French in Lesotho Schools Forty Years after Independence

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Abstract
Most independent African states are now, like Lesotho, about forty years old. What has become of foreign languages such as French that once thrived under colonial rule albeit mostly in schools targeting non-indigenous learners? In Lesotho French seems to be the preserve of private or "international" schools. Can African learners in a developing country such as Lesotho, most of whom attend public or government schools, take to a European foreign language in a world where knowledge of key foreign language is quite often crucial? This paper will argue that learners' attitude to this question is conditioned by the official *raison d'être* of the subject as well as learners' awareness of it. The presence of French in Lesotho will be studied in light of Dabène's (1994) theory of "xénité" where it will be argued that the choice of a language by a prospective learner or institution is a function of the perceived distance separating the learner or institution from the target language. The paper will then make recommendations for a more successful approach to the teaching of French in Lesotho, chief among which is the introduction of French as an optional subject in government schools.

Introduction
A visit to the National University of Lesotho (NUL) French Department will reveal a first year intake of 93 black African students, most of whom are complete beginners in French. The few who have learnt French before are generally former students of private or "international" institutions such as Machabeng or National University of Lesotho International School (NULIS). Students are mostly female and ages range from 20 to 35. By any standard in the region, 93 students choosing to take a first year course in French is an indication of keen interest by a student body. Such interest or curiosity on the part of NUL students could be a sign that indigenous Basotho have some notion of the value of European foreign languages in a world where knowing a key foreign language can be a decisive factor in embarking on a fulfilling international career. Mankolo argues that

> …the implications for societies of globalization … are at the heart of present concerns to improve and upgrade

> education systems. The globalization of economies and societies at all levels has raised a new challenge, requiring the adaptation of educational content to meet both personal and national demands in individual countries, as well as in the international arena. (Mankolo, 2006: 1)

A quick survey will however show that the vast majority of Sotho schools do not offer French or any other foreign language as a subject. The few interested Basotho young men and women discover it as adults through the national university or at the Alliance Français in Maseru. In fact, it appears only private schools offer the subject in Lesotho[1]. This is a strong sign that the presence of French in Lesotho is not clearly appreciated by the vast majority of Basotho, decision makers included. Yet the very fact that a subject seems to exist on the fringes of the system makes it a policy as well as a curriculum issue. On the other hand, authorities, once convinced of the need to introduce French could find themselves faced with the "headache" of finding space on overloaded school curricula for new subjects.

Independence from Britain forty years ago was the natural take-off point for black-driven policies in Lesotho. We need to find out the state of the linguistic challenge in Lesotho and the place of the French language in the formal school system and the role the language was meant to play in learners' post-school lives before independence. We shall thereafter analyze developments after independence before making recommendations as to how Basotho could take full advantage of foreign language opportunities to enhance their personal career opportunities and contribute more effectively to the overall development of the nation as a whole. But first let us take a look at some reasons why language policy designers could not have concerned themselves with foreign language education in the first forty years of independence.

Imperatives of Integration, Language Policy and the Curriculum

Most language policies in Southern African countries formerly colonized by Britain pay no attention to the teaching of foreign languages. This seems to be a very normal tendency given the urgent business of nation-building. Post-independence language policies are naturally dominated by nationalistic concerns and therefore totally ignore the existence of foreign languages in local educational institutions and their role in the country as a whole. In fact, in countries like Zimbabwe, the pressing need to integrate blacks into the economic mainstream saw school authorities compelled to offer new technical subjects focused on the immediate developmental needs of the nation. To

[1] The French department at NUL had difficulties finding suitable schools for a rare crop of three student teachers going on teaching practice in 2007.

create space for the new subjects, foreign languages like French had to make way, very often resulting in the closure of French departments.

In some countries, including Lesotho, French has been made to compete against national language(s) with students having to choose between their own language and a foreign one. This has often left learners and their parents with no choice but to abandon the foreign language for subjects perceived to be of more economic and cultural value. The result is that the continued existence of foreign languages on local curricula in some SADC countries is at best precarious.

At independence, the most pressing need of formerly oppressed and segregated societies was to integrate major local languages into the curriculum and consequently boost the status of the indigenous peoples and their culture(s). Independent Southern African countries invested huge resources into ensuring that formerly marginalized local languages were transcribed and taught at all levels and that they were developed enough to be used in official communication (Chimhundu, 2002). Several African countries are still grappling with the idea of making African languages technologically competent so that, like Afrikaans in South Africa, they can be used for instruction at secondary and tertiary levels and freely in business communication. Some have even considered the development of regional African lingua franca in the mould of Esperanto. (www.adeanet.org/newsletter/Vol8No4/en-n8v4-2, 16 March, 2001)

However, in most southern African countries the dust seems to be slowly settling on the language policy front. Even recently independent South Africa now has a comprehensive language policy that has been cascaded down to institutions of higher learning. (Witwatersrand University, for instance, now has its own language policy derived from the national one.)

Forty years into independence is a good time to look back and see what has been the fate of French in Lesotho. What space, if any has been given to the subject/ language in Sotho society and in particular on the national curriculum? What should be done if French is to have a future in Lesotho for the benefit of all? While it was imperative and even inevitable in the years immediately following independence, for Lesotho to concentrate on defining and consolidating the status and socio-economic role of national and official languages as a means of nation building and ensuring sustainable long-term economic development, the time has now come to further propel the nation forward by turning to the deliberate teaching of key foreign languages such as French.

In Lesotho, the key place and role of Sesotho have never been in doubt because it is one of the few African countries that have one indigenous language spoken by a vast majority of the population (Chimhundu, 2002). In fact, such is the hold of Sesotho that even though it is officially the language of instruction for only the first four years of primary education, in practice, it appears to even rival English as the language of instruction well beyond those

years. Even at NUL, lecturers and students interact freely in Sesotho in and outside the classroom. Furthermore, Sesotho appears to be the favourite medium of verbal business communication with only a few being bilingual (e. g. passports, bank notices, etc.). In some written business communication, the terms Ntate and Mme, for instance, appear to have replaced Mr. and Mrs./Ms in texts otherwise written in English. In this diglottic situation therefore, Sesotho appears to have more value than English in the eyes of Basotho.

It is worth noting that the dominance of Sesotho is probably enhanced by Lesotho's erstwhile status as a British protectorate rather than colony. As a protectorate, the Basotho language and culture were not really put in direct competition with English as was the case in the colonies such as South Africa and Zimbabwe. In these countries being educated meant being able to speak, read and write in English. The indigenous languages were regarded as representing lesser civilizations and as being of little value to the economy of a modern country. The *Sunday Times* of South Africa reports that the vast majority of black South African Matriculation candidates in 2006 preferred to take Afrikaans as a second language rather than Zulu, claiming the latter is "difficult". However, in Lesotho there was much less to be done to make Basotho appreciate Sesotho in Lesotho (or Setswana in Botswana for that matter) than there was to make Zimbabweans or South Africans appreciate the value of their indigenous languages. Up to today, passing indigenous languages in Zimbabwean or South African school examinations has little bearing on a child's socio-economic future.

Given the relatively dominant status accorded to Sesotho, it would appear that the imperatives of linguistic unification and status enhancement of the national language are by and large attained in Lesotho. Would it therefore not be time that language policy planners in Lesotho considered the place and role of French (and any other selected foreign languages) in the local education system, with a view to ensuring the nation benefits as much as possible from the teaching of this foreign language? A short overview of the origins and development of the teaching of French in Lesotho will help show how this is both feasible and useful. The argument for French in Lesotho shall be based on the premise that the distance separating the Basotho from the French culture and language is much less than between the latter and peoples of other non-francophone SADC countries. This is because the more people identify themselves with a given target language, the more they perceive the value of that language. Analysis and discussion will be based on the notion of "xénité" (strangeness or foreignness), which stipulates that the greater the cultural and economic distance separating prospective language learners from the target language the less likely they are to seek to learn it and vice-versa (Dabène, 1994). The notion of "xénité" builds on the earlier notion of practical utility or utility value.

The Practical Utility of a Foreign Language

The practical utility of a language defines the benefit a learner gains from the linguistic knowledge in the long term (Bogaards, 1991). For instance, in SADC countries such a Zimbabwe, English is a prerequisite for a place in a tertiary level institution and even to get most middle and high income jobs. This notion has implications for the learner's attitude (interest and personal investment in the learning process) towards the target language and the approach to it. Bogaards asserts that once one has learnt English, the person lose interest in learning any more European languages because of the immense utility value of English. He argues that, if learning English as a foreign language is definitely useful for most speakers of other European languages, since English is some sort of lingua franca, learning one of these other languages hardly has similar attraction for speakers of English (ibid.).

While the notion of practical utility is helpful, it only suggests the possible origins of that utility or lack of it. It also assumes that every prospective foreign language learner is mature and has power to choose what s/he learns. This is not always the case where school children are concerned. The theory also tends to define the value of a language mostly in economic terms and therefore, based on Bogaard's argument; it could be assumed that Basotho who are English-speakers would have little interest in learning French. However, the trend at the NUL French Department noted above appears, if not to fly in the face of this theory, at least to beg for further exploration of the question. Dabène develops the notion of utility further by analyzing in detail the underlying factors of the perception of a language as being useful or not through her notion of "xénité".

Distance as Factor in Language Policy Design and Language Learning

In an officially bilingual country such as Lesotho, every individual must learn the national language, Sesotho, as well as the official language, English. Since English is already for many akin to a foreign language, learning French can prove to be quite onerous for most Basotho school children. Reasons most frequently cited by those opting not to learn French include:

a) the difficulty of the language (It's so different from Sesotho or English.);
b) its "uselessness" (What will I do with it?);
c) lack of people to converse with in French (Where will I use it? Whom will I talk to?).

Such statements, albeit mostly stereotyped, warrant a review of the environment in which the language is learnt.

The conditions in which the French language is learnt in Lesotho can best be qualified as "exolinguistic" (Dabène, 1994). For Dabène, an exolinguistic situation is one in which the target language is removed from the learner's

universe and where the institutional contact that the learner has with it (target language) is accompanied by no meaningful extra-institutional acquisition" (Dabène, 1994). This is the very essence of the term "foreign" in foreign language viewed from a language education perspective.

Dabène uses the notion of distance to define what she terms various degrees in the foreignness (xénité) of languages[2]. She describes three different types of distance which define the foreignness of a language.

a) *Material distance*

This is geographical separation, which affects even relations that teachers have with the countries whose language they teach. Lesotho is about 3000km from the nearest French-speaking country Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a country with which it actually has no official arrangement concerning the teaching/ learning of the French language. The only bilateral agreement Lesotho has with another country concerning French is with France, a country about 12000km away and whose embassy to Lesotho is in South Africa. Moreover, Lesotho is totally surrounded by English and Afrikaans-speaking South Africa. In fact, any international contact French teachers may have with other speakers of French is likely to be with colleagues in neighbouring South Africa. The situation is however tampered by the presence of the thriving and committed Alliance Française of Maseru which strives to bring together French-speaking locals and Francophone expatriates and tourists. The Alliance Française actually has an open invitation to all teachers of French and other "friends" of the French language and culture (les Francophiles) to use their premises as a socio-cultural venue and library. Their commitment to institutions teaching French in Lesotho is demonstrated most eloquently by the support they give NUL French Department.

b) *Cultural distance*

According to Dabène, divergences of a cultural nature can take the form of differences in relational practices and in value systems prevailing in the societies or the educational systems that they engender (ibid.). Such divergences can actually engender antipathetic attitudes towards a given language, its speakers or culture. Of all Southern African non-Francophone countries outside South Africa, Lesotho probably has the most peculiar cultural bond with the francophone world. The French language and culture have significant links to Lesotho because the country was evangelized by protestant Franco-Canadian missionaries in the early 19th century. The contribution of these missionaries to Sotho culture is quite significant. Their most telling impact is probably in the linguistic domain because they laid the foundation of the linguistic unity of Lesotho through their transcription of

[2] « degrés dans la xénité des langues »

Sesotho and the translation of the Bible into Sesotho (Castel, 1988). By so doing, they imposed the Sotho language as the undisputed medium of national communication in the country. Generally, the Whites are called "makhoa" in Sesotho, while the French are called by a special name, "maFora", and their country "Fora". Franco-Canadian culture also contributed to the moulding of the religious face of modern Lesotho. Pius XII seminary, close to the National University, has a Franco-Canadian (Quebec) past. So do numerous schools, missions, churches and hospitals throughout the country. This has engendered a lot of positive sentimental value for French people in Lesotho.

c) *Structural/ linguistic distance*

These are differences noted in the two linguistic systems the foreign language learner has to handle – that of his mother language and that of the target language. We are not aware of any contrastive study carried out in Lesotho between Sesotho and French. We note however major differences in all areas of the linguistic system – phonetic, phonological, syntactical or lexical. There are nevertheless peculiar similarities in the phonetic domain. For instance, the sound [R] as in [Roma] is identical to the Parisian [R] and quite different from the [r] generally noted in most other Bantu languages. A study in this area could probably note other similarities and determine their origin.

The use of English as the main official medium of instruction could actually further complicate the situation of the Sotho learner of French. The teacher explains grammatical complexities in English, all translation work involves only English and all bilingual textbooks and dictionaries are in English. Yet most black Sotho learners are still in the process of learning English.

Effects on the Place of French in Lesotho

Of the three types of distance, only structural distance seems to present an obstacle to the prospective learner of French. Cultural and material distances, could actually present opportunities for Lesotho. Even the fact that Basotho children have to learn English, a European and therefore "foreign" language to them, could actually be seen as equipping them with strategies to learn other European languages in the future. The question is how strongly are these opportunities perceived in the post-independence dispensation? Past links to Francophone culture and French language do not appear to have persuaded the policy makers to give greater space in the curriculum to the French language than has been the case in neighbouring countries.

As in all countries colonized by the British, there were two curricula in the protectorate of Lesotho, one for the Whites and the other for the Blacks. French featured in the White schools curriculum but had virtually no place in Black schools. Aims and content of the subject were literally transplanted from Europe where foreign language education had a strong bias towards culture. Young Whites learnt French in order to use in their international

travels to France or Canada (Quebec), not in Lesotho. The result of this bias was very clear in the Cambridge "A" Level syllabus which was dominated by the study of French literature. The study of African writers or writers from anywhere else outside France was neglected.

French as a subject therefore does not feature prominently, if at all, in the academic tradition of the majority of the black actors involved today in the teaching/ learning of French: various bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education, teachers, learners and parents. Further, research has shown that in the post-colonial climate where the priority is on the construction of an "indigenous African" identity, European foreign languages lose even more of their value in the eyes of Blacks (cf. Dabène, 1994, p.33, on a similar situation in Nigeria).

Special Mention of French in the National Language Policy

An intergovernmental conference on language policies in Africa held in Harare, Zimbabwe in 1998 attended by Lesotho set out to

> … define prospects for the political and technical management of the African linguistic context, with the main outcome expected being a mutually agreed reference framework to be used by each African state to set out a clear and comprehensive national language policy indicating clearly the statuses and functions of the languages in use and the measures proposed to implement that policy." (Chimhundu, 2002)

The conference excluded foreign languages (languages not normally used in daily official or unofficial interpersonal communication such as French or Portuguese in Lesotho) from future language policies by stipulating that countries should specify the use of languages "… in the exercise of state functions and in relations between the state and its citizens." (ibid.) This statement is controversial in that it assumes that the importance of language can only be measured in terms of its value to the state. It effectively relegates foreign languages to an undefined and neglected socio-economic space in African countries. A direct result of such an approach is that little official thought is given to foreign languages and resources for their development are scarce if at all they exist. In fact, in most English-speaking Sub-Saharan countries, languages like French continue to be taught only because of the direct financial backing of France. However, history has shown that it is possible for African governments to deliberately move to teach foreign languages once political and economic benefits for the country have been clearly defined. This is the case of Zimbabwe which recently introduced the teaching of Chinese language and culture at the University of Zimbabwe in support of the state's "Look East" economic policy that seeks to develop relations with Asian countries such as China. An interesting feature of this

conference however is that it refers to European languages used in Africa as official languages as "imported" or "foreign languages" (Chimhundu, 2002, p. 15). The peculiar use of the label "foreign" by national policy makers is worth noting. It inadvertently puts languages called "foreign" because they are only taught to a few learners in selected schools and those European languages that actually dominate official and public communication space in a given country on a par. The new attitude appears to be that henceforth only indigenous languages will occupy protected space.

At another pan-African language policy development workshop at which Lesotho was represented, the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) concluded that, "No language policy can be dissociated from economic, social and cultural realities, and that education must allow for a broadening of life's opportunities" (www.adeanet.org/newsletter/Vol8No4/en-n8v4-2, 16 March, 2001). The peculiar and positive contribution of French culture to Sotho nation building and language development is something that Lesotho may want to recognize and document officially. The government should also consider the active role played over the years by the French government in the development of French as a subject in the country, particularly at the nation's highest institution of learning, NUL. Further, a key foreign language like French mastered by key players in public administration and business would definitely broaden opportunities for Basotho as individuals and Lesotho as a country.

A brief statement defining the historic and unusual contribution of Francophone people to local culture and officially giving French preferential status ahead of other foreign languages that may eventually be of interest to Lesotho could be added to national language policy. The policy should go on to describe the role that French will play in the future development of the country. This would then serve as a useful and unifying guide for the nation's curriculum developers and education administrators. While such a political statement may appear superfluous to some who may be wont to argue that after all French is already being offered in some institutions and that it is up to schools to decide if they wish to teach it or not, there is no escaping the reality that ADEA recognizes: "Political will lies at the heart of any reform effort" (ibid.). If therefore French is to be taught in an organised and well-focused manner beneficial to Lesotho, a clear policy statement is essential.

French on the Curriculum as an "Optional Subject"

Among the factors that go into formulating a curriculum is the notion of defining "ideals" to pass on to the younger generation. "The curriculum is the most obvious and direct means in the whole educational organisation of transmitting national and community ideals from the older to the younger generation." (Ruperti, 1976, p. 113) While newly independent nations' ideals may leave little room for European foreign languages (which after all are for some a sore reminder of colonialism), more mature independent nations must

realize the importance of these languages in their long-term goals. Such countries must take note of globalization where nations, especially developing ones, can ill afford the luxury of an introverted curriculum. Countries like Lesotho must aggressively seek to network with institutions in developed nations in order to survive and prosper.

A curriculum choice that Lesotho can adopt is to introduce French in schools as a means of differentiation through which the nation's elite is defined (business leaders, government leaders, diplomats, etc.). "In secondary education differentiation takes place by means of a system of optional subjects and here again the four streams are taken into account." (Ruperti, 1976, p. 123) In a system of "streams", pupils are placed in classes according to their performance. Over and above a common curriculum of "core" subjects considered essential for any youth, selected subjects would be made available only to certain streams. For instance, the "top" stream would take French over and above the core load of subjects available to all other streams. Colonial Rhodesia and South Africa developed this system to perfection and it is still in use in those countries today.

Planners will also have to decide the objectives and content to be covered depending on the intended end use given that choice of teaching and learning approaches depends on the context in which the target language is learnt. Lack of direct contact, be it live or deferred, with other speakers of a foreign language can affect language learning programs. If objectives formulated in terms of communicative competence are useful where learners are likely to meet speakers of the target language (during their holidays or their careers, for instance), such is not the case for learners who won't have such opportunities. For the latter, it could be preferable to develop syllabuses based on a structural approach or limit the content to a given aspect of the language such as written comprehension (Bogaards, 1991).

Benefits for Lesotho

Lesotho is a relatively poor developing country, massively dependant on its more industrialised neighbour, South Africa, whose mines employ up to 35 percent of Lesotho's male adults of working age. Lesotho's most urgent need is therefore economic development. A French-speaking elite could help Lesotho realize this goal in the following sectors:

a) Tourism: Lesotho is an attractive tourist destination thanks largely to its climate (snow in winter with even a possibility of skiing), mountainous terrain and peaceful atmosphere. The influx of tourists from French-speaking countries could be increased by the guaranteed presence of competent French-speaking tourist guides and travel agents in the country. These could be employed both by the government ministry in charge of tourism as well by the private sector.

b) Business: The confidence of investors from French-speaking countries could be boosted by the knowledge that they would be aided by competent local translators and interpreters in their interaction with local players in business instead of having to bring expensive translators from outside Lesotho. The very presence of French-speaking locals in Lesotho, added to the historic Francophone influence in this country, could be an attraction on its own for businesses from Francophone countries.

c) Education: The French, mostly through the Alliance Française of Maseru, are already active in the local education sector. The French Department at NUL was launched by French experts and all local lecturers in the department were trained in France and Canada. If the government were to take the above suggestions, the French government and/ or the Canadians could see in it a committed partner, not only in the teaching of French but also in the diffusion of French and Francophone cultures. The French and/ or Canadians could increase their commitment to the teaching of French through the provision of scholarships for future teachers, guides, translators, etc. They could also help source teaching materials and even collaborate in the development of teaching resources (e. g. textbooks) that respond more directly to local curriculum objectives and the needs of learners in this part of the world.

d) Culture: Since language is inseparable from culture, greater interest by Basotho in French will translate into greater appreciation of the French and Francophone cultures as well as the cultures of other French-speaking countries. This will satisfy the curriculum need of broadening the youth's horizons and increasing their options in life. It could also get the French interested in investing more in cultural projects of benefit to both the Sotho and French cultures. A highly successful example within the SADC region is the annual Harare Festival of the Arts in Zimbabwe which benefits a lot of local artistes and artistes from Francophone countries.

Conclusion

The French language is part of the national heritage of Lesotho. It is hardly tainted by any of the terrible memories associated with conquerors' languages elsewhere. To the contrary, Basotho look back at the contribution of "maFora" to their country's development with a touch of fond nostalgia. France and other French-speaking countries remain committed to working with Lesotho to develop the teaching of French in the country to the mutual benefit of all. There are ways in which the forty year-old nation can maximize its benefit from this past. A clear statement defining the place and role of French in modern Lesotho as well as a well-studied positioning of the language on the national curriculum are clearly at the heart of such a strategy.

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