ACADEMIC JOURNALS
expand your knowledge

African Journal of Political Science and International Relations

Full Length Research Paper

"Mother tongue won't help you eat": Language politics in Sierra Leone

Mneesha Gellman

Marlboro Institute for Liberal Arts and Interdisciplinary Studies, Emerson College, USA.

This article addresses the question, how does Sierra Leone's language regime, moderated through formal and informal education, contribute to post-war globalization dynamics? Since Sierra Leonean independence from Britain in 1961, Krio, a type of Creole, has gone from being the mother tongue of a small ethnic minority to the lingua franca, particularly in Freetown, the state capital. English has been Sierra Leone's elite language since colonial times and remains the only official language of government. Yet many other languages are spoken in Sierra Leone in different communities and contexts. Drawing on interviews and political ethnographic work in Freetown and the districts, the study argues that language and identity shift connected to post-war globalization reflects tensions between upward socio-economic mobility and cultural survival.

Key words: Sierra Leone, language, education, participation, identity, citizenship.

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Lamin Kargbo, of The Institute for Sierra Leonean Languages (TISLL) in Sierra Leone's capital city of Freetown, describes the challenges of promoting mother tongue adult education: "People are looking at it like, if you are literate in mother tongue, what will you eat? Will it get you a job? Are you even considered literate? This is because only people who go through the formal education system are counted as literate" (Kargbo and Jones, 2014). With this assessment, Mr. Kargbo summarizes one of the many contradictions of Sierra Leonean language politics that citizens must navigate as they move through both formal institutions and daily informal speech. This article addresses how Sierra Leone's language regime, meaning "language practices as well as conceptions of language and language use as

projected through state policies and as acted upon by language users" (Sonntag and Cardinal, 2015: 6) contributes to post-conflict globalization era citizenship.

At the theoretical level, the study argues that language choice in educational sectors informs identity, and that the reality of post-conflict globalization entails language hierarchies that shape people's language preferences and repertoires. Formal sector education policies are part of the state's language regime, while informal education practices constitute part of lived language practice. Numerous studies from other countries have confirmed the way in which globalization, migration, and the quest for upward mobility shape language choice at individual as well as institutional levels, including in schools (Coronel-Molina and McCarty, 2016; Faingold, 2018;

E-mail: mneesha_gellman@emerson.edu.

Telles and Sue, 2019). Across these formal and informal education spaces, Sierra Leoneans respond to a shift in economic, social, and political environment unfolding within a volatile post-war and post-Ebola crisis context, where the underlying drivers of conflict, including unequal access to insufficient resources, remain present.

Language in places like Sierra Leone may be seen as not political, since civil conflict has not fallen precisely along linguistic and ethnic lines, and yet the study argues in this and other works that language in both policy and practice is highly political because it forms the identity context in which people navigate all other aspects of their lives, including work, education, and politics. One intervention the researcher offers as a political scientist with an interest in language rights and education is to assert the importance of language policy and practice *as* political, and something that political scientists ought to pay more attention to in a range of cases. The study does not proscribe language policy for Sierra Leoneans, but rather addresses the complexity involved with trying to maintain cultural identity in the face of desire for upward economic and social mobility in a place that remains one of the most impoverished countries in the world. Since English operates as the high-status language in Sierra Leone, the shift to Krio may produce better language cohesion for people across ethnic groups, but will not allow most people access to the middle and upper class jobs, including politics and international development that continue to require English.

While much attention has been paid to Sierra Leone's transitional justice process, very little international or domestic attention has been directed to its language politics in the post-conflict globalization phase of the twenty-first century. The study contribution is to assert the importance of language politics in Sierra Leone as worthy of political science attention, and to document how institutions and people navigate a language regime operating in the midst of post-conflict globalization. Future researchers may further develop the case study with their own methods and agendas.

Key concepts and terms

Citizenship is the status of holding territorially affiliated rights within a given state. This article focuses on how language use, derived from formal and informal educational access, maps onto how people imagine or perform their roles as citizens. It defines citizenship performance as the process by which people engage in the social contract, both claiming their rights and carrying out their responsibilities in relation to the state. Participation is generally conceived of as action that results from following through on a choice to do something with others. Indicators of institutional political participation include voting, meeting with elected or selected officials, or serving in those roles oneself, as

well as extra-institutional participation such as protesting or petitioning to influence policy (Gellman, 2017:12-13). Indicators of cultural participation may also be political and could include things like membership and activities in secret societies, facilitating rites of passage ceremonies or religious practices, as well as teaching and learning indigenous languages and associated customs.

The researcher has argued elsewhere that state language regimes in some countries are rooted in colonization practices that seek to homogenize the populace (Gellman, 2019). The researcher has also previously made the case that in Sierra Leone, individuals and groups held memories that influence identity and participation (Gellman, 2015: 151). In line with Trudell (2012) who looks to find ways for people to address both upward mobility through dominant languages while retaining cultural particularity through mother tongues, this article explores the conceptual aspects of schooling in a multilingual context, to better understand the tensions resonant in language practices in daily life, including in participation repertoires.

Language death is not a theoretical possibility in Sierra Leone; it is a process on march. UNESCO cites five Sierra Leonean languages as being in danger of disappearing: Bom, Kim, Mani, Mo-Peng, and Sei, and many more will join this list as the number of speakers drop over the coming years (Kanu undated). The depreciating value of mother tongue use in Sierra Leone is indicative of the continuing rise of English language hegemony around the world (Crystal, 2013; Dor 2004).

While English is a vital skill for economic advancement through employment and study, Trudell has documented that schooling in the colonial language often opens these opportunities for mostly those who come from privileged backgrounds, and that mother tongue instruction could in fact yield stronger schooling outcomes for those most in need of mobility (2012: 369-70). What it means to be Sierra Leonean in a post-conflict globalizing world is at stake in the arena of language choice. The study refers to mother tongue as the language or languages in which one is raised and bypasses debates over terminology (Childs et al., 2014: 169, 180-1). Heritage tongue indicates a language that may no longer be a mother tongue because of shifting language use patterns, but that still connects someone to their ethnic heritage.

METHODS

This study draws on a range of causal and interpretive research methods (Blatter, 2017:2) to address Sierra Leonean language politics. This includes a year of political ethnographic work (2013-2014) in the Wilburforce neighborhood of Freetown, where the researcher engaged in daily exchanges with Sierra Leoneans in English and Krio. Twenty qualitative interviews with language teachers, policy officials, and non-governmental organization (NGO) workers ware also conducted in education and language-related fields, and many informal discussions with linguists, educators, and development workers about research themes, including Sierra

Leonean Masters in Development Studies students at the Forah Bay College, where the researcher taught. It should be noted that this study is replete with limitations.

The author is a white cultural and linguistic outsider in Sierra Leone, and responses to her questions most likely were filtered through the positionality of power that comes with that identity. Nevertheless, her extended time in Sierra Leone compounded by the lack of attention that language politics there has received makes this one small contribution to a larger conversation about cultural and economic survival. The researcher hopes that future researchers, including Sierra Leoneans fluent in Krio, Mende, Temne and other Sierra Leonean languages, will take up these research questions and further investigate them through the lenses of their own positions as well. In this way, a more complete picture of language politics in the country can emerge.

The article proceeds as follows: first, the study reviews the colonial language regime to document how British rule played a major role in setting Sierra Leone on the course for indigenous language loss. Second, the study assesses the contemporary status of languages in Sierra Leone both within and outside of the formal education sector. Third, the study examines Sierra Leone's language regime in relation to the formal education sector, particularly the way languages are incentivized or stigmatized socially in schools. Fourth, the study looks at the role of the formal education sector, represented by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MEST) as a significant player in language acquisition and status consignment in the country. The study concludes by considering the tension between language continuity and upward socio-economic mobility in Sierra Leone.

COLONIAL LEGACIES AND LANGUAGE USE

A language regime refers to state policies and practices of language as well as concepts about languages engaged by language users (Sontag and Cardinal, 2015: 5-6). While some countries may have multilingual language regimes where more than one language is officially recognized, in Sierra Leone, English is the national language and used for state policy and the formal education system in principle, though not at all uniformly in practice. Krio, the contemporary *lingua franca* in Sierra Leone, has gone from being the mother tongue of a small minority of ethnically Krio people, less than two percent of the total population, to the dominant language throughout much of the country. Frequently characterized as the most "neutral" indigenous language, this is probably more a result of Krio's now mainstream use rather than any actual neutrality, particularly as stories abound of ethnic Krios looking down upon non-ethnic Krios who speak the language (Francis and Kamada, 2001:237).

Krio as a language was formed by different groups of people sent to Sierra Leone in the late 1700s and early 1800s. This influx of Black immigrants, termed Settlers, included freed slaves from England, Nova Scotians, who were former American slaves granted their freedom by fighting for the British during the US War of Independence, and Maroons, enslaved people from Jamaica who had fought for their freedom and been exiled to Sierra Leone via Nova Scotia (Fyfe, 1962; Fyle 1981:45). The final group to facilitate the development of

Krio were liberated Africans, people from all over West Africa who were sold into slavery, but recaptured by British abolitionists on the high seas and rerouted to Britain's colony in Sierra Leone (Fyle, 1994:46). Out of a need to communicate in the Colony, African syntax fused with English words to develop the Krio language, and descendants of these four groups are today considered ethnic Krios (Fyle, 1994: 46).

The English language regime in Sierra Leone embodies the country's colonial, racist legacy, where language and cultural practices deemed useful to the British were valued over indigenous ones. This is in line with a wide literature on the effects of colonialism on African states in the realm of political authority and institutions (Beissinger and Crawford, 2002; Clapham, 1996; Herbst, 2000), economics (Van de Walle, 2001), ethnic identity and nationalism (Marx, 1998), and language use (Posner, 2003:127-146; Trudell, 2012). During British colonial rule, access to, and the content of, public education was directly tied to an agenda of control, "in order to prevent the creation of educated elite from among the common people who would naturally be critical of British rule" (Banya, 1993:165). This meant that only Sierra Leoneans who could serve the colonial administration would be educated, but even then, only in ways that would make them more useful to the British (Banya, 1993: 169).

Even as education in colonial times was a functional enterprise to groom those most useful to the colonial system, the post-independence period has fostered only modest reform. The basic underlying principle of formal sector education remains as a utilitarian westernization tool for those with means to access it, rather than education as a means to self-empowerment or self-actualization. However, as Trudell points out, evidence from Francophone West Africa show that formal education in the colonial language rather than mother tongue serves to essentially reinforce social hierarchies rather than act as an equalizer (2012: 369). The result is that an undereducated populace is maintained without the capacity to transcend the inequities that previously manifested into violent civil war.

LANGUAGE REGIMES AND LANGUAGE SHIFT

Language regimes govern how people present themselves ethnically and in power relationships. Such regimes inform how people operate as citizens who are enmeshed in acutely local but also national discourses and performances. In Sierra Leone, as Fyle puts it, "a person may be a Vai speaker, before being a Mende speaker, before being a Krio speaker, before being an English speaker, before being a French speaker. What do we do about his or her primary Vai-ness?" (Fyle 2003:116). In this way Fyle is pointing to the identity implications multilingualism, as well as language shift across space and time.

Like urbanization, war migration and displacement patterns change local language regimes by altering the usefulness of language as a currency. Massive movement of people looking for safety and economic survival during Sierra Leone's civil war shifted the utility of language from something that reproduced cultural values and systems to something that allowed people to facilitate communication between diverse groups of displaced people and forced migrants. Language shift in Sierra Leone has taken place in part because of human movement patterns during the civil war, including displacement and survival of occupying forces. While Sierra Leone's civil war was not an ethnically driven war, ethnic identity did play a role and its complexity has been compounded by linguistic shift.

In a group interview, a literacy teacher, Mr. Kargbo, related how Krio dominance has increased among youth in rural areas after the war, "I went to conduct a teacher training beyond Kabala in 1991-2. People told me, 'speak in Limba, I don't understand Krio.' But after the war I went back and the children said, 'ask me in Krio, I don't know Limba'" (Kargbo and Jones, 2014). This vignette acknowledges how the civil war changed language dominance. Before the war, in Kabala people lived out their daily lives in Limba, but afterwards, the daily language landscape switched to Krio (Albaugh, 2018:254-267).

Political party language use

One way that Sierra Leonean tribes have been harnessed is through political parties, although ethnic identity no longer automatically correlates with linguistic identity in current times. Nevertheless, language and ethnicity has been used divisively by parties and politicians to such an extent (Christensen and Mats, 2008:518-9; Zack-Williams, 1999:146, 153) that fear of being labeled tribalist has kept many indigenous community leaders from advocating for linguistic rights (Kargbo and Jones, 2014). In the period after independence, ethnic divisions crystalized into the Mende-led Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the Temne-led All People's Congress (APC) (Lumeh, 2009:22-29).

In political party usage, language and ethnic identities are discussed interchangeably, even though Krio is used as a platform to recruit members to both parties as well as to publicize platforms. As Francis and Kamanda point out, ethnically driven political divisions permeated the media as well, with newspapers serving as "the mouthpieces of the different ethno- regional-based parties, such as the APC's *We Yone* newspaper and SLPP's *Skpndh*" (Francis and Kamada, 2001: 234). However, it is worth noting that both publications were written in Krio rather than Mende or Temne. This may be due to low literacy in Mende and Temne, and also influenced by the nod towards national unity that the use

of post-war Krio implies. Publishing political material in a language other than English or Krio could run afoul of tribalist claims. Such caution dampens language activism, and this is understandable in a place where ethnic identity became entrenched in both politics and the media that publicized it.

Ethnicity continues to be a prime characteristic used to assess someone's potential for upward social mobility or access to positions of power (Francis and Kamada, 2001: 234). Francis and Kamanda (2001: 234) note that elites across ethnic groups, including Krio, Mende, Themne, and later Limba, have harnessed ethnic identity as a tool to obtain their own agendas in both pre- and post-colonial times. While command of English will facilitate access to increased economic and educational opportunities in Sierra Leone and abroad, ethnic identification, including linguistic identification of co-ethnics, was and is used as a tool of political organizing that has real consequences for how citizenship is performed. On the one hand, the SLPP and APC retain control of their constituencies by rallying tribal loyalties, but this is not a foolproof method. In informal conversations during ethnography (broadly including regular daily interactions) with working class Sierra Leonean mothers who spent the war period in Freetown, they commented that though they were Mende or Krio, they voted for the APC instead of SLPP because they could not stomach supporting SLPP based on what they perceived as the party's role in the war and therefore in the tragedies that befell their families (Anonymous, 2014c).

It is the connection between political party mobilization of ethnic cleavages and indigenous languages as tools of those cleavages that has made people shy away from mobilizing around language rights as a cultural right in Freetown. Mr. Kargbo of TISLL reflected on how, though some members of the Limba Development Association wanted to mobilize a promotion of the Limba language, others halted the conversation by reminding people that they could be accused of tribalism, thus language promotion efforts were not pursued on that premise (Kargbo and Jones, 2014). Therefore, the tribalist organization of party politics has tainted the potential for ethnic mobilization in the cultural realm, where people do not want to mobilize around language promotion because they fear tribal stigma. Similarly, ethnic identification in formal education has also been tainted as tribalist, rather than diversity-promoting, because of preferential treatment through the handing out of educational scholarships based on ethnicity rather than merit (Francis and Kamada, 2001:234-5).

LANGUAGE STATUS AND IDENTITY

In the past, the homogenization of language was seen as an inevitable part of the modernization and democratization process, though in recent years this has been complicated as language diversity issues have

surfaced in the Global North (Sontag and Cardinal, 2015: 10). In the West African context, Ghana, Burkina Faso, and Côte d'Ivoire have all piloted bilingual education programs with some success. These countries may consider themselves to be multilingual, the general term for multiple languages being employed by the same group of speakers. However, diglossia, defined as a kind of societal multilingualism where two different languages of divergent status are used within one community of speakers (Fishman, 2006:69), more accurately describes the language use and performance happening in Sierra Leone.

Diglossia is common in Creole-speaking parts of the world, with the former colonial language being considered high status and the local Creole low status (Sengova, 2006: 184). Creoles are separate languages that operate with distinct status differentials. Scholar Abdul Bangura labels the linguistic situation in Sierra Leone as one type of polyglossia, or what he terms "double overlapping diglossia" (Bangura, 2006:160). In double overlapping diglossia, English serves as the high status language in relation to lower status Krio, which in turn is used as the high status language in relation to other lower status indigenous languages (Bangura, 2006: 160). Bangura notes that like Krio, Mende and Temne are also both considered low status in relation to English but serve as high status languages in relation to other indigenous languages, hence the double overlapping characteristic of diglossia in Sierra Leone (Bangura, 2006: 161). The status categories derive in part from the contexts in which different languages are supposed to be used; for example, English in classrooms and Krio, Mende, or Temne in commerce across ethnic groups, depending on the region. Krio is the dominant economic language in Freetown; Temne is concentrated in the north of the country; and Mende in the south and parts of the east, though migration patterns have made these traditional language zones more fluid.

Beyond these ascribed language functions are perceptions of language utility. English is associated with functions of the state, essentially operating at the national level; while indigenous languages, particularly in rural areas, continue their function maintaining ethnically based nationalism (Bangura, 2006:158). Bypassing debate about whether English should be considered an "indigenous" African language or an "Africanized" language (Chisanga, 1997; Crystal, 2013; Kachru, 1994), the study focuses instead on the unmistakable reality that English is the high status language in Sierra Leone in relation to all other languages.

Bangura's observation above highlights the power dynamics inherent within double overlapping diglossia, and distinguishes Sierra Leone's language landscape from bilingualism, where two languages may be used by the same population of speakers without an implicit status differentiation. In fact, the historical reality of British colonialism that paved the way for English's supposed neutrality, in addition to its obvious association with globalization and the potential economic benefits that its use may bring, has also undermined the status of local languages in ways that leave many Sierra Leoneans lacking "cultural self-confidence" (Bangura, 2006:159).

As elsewhere in the world, rural communities in Sierra Leone are better able to retain and pass on community languages through generations, albeit without literacy skills, as children and grandchildren learn from parents and grandparents in everyday home and community life. In many Sierra Leonean villages, it is common to have no English speakers whatsoever, with more prosperous locals speaking a mix of the local language and Krio. For example, when the researcher asked a British NGO worker in a small village in eastern Sierra Leone in 2014 what languages he usually uses in his work with locals on community development, he responded "Kri-ende," meaning a mixture of Krio and Mende (Anonymous, 2014b). Such language mixture is typical of villages that rely on community-funded schools, rather than government-supported ones, as teachers at community schools come directly from the villages themselves and have less exposure to English than their government teachers counter-parts. While this situation allows for increased mother tongue use, it invariably poses problems for students who seek continued study beyond the primary level. Such students usually have to leave their home villages and attend school in a larger town where they are dropped into English immersion at older ages, and where the subject matter is considerably more sophisticated than in grades one through three. Though English skills are prized above all others, Krio, one of nearly twenty indigenous languages in Sierra Leone, has become the next best thing, and its standardized orthography was developed in 1984 by the Ministry of Education (Kamarah, 1994: 135). Increasing urbanization means that the prioritization of some indigenous languages over others is a national-scale phenomenon, while the devaluation of other indigenous languages is more pronounced in the capital city of Freetown, as well as in regional trade hub cities such as Bo and Makeni. In 2020, 1.2 million Sierra Leoneans, out of a total population of 6.6 million, live in Freetown, with 42% of the total population living in urban areas (CIA, 2020). Urbanization continues at a steady pace (Government of Sierra Leone, 2013: 1) and will continue to impact the language landscape of the country.

EDUCATION AS HIERARCHY-ENFORCER

Education is a human right explicitly articulated in Article 26 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that elementary education should be free and available to all, and that its purpose is "full development of the human personality" (UN, 1948).

Though there are tremendous challenges to educational

access and quality in Sierra Leone, particularly for rural, poor, female school-age children, government commitment to education as a human right and its understanding of education as vital for socioeconomic advancement was reiterated as part of formal policy in 2013, supported by a range of United Nations agencies and other international actors (UNESCO 2017; Government of Sierra Leone, 2013: xiii).

According to the late Sierra Leonean scholar and linguist Clifford Fyle, there is no monolingual country in Africa, and it is the multilingual nature of African states that makes their education policies so challenging (Fyle, 2003:115). Multilingualism includes both individual and group multilingualism, but in this paper focuses on group, or societal multilingualism, which acknowledges the impact of speaker communities on language use, rather than solely individual language ability (Baker, 2011:66). Societal multilingualism indicates that speakers may use different languages in different circumstances, making the implications for formal education language policy and practice more challenging. Social conditioning resulting from colonial era educational has resulted in a local population that values English as a high status language, over other languages deemed lower-status (Sengova, 1987: 528). These language status stigmas permeate social interactions, with non-English speakers cast as less capable of engaging with the institutions that define citizenship such as government offices and schools.

Language status hierarchies play out in schools in a variety of ways. One of these is through punishment by teachers of students who use non-target languages, a practice that reinforces notions of shame regarding linguistic minority identity. The researcher has previously documented the connections between emotions like shame or anger in quieting or amplifying demands, respectively, for cultural rights like the right to mother tongue education (Gellman 2017). As in many countries, punishment by teachers for minority language use by students has been a common practice for generations (Faingold, 2018:72; McCarty et al., 2014). This was the case in Sierra Leone throughout the post-colonial period until very recently (Bangura, 2006: 162).

When Fyle (1976:50) was documenting language use in Sierra Leone in the 1970s, he noted how even when children were able to counter teachers' punishment-enforced insistence on using English at school, all this did was push students' local language use into the private sphere, where youth were more likely to confuse mother tongue and English language. Such a scenario sets schoolchildren up for weak command of both languages. Fyle (1976: 50) comments that: The child, in spite of his teacher, who knows that this supposedly inferior language is his only true linguistic possession, begins to see himself as an inferior human being despising the native language which he cannot throw away and striving to achieve a superiority in the use of a foreign tongue that, unless he is exceptional, he can never attain.

In this way, over time, punishment for mother tongue use undermines a child's sense of self as unique and worthy of validation in their ethnic community. The shame that accompanies punishment often develops into a loathing or disregard for anything connected to an ethnic heritage (Olthuis et al., 2013:32-33; Thiong'o, 1986).

During ethnographic work, in dozens of informal conversations with Sierra Leonean mothers in Freetown, Bo and Makeni from 2013-2014, contemporary language stigmatization was evident, with parents expressing desire to educate their children in English, with Krio as the default language, and avoid minority languages in both education and at home. This is in part because of language shame, but also directly connected with desire for economic mobility, which parents see as linked to English capacity (Anonymous, 2014e). Thus, language shift writ broadly includes cognitive and emotional dissonance as people transition from using mother tongue to an official language. It also points to a rational approach by parents, namely, to inculcate children with the most economically advantageous linguistic skill set.

Status is not the only issue with utilizing English over other languages in Sierra Leonean schools. In a group interview with four staff members at the Milton Margai College of Education and Technology, the staff reflected on the fact that the reality of teacher quality in Sierra Leone is such that many teachers themselves do not speak English well, if at all, particularly in rural areas (Anonymous, 2014a). An NGO worker in the city of Kenema commented that such capacity limitations in English mean that many schools, especially community-supported schools located too remotely for the state to run them, tend to operate in the local language plus Krio (Anonymous, 2014b). Families who pay to make the school operate generally support teachers from the community itself and therefore the language of instruction is more likely to be the dominant mother tongue (Anonymous, 2014b). The Milton Margai staff observed that community schools are funded by community members themselves rather than MEST and so constitute a formal schooling space that is maintained by the will of its members (Anonymous, 2014a).

A graduate student at Freetown's Foray Bay College who is also a parent of school-age children and works for a development NGO noted, "in state-run schools, Krio tends to be used as the common language when students of multiple ethnicities attend a school, or when teachers want to offer a more "universal" language beyond the local community language "(Anonymous, 2014d). This interviewee also remarked that aspiring upwardly mobile parents will try to speak to their children in English if they know how, or Krio if they do not; even if the parents' own mother tongue is something else, out of interest in equipping their children for as many opportunities as possible (Anonymous, 2014d). This shows that indigenous languages besides English and Krio are therefore not perceived as offering opportunities

that parents would want to provide, and therefore home life, like school, is preferred in the highest-status language possible.

The status of language speakers has much to do with which languages are retained and which ones fall out of use (May, 2012:155). As Sierra Leone ranks nearly last on major development indicators worldwide, the impetus for parents to encourage skills that will help their children gain lucrative jobs is not out of place. Yet even in families with means to upwardly mobilize, the practice is frequently one of hybridization. The multilingual student and mother commented, the reality may be more of "Kringlish," a constant switching between Krio and English akin to Spanish-English "Spanglish" in the US, which reveals language aspiration in the context of local language reality (Anonymous, 2014d).

Nigerian linguist Ayo Bamgbose documents that teachers, in their own sensitivity to students' progress with the learning material, "often switch between the official medium and the mother tongue in order to make their teaching meaningful; hence, an official medium in higher primary classes is often a myth for the consumption of inspectors of schools and visitors" (2004: 5). Such practice was evident during this study's ethnographic observations and in conversations with parents and local community workers throughout the country in 2013-2014.

In Sierra Leone, the civil war dominated the international spotlight throughout the 1990s and 2000s, so linguistic diversity was, and has not become, a priority for donors except in addressing illiteracy. The emphasis on English as the language of instruction remains in place in MEST's most recent education policy report (Government of Sierra Leone, 2018: 47-64), despite research that shows the advantages for literacy retention in promoting mother tongue learning (Albaugh, 2014: 84-5; May, 2003:144-6). Both the 1995 and 2018 Education Policy reports developed by MEST have reinforced English-medium policy (Government of Sierra Leone, 1995:34; Government of Sierra Leone, 2018:1), with minimal mention of other languages in the 2018 report. English continues to be the goal, but without a means to attain it.

SCHOOLING IN SIERRA LEONE

Sierra Leone's language regime is best described as a set of lightly institutionalized or ad hoc practices that gear people towards English-language learning and use. The language regime concept captures how state policies and notions of language use are embedded institutionally through formal education (Sontag and Cardinal, 2015: 4-5). Particularly in rural areas, soft education policies allow the first three years of schooling to take place in the dominant community language, meaning a language that the majority of students at a given school and their families speak. Officially, indigenous languages are

supposed to be "promoted," but there are no details on how that promotion is supposed to happen in the Constitution, legislation, or MEST reports (Government of Sierra Leone, 1991: 9, Government of Sierra Leone, 2018).

All schools in the country are theoretically conducted in English, with other languages introduced as electives (Government of Sierra Leone, 1991: 4). Since 2013, Sierra Leone has followed a 6-3-4-4 education structure,[1] meaning six years of study to complete primary school, three years for junior secondary school, four years of lower-level senior secondary school (SS1) and four years of upper-level senior secondary school (SS2). However, there is only an academic incentive to study one of the four nationally recognized indigenous languages: Mende, Temne, Limba, or Krio, through junior secondary school, when students can elect to take a language as one of their Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE)[2] subjects, but in practice very few students choose to do so (Nelson and Horacio, 2014). Indigenous languages are not included as subjects on the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), the exam that students take after completing SS2 as they either try to gain college or trade school admission, so there is no institutional incentive to study indigenous languages beyond the BECE. Even so, students' results on the English portion of the WASSCE have been dismal, with the vast majority of all students scoring the lowest levels of the English exam portion (Government of Sierra Leone, 2018: 53). Table 1 summarizes language theory by schooling stage.

The reality of language use in classrooms differs significantly from the theoretical, and there have been MEST policy modifications in attempt to align the two. In its 2010 Education Policy draft, MEST acknowledged that many teachers in rural schools use the dominant local indigenous language, sometimes referred to as the community language, as the medium of instruction during the first several years of schooling. However, MEST's report in 2018 omits this (Government of Sierra Leone, 2018).

In his earlier work, referring to the1961-1979 period, Fyle describes the Sierra Leonean government's English-only program in primary and secondary schools as an "anti-literacy campaign" (Fyle, 1976: 59). In this context, English-only programming refers to the immersion model, where children from many backgrounds may enter the formal education system with minimal or no working knowledge of English, but are immediately placed in English-only classrooms with the ideal of rapidly developing English fluency. Fyle's claim that such

---

[1] Prior to 2013 it was a 6-3-3-4 structure.

[2] The BECE exam often determines students' maximum education level, as only those who pass are considered prepared enough to continue on to SS1. Many poor and working class children without the means to pay for an extra year of study to prepare them to retake the test drop out and try to join the workforce.

Table 1. Official language use policy during students' 6-3-4-4 education.

Stage of schooling	Years 1-3 primary	Years 4-6 primary	3 years of JSS	4 years of SS1	4 years of SS2
Language use in theory	Dominant community language may be used under 2008 Education Policy	English is the only allowed language	English only, but Mende, Temne, Limba, or Krio can be taken as electives and BECE subjects	English only	English only, without option to take indigenous languages as WASSCE subject

programs undermine literacy is backed up by Trudell's most recent work on Francophone countries that shows how educational submersion in the official language does not better prepare students in language fluency, grasp of subject matter, nor in developing their sense of self (Olthuis et al., 2013:174-5; Trudell, 2005: 239-51; Trudell, 2012). In fact, students in bilingual language programs (mother tongue plus dominant language) have higher learning outcomes and greater chances to transcend poverty than those in dominant language-only programs, and this has held true across a range of countries (California Department of Education, 2000; Coşkun et al., 2011; Skutnabb-Kangas and Dunbar, 2010: 71).

Studies show that rather than corrupting students' ability to learn English, literacy in mother tongue languages promotes the kind of complex and symbolic thinking necessary for language learning in general and is compatible with learning multiple languages as well (Hovens, 2002; Trudell 2005: 242-6). Erica Albaugh (2014: 182) demonstrates that in West Africa, education in a foreign language increases people's identification with the nation, rather than their ethnic group, while people who are educated in a mother tongue appear to maintain equal attachments to their ethnic group and the nation. One implication of this finding is that language shift may entail changing patterns of participation through the mechanism of identity formation.

RESULTS OF POLITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY ON LANGUAGE SHIFT

Joachim Blatter, in his discussion of political science methodologies and methods ranging from truth-seeking (positivists) to meaning-making (interpretivists) states that the job of the sense-maker is "to locate an explanatory endeavor within the general discourse about these basic entities of social reality…[in order] to provide orientation" (2017: 9). As a researcher who engages both truth-seeking and sense-making as legitimate approaches, this particular article falls into the interpretivist camp and therefore the results are, as Blatter says, an orientation to the discourse of language shift. Sierra Leone's educational challenges are no doubt profound. Though literacy has increased steadily from the end of the war,

from 29.3% literacy for those fifteen years and older in 2003 to 38.1% by 2007, still, in 2018, only 43% of all Sierra Leoneans over the age of 15 are considered literate, with gender disparity evident, as 52% of men are literate and only 40% of women (UNDP, 2009: 4; CIA, 2020). These statistics are a sobering reminder that formal sector education continues to fail Sierra Leoneans in many ways, and that language hierarchy is just one of many issues that needs to be addressed.

At the same time, there is no evidence that speaking a dominant language needs to come at the expense of speaking other languages (Gbakima and Kamarah, 2014). Education policy in Sierra Leone and elsewhere is capable of multilingual design, but language status hierarchies, as one of many factors, play a role in determining policies and practices of language in schooling. This is evident in the group interview conversations with staff members at Milton Margai College of Education and Technology. One person articulated the assumption pervading teachers' perceptions that "learning English is superior to learning mother tongue," and the other staff members nodded vigorously in agreement (Anonymous, 2014a). Such thinking evolved from colonialism's racist social hierarchy, but has been adopted by communities and supported by proof of upward economic mobility connected to language use (Anonymous, 2014a; Fyle, 1976: 50).

In part, this scenario is based on a misconception by teachers that using mother tongue will harm student's English-learning ability (Anonymous, 2014a; Fyle, 1976:50; Gbakima and Kamarah, 2014). In effect, as previously documented by the author (2015) and as the Milton Margai interviewees emphasized in the meeting, it is the quality of teachers, both their own performances and the training they receive, as well as the curricula and materials they use in the classroom, that remain central issues in Sierra Leone's language learning challenges (Anonymous, 2014a).

Such challenges are not merely to be cast off as educational or cultural issues. The main result of this study, drawn from a synthesis of qualitative interviews and political ethnography, is that language shift has major effects on citizen identity, but the impact of that shift is only beginning to be articulated. Many Sierra Leoneans,

as well as outside researchers and aid workers, remain focused on the rightfully vital immediate needs of people to basic human rights for survival. Spaces like formal education are often overlooked and details such as language of instruction may little garner attention. Yet schooling is a doorway that directly links people to individual and collective identities that can be mobilized politically.

What is known from other cases is that while the first generation to lose fluency in their parents' mother tongue may be able to maintain a sense of ethnic identity, ethnic connections become harder to nurture without language for subsequent generations. This may be because participation in village culture will be strained for the generation serving as translators, and also because as families linguistically move towards English and Krio, cultural priorities may shift as well (Anonymous, 2014d). This study has documented that Sierra Leone's language shift continues at full throttle, and asserts its importance as a subject worthy of further research to address the implications of what such shift will have on politics.

CONCLUSION

Hegemony of a particular language implies that while people may willingly use the language and even seek out learning it, language acquisition choices happen within coercive social circumstances, including within the education sector and socio-economic systems, where there is pressure or incentive to prize a particular language over others. Language hegemony operates in any country where dominant language use is tied to migration patterns, economic mobility or cultural hegemony, which is recognized as social mobility through assimilation.

Language hegemony also points to a broader problem about ethnic identity and how citizens are able to access their rights as culturally bound beings. Importantly, this is not purely a schism between traditional languages and the colonial legacy of English, but includes Krio as the lingua franca. Though children are capable of learning multiple languages simultaneously, in an attempt to ensure their children's future, many Sierra Leonean parents insist on English-only schooling and speak only English or Krio to their children at home. Elites operate as trendsetters, creating norms that other families, as well as schools and social networks, follow when they are able, searching for a linguistic boost on the socio-economic ladder. The long-term effects of these socio-economic linguistic patterns are yet to be well-documented and call out for further research.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

Albaugh EA (2018). "Language Movement and Civil War in West Africa." In Tracing Language Movement in Africa, edited by Ericka A. and Kathryn M. de Luna Albaugh. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Albaugh EA (2014). State-Building and Multilingual Education in Africa. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Anonymous (2014a). Group interview with author. #26SL. Four Registrar's Office employees, Milton Margai College of Education and Technology, Freetown, Sierra Leone 3/24/14.

Anonymous (2014b). Informal conversation with author, 3/1/14. Kenema, Sierra Leone.

Anonymous (2014c). Informal conversations on politics with working class Sierra Leoneans in Wilburforce. Freetown, Sierra Leone. 1/13/2014 & 2/2/2014.

Anonymous (2014d). Interview with author, #5SL, Gender and Development MPhil student, Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone. Freetown, Sierra Leone, 1/21/14.

Anonymous (2014e). Civil society leader. Personal communication with author. Freetown, Sierra Leone. 5/3/14.

Baker C (2011). Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Bangura AK (2006). The Krio Language: Diglossic and Political Realities." In: New Perspectives on the Sierra Leone Krio, edited by Mac Dixon-Fyle and Gibril Cole 151-166. New York: Peter Lang.

Banya K (1993). "Illiteracy, Colonial Legacy and Education: The Case of Modern Sierra Leone." Comparative Education 29(2):159-170.

Beissinger MR, Crawford Y (2002). Beyond State Crisis? Postcolonial Africa and Post-Soviet Eurasia in Comparative Perspective. Washington, D.C.; Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Distributed by Johns Hopkins University Press.

Blatter J (2017). "Truth Seeking AND Sense Making: Towards Confirgurational Designs of Qualitative Methods." Qualitative and Multi-Method Research 15(2):2-14.

California Department of Education (2000). Proposition 227 Final Report. Accessed 7/25/18 at: https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/er/prop227summary.asp.

Childs GT, Good J, Mitchell A (2014). "Beyond the Ancestral Code: Towards a Model for Sociolinguistic Language Documentation." Language Documentation and Conservation 8:168-191.

Chisanga T, Alu MKN (1997). "Owning the Other Tongue: The English Language in Southern Africa." Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development 18(2):89-99.

Christensen MM, Mats U (2008). "Mercenaries of democracy: The 'Politricks' of remobilized combatants in the 2007 general elections, Sierra Leone." African Affairs 107(429):515-539.

Coronel-Molina SM, McCarty TL (Eds.). (2016). Indigenous language revitalization in the Americas. New York and Oxon: Routledge.

CIA (2020). The World Factbook - Sierra Leone. Central Intelligence Agency-US Government. Accessed 6/17/20 at: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sl.html.

Clapham CS (1996). Africa and the International System: The Politics of State Survival. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Coşkun V, Derince MS, Uçarlar N (2011). Scar of Tongue: Consequences of the Ban on the Use of Mother Tongue in Education and Experiences of Kurdish Students in Turkey. Translated By: Leyla Tonguç Basmacı. Diyarbakır, Turkey, Diyarbakır Institute for Political and Social Research.

Crystal D (2013). English as a Global Language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dor D (2004). "From Englishization to Imposed Multiculturalism:

Globalization, the Internet, and the Political Economy of the Linguistic Code." Public Culture 16(1):97-118.

Faingold ED (2018). Language Rights and the Law in the United States and Its Territories. Lanham, Boulder, Lexington Books.

Fishman JA (2006). Diglossia and Societal Multilingualism: Dimensions of Similarity and Difference." In Language Loyalty, Language Planning, and Language Revitalization: Recent Writings and Reflections from Joshua A. Fishman. Edited by Nancy H. Hornberger and Martin Pütz. Clevedon [England]; Buffalo: Multilingual Matters. pp. 69-78.

Francis DJ, Kamanda MC (2001). "Politics and Language Planning in Sierra Leone. African Studies 60(2):225-244.

Fyfe C (1962). A short history of Sierra Leone. London: Longmans.

Fyle CM (1994). Official and unofficial attitudes and policy towards Krio as the main lingua franca in Sierra Leone." In: African Languages, Development, and the State, edited by Richard Fardon and Graham Furniss, 44-54. London New York : Routledge.

Fyle, Clifford N. (2003). "Language Policy and Planning for Basic Education in Africa." In Towards a Multilingual Culture of Education, edited by Adama Ouane, 113-119. Hamburg, Germany: UNESCO Institute for Education.

Fyle, Clifford N. (1976). "The Use of Mother Tongue in Education in Sierra Leone." In Mother Tongue Education: The West African Experience, edited by Ayo Bamgbose, 43-62. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Fyle CM (1981). The History of Sierra Leone: a Concise Introduction. London.

Gbakima A, Kamarah SU (2014). "Online discussion forum debate on detractors from English learning in Sierra Leone, between Professor Aiah Gbakima, former Vice Chancellor of the University of Sierra Leone, and Dr. Sheikh Umarr Kamarah, Professor of Linguistics of Virginia State University, USA." http://leonenet.info/Home.php.

Gellman M (2019). "The right to learn our (m)other tongues: indigenous languages and neoliberal citizenship in El Salvador and Mexico." British Journal of Sociology of Education 40(4):523-537.

Gellman M (2017). Democratization and Memories of Violence: Ethnic Minority Rights Movements in Mexico, Turkey, and El Salvador. London and New York: Routledge.

Gellman M (2015). "Teaching silence in the schoolroom: whither national history in Sierra Leone and El Salvador?" Third World Quarterly 36(1):147-161.

Government of Sierra Leone (2018). Education Sector Plan 2018-2020: Getting It Right – Service Delivery, Integrity and Learning in Sierra Leone. Available at: https://www.globalpartnership.org/sites/default/files/2018-10-sierra-leone-esp.pdf, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology: 1-XLVII.

Government of Sierra Leone (2013). Education Country Status Report: An Analysis for Further Improving the Quality, Equity and Efficiency of the Education System in Sierra Leone. Pôle de Dakar, Dakar, Senegal: Government of Sierra Leone, Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, UNESCO-Dakar Office.

Government of Sierra Leone (1995). New Education Policy for Sierra Leone. Freetown, Sierra Leone, Department of Education.

Government of Sierra Leone (1991). The Constitution of Sierra Leone. edited by Act No. 6. Freetown, Sierra Leone.

Herbst J (2000). States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Hovens M (2002). Bilingual education in West Africa: does it work?" International Journal of Bilingual Educational and Bilingualism 5(5):249-266.

Kachru BB (1994). Englishization and Contact Linguistics. World Englishes 13 (2):135-154.

Kamarah SU (1994). Phonology and tonology in the morphology of Temne: A lexicalist approach. (PhD), University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Kanu SM (Undated). "Languages at Risk: A Case Study from Sierra Leone." University of Alberta. Unpublished working paper. Accessed 6/17/19 at: https://www.umes.edu/cms300uploadedfiles/microsoft%20word%20-%20languages%20at%20risk%20-%20a%20case%20study%20from%20sierr(1).pdf.

Kargbo L, Jones F (2014). Program Manager and Krio Literacy and Scripture Engagement Coordinator, respectively, at The Institute of Sierra Leonean Languages. Group interview with author. Freetown, Sierra Leone. 2/19/14.

Lumeh M (2009). The Dynamics of Colonialism, Political Division and the Militariat in Sierra Leone and Their Impact on Law and Society." California Western International Law Journal 40:1-30.

Marx AW.(1998). Making Race and Nation: A Comparison of South Africa, the United States, and Brazil. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

May S (2012). Language and Minority Rights: Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Politics of Language. New York: Routledge.

May S (2003). "Misconceiving Minority Language Rights: Implications for Liberal Political Theory." In Language Rights and Political Theory, edited by Will Kymlicka and Alan Patten, 123-152. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

McCarty TL, Romero-Little ME, Warhol L, Zepeda O (2014). Critical Ethnography and Indigenous Language Survival. Ethnography and Language Policy. T. L. McCarty. New York and London, Routledge.

Nelson W, Horacio M (2014). Executive Secretary of the Basic Education Commission, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. Interview with author. Freetown, Sierra Leone. 1/27/14.

Olthuis ML, Kivelä S, Skutnabb-Kangas T (2013). Revitalising Indigenous Languages: How To Recreate A Lost Generation. Edited by Linguistic Diversity and Language Rights. Bristol, Buffalo, Toronto: Multilingual Matters.

Posner D (2003). The Colonial Origins of Ethnic Cleavages: The Case of Linguistic Divisions in Zambia." Comparative Politics 35:127-146.

Sengova J (2006). Aborigines and Returnees: In Search of Linguistic and Historical Meaning in Delineations of Sierra Leone's Ethnicity and Heritage." In New Perspectives on the Sierra Leone Krio, edited by Mac Dixon-Fyle and Gibril Cole, 167-199. Peter Lang: New York.

Sengova J (1987). The National Languages of Sierra Leone: A Decade of Policy Experimentation." Africa: Journal of the International African Institute 57(4):519-530.

Skutnabb-Kangas T, Dunbar R (2010). Indigenous children's education as linguistic genocide and a crime against humanity? A global view. Kautokeino, Norway: Gáldu-Resource Centre for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Sonntag SK, Cardinal L (2015). "State Traditions and Language Regimes: Conceptualizing Language Policy Choices." In State Traditions and Language Regimes, edited by Selma K. Sonntag and Linda Cardinal, 3-26. McGill: Queen's University Press.

Telles E, Sue CA. (2019). Durable Ethnicity. Mexican Americans and the Ethnic Core. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ wa (1986). Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature. London; Portsmouth, N.H.: J. Currey; Heinemann.

Trudell B (2012). "Of Gateways and Gatekeepers: Language, Education and Mobility in Francophone Africa." International Journal of Educational Development 32:368-375.

Trudell B (2005). "Language choice, education and community identity." International Journal of Educational Development 25:237-251.

United Nations (UN) (1948). "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." United Nations Accessed 12/12/2017. http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/.

United Nations Development Programee (UNDP) (2009). Sierra Leone Socio-Economic Indices. United Nations Development Programee, http://unipsil.unmissions.org/portals/unipsil/media/publications/sl_indics%20undp_nov09.pdf.

UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2017). Sierra Leone. Accessed 12/12/17, http://uis.unesco.org/country/SL: UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

Van de Walle N (2001). African Economies and the Politics of Permanent Crisis, 1979-1999. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Zack-Williams A (1999). Sierra Leone: The Political Economy of Civil War, 1991-98. 20, (1) (02):143-162. Third World Quarterly 20(1):143-162.