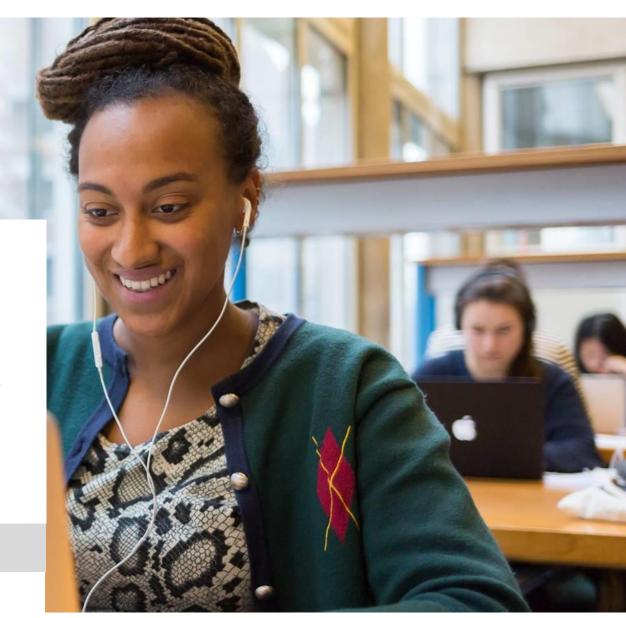# The opposing forces of decolonisation and the received scholarly tradition in the study of postcolonial English in Africa

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Disclaimer:
No corpora or questionnaires were hurt during the writing of this presentation,
it is also free of grammar lessons, analyses or any other harmful additives

Some reflections on things that are keeping me awake at night,
apart from running away more and more from DH and AI

Ongoing global challenges beyond "English"

- <u>Globalisation</u>: more contact, more migration

- <u>Digitalisation</u>: more contact, biases of large language models, training data; biases of online data as substitute for other forms of language use

- Renewed force to debates about <u>decolonisation</u>, black lives matter, and the counter-reaction from right-wing radicalisation, anti-wokeness

The challenge of scholarly voice

African scholar caught between multiple fires

- Received tradition, mainstream journals, monolingual bias, preponderance of studies of multilingualism in affluent, largely monolingual settings

- Decolonisation, scepticism of global north

- Isolation versus participating in the debates, building credible careers

- Pressure to make a difference, social good

Challenges pertaining to "English"

- "Perpetually declining standards"

- How best to teach

- English in multilingual contexts

- Situating the study of English in Africa

- Multiple simultaneous forces with conflicting consequences

Goals of this paper

- To offer my perspective on how these challenges play out in three domains:

    1. The role of English in multilingual Africa

    2. The description of African Englishes

    3. The teaching and learning of English in Africa

- To sketch the received tradition, decolonial challenges and pointers towards alternative responses and approaches

The role of English in multilingual Africa

Received traditions:

(1) Multilingualism is exceptional and even a problem, English is difficult because it is an additional language, Africans just don't speak English like an English speaker

(2) English is an important international language for the privileges and opportunities; English is a neutral language in situations of competition

Decolonisation perspectives:

(1) English is an alien imposition, cultural bomb that should be done away with, e.g. Ngugi

(2) A new indigenised English is required to tell your own story, e.g. Achebe

The role of English in multilingual Africa

Alternatives:

(1) Complementary rather than roles competing, solve the "puzzle" of stable multilingualism

(2) Cosmopolitan, world-minded versus isolationist positions: understanding connections & interplay of local, regional, global forces, rather than fixate on one

The description of African Englishes

Received traditions:

(1) Error analysis, regarding all or most deviations as deficiencies; English as an a priori, reified thing, to be transmitted to the minds of its learners;

(2) Exotic Englishes, e.g. literary characterisation or strange and unusual features as definitive or most prominent representatives in academic analysis

(3) Radical quantification, this is just digital data: drag the corpora into the statistical analysis engines and see what happens

The description of African Englishes

Decolonisation perspectives:

(1) African language logic (Makalela) transferred to English, understanding indigenisation

(2) Radical translanguaging perspective: only mobile resources being deployed without the need to locate stable features – that would be a western romantic notion of the nation state and its constructed languages

(3) Restandardisation (maybe after the fact, acknowledge what is already there. Bamgbose, Kachru)

The description of African Englishes

Alternatives

1) Nuanced terms and concepts: distinction between probabilistic & discrete features; distinction between acceptable & stigmatised features versus features below level of awareness

2) Emergentist and not aprioristic; reification equally evident in received tradition and decolonial perspectives, where languages are seen as agents that self-regulate their systems, with humans taking these grammar/language-things off the shelves for use

The description of African Englishes

Alternatives

3) Multilingual grammars, describe competences of multilingual users, rather than discrete and separate systems, or give up on the task and bend the knee before mobile resources and unruly bits of languages being deployed

4) Integrate linguistic and social aspects fundamentally: attitudes and norms are not separate from the "language" but impact on how the language evolves, achieves stable features etc.

5) Acknowledge complexity of influences and interacting forces, rather than apply Occam's razor to determine ultimate causes

The teaching and learning of English in Africa

Received traditions:

(1) Declining standards, improvement in pedagogy, better, authentic (native-speaker) materials, native-speaker teachers

(2) Text-based, academic-literacy oriented approaches drawing inspiration from functional approaches like Halliday's

Decolonisation perspectives mostly not developed, except:

(1) world Englishes's call for endonormative standardisation of local educated usage

(2) an open-ended translanguaging approach that invites multiple meaning-making resources into classroom

The teaching and learning of English in Africa

Towards an alternative:

(1) Clarity about goals, objectives – why teach English, what uses is it going to serve, different educational stages and different outcomes (e.g. primary school vs university)

(2) What target models will support those goals, how to get the target into the classroom and harness out-of-class experience and exposure

(3) What resources are available and can be put to use

Conclusions: Received tradition

- Global North perspectives on multilingualism and language teaching dominate practice and scholarly publication paradigms: languages are discrete objects that are added to existing languages in brain, but may result in competition & interference

- Aprioristic view of English, control of the language and its standards outside, African users as less than legitimate users, seen through the lens of deficiency

- Incorrect predictions, unhelpful and unrealistic practices, e.g.

  (a) there will never be enough "natives" to supply to the world to allow the non-natives to be in constant touch with these natives as per Quirk's requirement,
  (b) native-speaker review of articles…,
  (c) if the input isn't some standardised L1 model, then the interlanguage cannot be mapped as a trajectory from point A to point B, as point B doesn't exist in the learning reality

Conclusions: Decolonisation perspectives

- Anti-English stance solves none of the problems but makes light of them

- Ideology gets in the way of a critical understanding of the challenges, it forces binaries on a much more diffuse terrain

- Decolonisation isn't a fully adequate and accurate understanding of the problems (Taiwo 2022), ignores agency, globalisation, digital and other emerging communicative demands since liberation

- Need for nuanced critical perspective with wider understanding than a monocausal account [or alternatively, a metaphorical use of decolonisation that is semantically so inclusive that it ultimately applies to everything, thus becoming empty as explanation]

Conclusions: African alternatives

- Working out emergentist responses without giving up on the "project" (i.e. not simply translanguaging *über alles* as a way to avoid confronting the problem); framing the challenges, concepts of analysis: what to use, what to invent, theory-building, e.g.
  - Construe indigenisation and transnationalism/globalisation/digitisation as competing forces that have to be navigated simultaneously – multiple causes and explanations
  - Contextualisation: Africa isn't a particular to the universal of the Global North $\Rightarrow$ showing that particular theories that are universalised are just particular and not universal

Conclusions: African alternatives

- Solving the challenge of scholarly publication – owning your voice and getting published? How to become part of the AGENDA-SETTING process? Asymmetric responsibility (alongside the need to find a native to edit your writing)

- Pragmatic solutions to real world challenges, given realistic goals and understanding of available resources, rather than following imported theory