Abstract

This article develops the concept of a distinctly African university, which differs from other universities in actively promoting the preservation of African languages and cultures as part of its university mission. In pursuing this mission, a distinctly African university includes the study of African languages and cultures as part of its curriculum and research agenda, and may offer courses in which African languages are the medium of instruction. Research includes documentation, analysis and the production of African language texts, including texts in new genres. A distinctly African university which uses English as a medium of instruction and research may capitalize on the status of English as an international academic language in order to create bridging texts which link African languages and cultures to an international humanizing discourse rooted in the ideology of human equality and worth. In this way, the goal of preserving African languages and cultures may join forces with the need to use English as a link to the globalizing world, in contrast to the situation in which African languages and English are seen to be in competition.

Key words: English, African universities, African academia, African languages, African cultures

1. Introduction

This article emerges from a keynote address given at the University of Botswana in June 2011. The conference was the 6th International Conference given by that university's Department of English, with the theme "English and the Distinctly African University". This theme sets up an opposition between "English" and "African", with the implicit challenge to mediate between two poles, a challenge sharpened by the phrase "distinctly African".

This article presents a response to this challenge, one in which the use of English in African universities supports their role as *distinctly* African universities. Before turning to English, I will first discuss what it means for a university to be a distinctly African one and why it is so important for distinctly African universities to exist. As a prelude to this, I will discuss the nature of universities in general.

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2. The Interconnectedness of Universities

It is common knowledge that, to a certain extent, a university is an institution that is connected to a series of linked communities. At the minimum, it may be said that a university operates at both the local and international levels (Gallagher, 2009). At the local level, every university in the world is a product of the society in which it is located, the society which supports it and which it serves in return. It maintains links to this society through its students, staff and stakeholders, including other institutions, both governmental and private, and also institutions which are local but which represent other institutions farther afield, regionally and internationally, such as the United Nations. At the international level, every university is at least potentially connected to every other university by virtue of shared cultures and values. Universities across the world actively endeavour to reinforce this connectedness by establishing and maintaining a common academic culture and practices. These efforts may be seen in, among other ways, the use of external examiners and the constant study of practices at other universities when formulating policies and procedures. On a wider scale, the on-going development of the European Higher Education Zone as an outcome of the Bologna Process represents a formalization of this connectedness at the transnational level (Haug, 2003). Thus, the university is simultaneously a local and an international institution, with structures, goals and objectives that are (more or less) recognized internationally and which are paralleled in thousands of other such institutions all over the world.

3. The Distinctly African University

Given these observations, what may be expected of an African university? Based on the model just described, an African university may be expected to reflect and serve the particular African community in which it is located and, at a further remove, other African communities and, ultimately, the world community. Later, this article will propose that this international interconnectedness is crucial for a distinctly African university to fulfil its mission. For now, to return to the theme, what may be expected of a distinctly African university, as opposed to a merely African university (not all African universities need be distinctly African) or a non-African university? This article proposes that a distinctly African university is actively engaged in the preservation of African languages and cultures, which are increasingly under threat in the globalizing world, as is widely accepted to be the case, and regards such preservation and the promotion of the dynamic evolution of African languages and cultures as part of its mission.

It may seem that concern with African languages and cultures is part of what is meant when it is said that an African university reflects and serves its community, but this is not always the case. There are too many people, in universities and in communities, who view the Arts and Humanities with suspicion, as not being able to

contribute directly and immediately to development. This view has been challenged by scholars such as Abodunrin (2001) and Kalu (2001), and has been explicitly rejected by the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) (2011). Apart from the issue of how the Humanities contribute to development, this article proposes that, contrary to these views, a distinctly African university does value the humanities, in particular for the role these fields of study play in the preservation of African languages and cultures. In making these kinds of commitments, distinctly African universities become custodians of the treasure trove of African languages and cultures, alongside archives, museums, music, dance and drama groups, and other cultural organizations. The efforts of African universities in this regard may be replicated in the outside world, but can never be replaced (Nyamnjoh & Jua, 2002). In this respect, African universities are no different from universities in the rest of the world with the same local concerns. At the same time, this is why it is so important for Africa to have, not just universities, but distinctly African universities, which maintain an active concern for language and culture.

4. The Role of Distinctly African Universities in Preserving African Languages and Culture

So, what does the preservation of African languages and culture entail for a distinctly African university? In beginning to answer this question, I repeat the frequently made observation that preserving languages and cultures is a spontaneous process that takes place in every society when people actively use them and transmit them to their children. Linguistic and cultural decline take place when this process is disrupted, for the wide variety of reasons observed in the articles by Dorian (1992). This decline may be ameliorated through proper language planning and positive attitudes towards the languages and cultures under threat. These strategies underscore the fact that the most important driver of preservation is the active use of a language and culture and their transmission to the next generation of users. There may be records of languages and cultures, but no language is considered to be a living language without such transmission.

Having said that languages and cultures are preserved by people who use them and transmit them, it may seem that universities have no direct role to play in this process. However, one of the claims in this article is that universities also have a critical and unique role to play in the preservation of languages and cultures. With regard to the role of universities in the preservation of African languages and cultures, there are a number of relevant activities. These may be labelled, as in the standard performance management categories, as teaching, research and community service. All three of these are important, but this article will concentrate on teaching and research.

With respect to teaching, one important role of African universities is to establish African languages and cultures as the subjects of academic disciplines. These disciplines are then taught as courses, modules and majors. One effect of this activity is to enhance the prestige of African languages and cultures in the immediate community and beyond. When there is a Department of African Languages side by side with a Department of English, a statement is being made, that African languages and cultures are on a par with English language and culture (although I have my own quarrels with this particular way of drawing disciplinary boundaries). Teaching feeds and is fed by research, to which I now turn.

With respect to research, universities carry out at least three types of basic research activities. These are: documentation, analysis, and fostering the production of texts in African languages, which includes extending African languages to new genres. Each will be discussed in turn.

The first is documentation, which is very important, for at least three reasons. First, it preserves the forms of the culture. Whatever psychological content is given expression through these forms, the form is just as important as the content. Why is preserving form as important as preserving content? The main reason is that it is important historically: all living languages and cultures change, and future possessors and scholars of these languages and cultures will want to know what forms their cultural inheritances took in the past. Furthermore, the study of the patterning of such forms requires access to as much data as possible, in order to establish parameters of variation.

The second reason is that documentation makes these languages and cultures accessible to the outside world, a point that will become important below when the role of English in the distinctly African university is considered. In order to clarify this function, I note that documentation is a form of translation. This process does not only involve translation into other languages, but also includes translations into other forms of presentation. For language, this translation may take the form of presenting a text that was once presented orally and casting it in written form. It may also consist of presenting information about the language in forms that it never takes when it is used for communication. These forms include presenting the nouns of a language in terms of noun classes, or in terms of noun morphology, or presenting verbs in terms of verb paradigms. For other cultural genres, translation may take the form of a video presentation of what was once a live performance, or a written transcription. Translation in this sense, then, involves language and culture as they are used by insiders and casting them in a form which outsiders can begin to understand and appreciate. The fact that the outsider will not replicate the insider's experience is not a disadvantage, since any new cultural experience contributes to and enriches the outsider's unique mix of background and history. This type of translation, then, is very important, because there is no cultural appreciation of any kind without context which, for the cultural insider, is provided by the society in which s/he grows up. For the

outsider, some context must be provided, a context which links the insider's context to the outsider's context. In this case, the outsider's context is spelled out in the language of international academic discourse. The distinctly African university translates African languages and cultures into this international academic discourse, and thereby provides a context by which the outside world may come to understand and appreciate them.

The third reason for the importance of documentation arises from another advantage to the translation process just described. On the international level, there is a significant body of scientific research that is based on the assumption that all human languages and cultures have basic things in common, in spite of the differences that exist among them. Every record of every particular language and culture contributes to the understanding of human beings in general. It therefore also adds support for the ideology of the fundamental equality of all people.

I would like to emphasize at this point the status of a text that is produced by translation vis-à-vis the text that it is translated from. As we now understand it, translation reconstructs the original text, rather than simply providing an inferior version of it. From this perspective, we can say that a translation is a new text, with its own properties and context, at the same time that it is a text connected to an original (Varney, 2008). Its connection to the previous text is apparent, but it is a different text, because any change in any text provides a fresh tangent for interpretation.

Returning to research, the second basic research activity is analysis, which this article proposes is an extension of documentation when it is considered in the sense of translation. Analysis is the object of academic theoretical research, of the sort presented at conferences and published in books and journals. Analysis has suffered from the contempt of those who do not practise it, and sometimes of those who do. The value and importance of analysis is much less obvious than that of documentation. Analysis can seem irrelevant, sterile, something that drains life from the phenomenon that is being analysed. I would like to emphasize here that good analysis is nothing of the sort. At the very least, it extends the three essential functions of documentation in three ways.

First, analysis is like documentation in that it is a form of translation that provides, for outsiders, an entrance to the culture that they can use to begin to understand and appreciate it. To take one example, there is literary criticism of Shakespeare, which enables a greater appreciation of his work, for those of us who do not come from his culture. For the insiders of any culture, analysis can provide new insights and meanings at deeper levels. An example here would be literary criticism of contemporary literature situated within our own cultures, as well as similar critiques of film.

Second, analysis constitutes an extension to documentation in the sense of extending meaning. To make this idea clearer, I would like to take up one of the

purposes of culture, which, to my mind, is the major purpose. There has been a lot said about the purposes of culture, but I prefer to focus on its function of giving its users a framework within which to make meaning. Making meaning means making connections, with the further consequence that the resulting meaning is more than the sum of its parts.

Third, analysis, like documentation, clarifies and emphasizes the common humanity of people everywhere in the world. As said earlier, translation involves creating a new text based on an original text. Analysis, as well as documentation, is a form of translation which, in addition, changes the genre of texts. More than this, it extends the meaning of the original texts. The picture that emerges, then, is of a chain of texts connected to each other by shared meanings.

Returning to the functions of distinctly African universities in general, the third function concerns fostering the production of texts in African languages. This function includes the extension of African languages to new genres. African language texts include the academic books and articles I have already referred to, as well as textbooks, monolingual dictionaries, corpus projects and new creative writing, novels, poetry, plays, and others. Some may say that the potential readership for such texts is vanishingly small, but there is no way such a readership can be built up without continuing to develop the genres, with more and more texts, each of which will build and improve on its predecessors. In a sense, we might say: if we write it, they will read it. Even if such efforts fail to have the intended effect in the present, we will still have stored up what we possess in the present for the future, and those who follow us may find them to be treasures. Academics and creative artists have a responsibility to express what they know in academic and creative productions, no matter how miniscule the audience may be at any particular time. The distinctly African university may regard the maintenance of such linguistic and cultural skeins across generations, no matter how thinly stretched, as part of its mandate.

5. The Role of English

Let me turn to the role of English in helping the distinctly African university in its mission of preserving African languages and cultures. This may seem like an odd association, because the situation on the ground at present is that African languages are forced to concede more and more linguistic space to English. English crowds out African languages in contexts in which they might have been used, such as government, education, the judiciary and the media where they might be used. Furthermore, English is the most widely used international language, and knowing it opens doors that cannot be entered with local languages. The result has been an emphasis on children learning English for the purposes of advancement and, in the process, the African languages of their parents may be left behind. Another related

consequence has been the eroding of the prestige of African languages, continuing a process begun during the colonial period.

This situation has led to a certain degree of polarization with regard to linguistic attitudes towards both English and African languages. On the one hand, there are those who rightly deplore the ground lost by African languages and cultures, for reasons ranging from educational effectiveness to loss of diversity to pride and love. On the other hand, we have those who think that the outcome for African languages is already foreordained, and that English should be promoted at their expense, as the best way to link Africa with the globalizing world. Both sides of this divide assume that English and African languages occupy opposing and antagonistic positions; they differ only in their attitudes towards the eventual outcome. This article suggests a third view of English, one which does not necessarily invalidate these other views.

In terms of taking sides in this debate, I favour the preservation of African languages and cultures as living, active, dynamic systems. I favour it very strongly, as I favour all linguistic and cultural diversity. As one route to preservation, I also favour the reclaiming of linguistic space for African languages. One possible avenue of reclamation at the university level might involve offering African language medium courses, in any area of study, using African language medium teaching materials, to be taken for credit, alongside of English medium courses, with the possibility that an African medium course might be used to fulfil a requirement in place of an English medium course.

Such a strategy would need to be undertaken in full cognizance of potential obstacles. Political support from governments and other sectors of society may be lukewarm or absent. The most immediate stakeholders, parents and students, may continue the present flight from African languages to languages with more international currency such as English¹. Such an approach would also have to avoid the pitfalls of the Bantu Education system in South Africa during apartheid, in which the use of African languages as media of instruction was part of a separate and deliberately unequal educational system (Christie & Collins 1982)². It is noteworthy that a single type of action, such as the use of African languages as media of instruction, can have the positive effect of preserving African cultures and enhancing their prestige, or the negative effect of erecting a barrier to first rate education, depending on the social and ideological context in which it is employed.

At this point in history, the forces accelerating language endangerment make it unlikely that African languages will replace English in any of the linguistic contexts listed above in Anglophone African countries (Mufwene, 2002). However, this conception defines the goal too broadly. When all of the 6700+ (Solash, 2010)

¹ I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for reminding me of the importance of these issues.

² I am grateful to Grant Lilford and Samuel Ravengai for making this point at the conference.

languages of the world are considered, the vast majority of those that survive the impending mass extinction of languages (Simons & Lewis, 2011) will not be international languages or official national languages, but they will have survived because they have found a social and cultural niche. The distinctly African university may well consider its mandate to be successful if it contributes to the continuity of African languages by helping to create an internationally recognized niche for them. What is important here is that the victory does not have to be all encompassing to count as a victory.

At the same time, I suggest that English, as a language used in African universities, has a role to play in the preservation of African languages and cultures. This role is connected to the effect that teaching African languages and cultures at university level has in enhancing their prestige, as already alluded to. I suggest now that African universities also serve as a conduit for the same prestige that they confer at the local level by virtue of the complex web of connections to universities and other institutions internationally. How do they do this? Here I return to what I said earlier, about documentation and analysis providing accessibility to cultural outsiders. I will go further now and say that because documentation and analysis at the university level is cast in internationally recognized forms, the texts and discourses produced are easily perceived to be part of international discourses that take the equality of human languages and cultures for granted. They become part of the chain of texts that form these discourses and contribute to the production of new texts. This type of internationalization promotes prestige and respect for African languages and culture by situating them within the universal human context. The process may be compared to that which takes place when, for example, the Great Zimbabwe site is made a World Heritage Site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). It then takes its place alongside other World Heritage Sites and contributes to their stature as a group, while sharing in it. This embedding is made possible by the use of English, which is one of the languages of international academia. At this point, a picture emerges of a universal discourse of humanity, built up from the mediating texts produced by cultural insiders, complemented by the further interpretations of outsiders.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, this article has proposed a point of contact for two apparently incompatible concepts, the goal of a distinctly African university which actively promotes the preservation and evolution of African languages and cultures and the need for the use of English as one of the main international languages of the globalizing world. It has suggested that two of the main functions of the university in this process, documentation and analysis, are forms of translation by which the linguistic and cultural experience of the insider is reconstructed in a form that provides

the outsider with a point of entry, a context within which a different culture may be respected and appreciated. This cross-cultural communication contributes to a global cultural discourse which confers value on languages and cultures outside of their original contexts.

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