

Post-Conflict Language Issues at the University of Juba, Southern Sudan: Policies, Proficiencies and Practicalities

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Abstract

After a generation of ethnic, religious and linguistic conflict in Southern Sudan, the re-establishment of an English-medium university in the new site of government, Juba, presents numerous challenges related to language. These challenges stem from a range of historical and socio-political factors, including the enactment of oppositional language policies in tumultuous times. Both the language policies and the tumultuous times have had direct and indirect effects on present language proficiencies among students and staff at the University of Juba. These have been causing difficulties in academic learning and teaching, as well as some tensions in the university community. Visionary leadership is attempting to address the practicalities associated with these challenges both in the immediate and the long term, investing deeply in the promise of English language development.

Introduction

In Southern Sudan there is presently high hope invested in the establishment of peace, following on from 21 years of war. Hope in the peace is directly linked to the work of the Government of Southern Sudan (GOSS), set up as part of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in January, 2005, and to its vision of a self-governing community. In turn, this vision of the GOSS is linked to hope in the English language, and hope in the English speaking world.

The English language is expected to function alongside local languages as the language of government; as a key language of education; as a unifying language across ethnic groups; as a language for international communication; and finally as a stance in opposition to Arabisation from the north. This paper focuses on the extent of these expectations and the challenges faced by the GOSS in realising them.

We begin by briefly reviewing the recent linguistic history of Southern Sudan, its links with the colonial past, and the shifts in language policy and practices that have occurred over the years of conflict. We then turn to the University of Juba and its present challenges in regard to English proficiencies among students and staff. We conclude with the vision for English language development that has been put forward by the University of Juba, taking account of the practicalities.

Southern Sudan as a site for English: Language policies, 1900-2005

In locating Southern Sudan as a site for English, we have to think in terms of geographical spaces, colonial histories, and military conflicts. The first step is to locate Southern Sudan geographically.



Figure 1: Sudan and Southern Sudan¹

Sudan as a whole stretches south from Egypt to where the White Nile enters from Uganda, and west from the Red Sea to Chad. The present Southern Sudan, established in January 2005, comprises all lands and areas that constituted the former three Southern Provinces of Sudan: Bahr el Ghazal, Equatoria and Upper Nile, as the boundaries stood on January 1, 1956. It is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-racial entity. In Southern Sudan, African Nilotic peoples are the predominant populace. These incorporate many different ethnic groups and languages, the largest being the Dinka, Nuba and Shilluk.

This is in contrast to the north, which is less diverse, largely of Arab ethnicity and cultural tradition, Islamic, and with modern Standard Arabic as the dominant language and the language of the central government and the state media.

According to the 1956 census, conducted by the outgoing colonial administration, 69% of the population of the Sudan registered as ‘African’ and

¹ Our thanks go to Ms Rosie Antenucci for this map.

31% as ‘Arab’². Corresponding 1983 data indicated an 8% increase in Sudanese people claiming ‘Arab’ or ‘Arabised’ status. This arguably reflects a feeling that it was sometimes safer to be Arab than to be non-Arab. Since 1983, there has been no further census.

As a political entity, Southern Sudan has a history of colonisation – trade-based colonisation from the 18th century to the early 19th century by the Arabic populations to the north and east, and expansion-based colonisation by the British from the mid 19th century, following the collapse of the Ottoman empire, to the mid 20th century, when they withdrew. From the Arab world came merchants and slave traders; from the British came administrators, educators and military action against slave traders.

Such colonial movement generated local pidgin versions of Arabic, the Southern Sudanese version becoming known as ‘Juba Arabic’. This was developed into written form in the 1930s and 1940s, partly as a result of the presence of junior officials in the British administration who were relocated from the north. Speakers of Juba Arabic did not readily understand speakers of Arabic elsewhere, nor were they readily intelligible to them. Nevertheless the language had and still has strong local currency in the south³. Educated southerners may also speak Standard Arabic.

The advent of the British, as elsewhere in the world, generated the spread of English as a vehicle for the “civilising influence of Britain”⁴. A fully fledged version of English was inculcated through formal schooling along colonial lines. This reflected a wider picture in the 1950s when

the teaching of English language in Africa, offered as it was to a small and elite minority of the population, was not seen except by a few individuals as fundamentally different from the teaching of English in Britain [...] to provide communication, but also to provide an education in a literary and classical tradition similar to that which native speakers had.⁵

English was being taught in this way across Southern Sudan at the time the British withdrew from the region, with missionary schools very dominant alongside government schools. Despite the conflict, English remained the language of school instruction from grade 3 through secondary level in at least

² Mabior (1995: 5).

³ Metz (1992).

⁴ Crystal (1997).

⁵ Brumfit (2001: 115).

50% of schools until 1990⁶. While English was never the language of government in the north, it was the language of secondary schools there prior to 1969 and also was the chief language of the University of Khartoum until the early 1990s.

Following the end of British colonial rule in 1956, the Sudan was established as a single country, despite a number of reasons against it. These included its vast size (Africa's largest country); population differences (the north primarily comprising Arabic and Islamic people, and the south primarily Nilotic and Bantu peoples of diverse faiths); centuries of conflict between north and south, including slave trading by the northerners; separate British administration systems in the north and south, with northerners being forbidden to freely enter the south; and finally different languages of government (Arabic in the north and English in the south).

From the perspective of the northerners, the British colonial enterprise could be seen as an interruption to the Arabisation of Africa, which had been occurring gradually over many centuries from the north and east coasts. Thus, from the moment the British commenced to withdraw, Southern Sudan became a frontier to Arabisation. There ensued a lengthy struggle over shared participation in government, a struggle that became military, economic, religious and linguistic. This was brought to an end by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA)⁷ of 9 January, 2005, under which two levels of government were established: the Government of Southern Sudan (GOSS), in Juba, and the Government of National Unity (GNU), in Khartoum. The GOSS runs the affairs of Southern Sudan and is autonomous in that regard. The GNU is a coalition between the two major parties, one representing the north and the other the south, with minor participation from smaller political parties. The CPA has ushered in a six year Interim Period, culminating in 2011 with an internationally monitored referendum, whereby the people of Southern Sudan, voting by majority, shall decide whether to secede or to become a state in a federated nation⁸.

Southern Sudan is also in an interim period as a site for English, reflecting the close links between social and linguistic history in the region, as summarised in Table 1.

⁶ Metz (1992).

⁷ *The Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Government of the Republic of the Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Sudan People's Liberation Army, Nairobi, 9 January 2005.*

⁸ *Laws of Southern Sudan: Interim Constitution of Southern Sudan (2005).*

Table 1: Southern Sudan as a site for English: 1900-2011

	Recent social history in Southern Sudan	English in Southern Sudan
1900-1955	British colonial administration of both northern and southern Sudan, but separately	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> English begins to spread, through schools and regional administrative practices, alongside Indigenous languages. 1930s: an administrative training centre becomes established in Juba, using English.
1955-1972	Military conflict following on cessation of British colonial administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> English initially continues to be used and taught wherever the conflict permits 1963-4 foreign-born missionaries are expelled, thus reducing access to English through education
1972-1983	Period of relative tranquillity , marred by inadequate power sharing, unequal socio-economic development, and imposition of policies and practices of Arabisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schooling and regional government is re-established, with English re-adopted as the official language 1976: University of Juba established, using English
1983-2005	Military conflict following nation-wide imposition of Sharia law and other discriminatory policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> English is used by leaders in the political, military and educational arenas, locally and in exile 1989: University of Juba moves to Khartoum, teaching continues in English initially and then staff and students are inducted into Arabic as the medium of instruction 1990: Arabic is mandated as the language of instruction in all schools. English may be taught as a subject. However, there is minimal student access to English, except for those taking refuge in countries where English is a medium of instruction as in Kenya and Uganda.
2005-2011	Interim Period following Comprehensive Peace Agreement (09/01/05) and prior to referendum on the future of Southern Sudan in 2011.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government resumes in English, but most cadres only speak Arabic. English is to be taught alongside Indigenous languages in primary schools, and as medium of instruction in secondary and higher education. Teachers are in short supply and are not yet proficient in English. 2006-2009 University of Juba returns to Juba. Many students and staff struggle with English.

The shifts in language policy over the years of the struggle in Southern Sudan can usefully be described in terms of Kachru's (1985) construction of three concentric circles identifying different categories of English language user.⁹ The 'inner circle' represents users from the traditional sites of English, such as Britain and Australia; the 'outer circle' represents sites and users having a historical affiliation with such countries, typically through colonial government; and the 'expanding circle' represents sites where English is taught and used as a foreign language, or more recently as an international language.¹⁰ Southern Sudan from the 1930s to the 1980s would have been located in the 'outer circle', reflecting its experience under British administration, and its continuing hold on English as the language of government and education at that time, even if not as close a hold as in Kenya and Uganda, which Kachru classifies as core African outer circle locations. In 1990, however, when the northern Sudanese mandated Arabic as the language of instruction in all schools, Southern Sudan would have shifted to Kachru's 'expanding circle', where sits Egypt, for example. The subsequent policy reversal, under the Interim Constitution of Southern Sudan, whereby English has been re-adopted as the language of government and power suggests that Southern Sudan may once again become a member of the 'outer circle'.

This shift in relationship to a colonial language has parallels in the recent re-introduction of Portuguese in East Timor following its independence from Indonesia. In both cases, the language of one colonial power was replaced by the language of another, and then re-adopted following years of armed struggle. Also in both cases, there are several likely reasons for the choice. Reverting to the previous colonial language functions as a call for support from a historically connected source and from the world related to that source. It also indicates a stance of independence from a recently oppressive and still powerful neighbour, rejecting the continuing power of its language, and affirming an attachment on the part of the new leaders to the language that helped establish their leadership. Such reasons are somewhat different from the traditional reasons advanced by political leaders to support the use of a previously colonial language,¹¹ although they may also include them. National unity is one such reason, since adopting the colonial language avoids favouring one ethnic group over others and reduces fears of its potential domination. Other reasons are national development/progress, efficiency of European languages of wider communication, and cost-effectiveness. The choice of English as the language of government and higher education in Southern Sudan can therefore be seen as stemming from a range of factors and likely to have a range of implications.

⁹ Kachru (1985).

¹⁰ Pennycook (1994).

¹¹ Obondo (2007).

Following the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), and under the Interim Constitution of Southern Sudan, 2005, both English and Arabic are recognised as “official working languages of the governments of Southern Sudan and the States, and the languages of instruction for higher education”¹². However, a much stronger stance has been taken by the Government of Southern Sudan (GOSS) in its longer term plans. For example, it is intended that all major government business will be carried out in English, and that all public servants should be supported to develop their English proficiency as a matter of urgency. English is to be the language of instruction in the towns, beginning from 1st Year Basic School, whereas in the rural areas, instruction may be in the local national language up to 3rd or 4th Year, with English being taught initially as a subject, and then taking over as the overall medium of instruction in 4th or 5th Year¹³. All teaching at the University of Juba and progressively in the other two southern universities is to take place in English.

Policy implementation is currently hampered by the need to rebuild educational infrastructure, and a shortage of English speaking educators and locally relevant materials, and the GOSS has been sourcing these from neighbouring countries such as Kenya and Uganda and farther away, from South Africa. It now seeks to develop the University of Juba as a strong base for English language development.

The University of Juba as a site for English: English proficiencies, 2008

As mentioned earlier, the University of Juba is envisioned as an English medium university, with English as the medium of instruction across the disciplines, apart from Arabic Studies. This continues the policy introduced when the university was established in 1976, and overrides the use of Arabic that was mandated from 1990 until the CPA in 2005. To support this change, mandatory English language development courses have been available since 2007 from semesters one to four, and there is a plan to extend such courses to the final semester when possible.

At the start of 2008, proficiency and placement testing was conducted for university entrants across the seven Colleges and one Diploma Centre. About 600 students took part in the test, out of an expected number of 900-1,100 entrants. The results indicated a very poor standard of English. This assessment facilitated the Department of English Language and Literature in finalising preparations for a three week intensive English course, including the identification of appropriate kinds of language materials to be used in the

¹² *Laws of Southern Sudan: Interim Constitution of Southern Sudan* (2005).

¹³ *Ministry of Education, Science and Technology Policy Handbook* (2007).

course. This course was offered over three weeks just before the start of the academic year, and was attended by all of those who had sat for the test.

Staff with an Arabic orientation were also assessed for English language proficiency at the start of 2008, specifically regarding their ability to teach their courses or conduct office work in English. Initial support processes for transformation are now being provided for those in need. In the long term, the Department is planning provisions that will take account of the particular language needs of students and staff in different disciplines, although this will be determined by resource availability. It is hoped that, over the next two to three years, the standard of English among University entrants and Arabic oriented staff will have been improved and restored to that of the mid 1970s and early 1980s.

Associated with the years of conflict are a number of factors which impact on students in regard to the university's English language policy. Key among these are: the displacement of many of the inhabitants of Southern Sudan as a result of conflict; the Arabisation of Southern Sudanese schools from the 1990s; the destruction of educational facilities and resources; and weaknesses in the current examination system which have allowed some university entrants to present as having more fluent English than they in fact have.

Diaspora returnees have very diverse educational histories. The most fortunate in terms of English as a medium of instruction are those displaced people who are returning from countries where English medium schooling is in place, such as Kenya and Uganda. Others are returning from the Arabic-speaking north of Africa. Others again are returning from countries where French is used in the education system, such as the Congo and the Central African Republic. Students who received education in Southern Sudan in recent years have only experienced Arabic or a local language as the language of instruction, apart from a few religious schools where English persisted. There are thus three main languages and patterns of schooling that have been experienced by university entrants: Arabic (both returnees and people brought up in the south), English and French.

The Arabic pattern students were mostly educated within Sudan, and owing to the effect of the language policy launched in the early 1990s by the current central government in Sudan, the essence of English Language proficiency has been totally undermined. Some of the pedagogical mechanisms for enriching language proficiencies among students, such as the teaching of literature and other basic literary studies, were eliminated from the national curricula of English language for both basic (primary) and secondary levels of education. This has resulted in mere rote learning of English, called 'parrot learning' by

Sudanese educators. This is the biggest cause of set backs in building up language proficiencies among students at these two levels as well as at tertiary level.

Since their standard of English is very poor, Arabic pattern students at the University of Juba struggle to cope with their university studies. They cannot follow lectures well in English, nor take notes during lectures or when reading in the library; and they have critical problems in understanding concepts and analysing issues. Some weep with frustration as they leave a class, and in 2007 some suspended their studies for a year to give themselves time to learn English. In 2008, the three week intensive English course at the start of the year assisted students, and most are continuing with their studies, though they still struggle with English.

The English pattern students are quite able to cope with the English language demands of their studies, but experience difficulties associated with the levels of English in the academic environment. For example, many say they feel bored when attending lectures conducted in very simple primary English and discussed in broken English. Also, when they try to initiate conversation with their peers in English, they receive cool responses or none at all. This means they feel rejected by their compatriots and also frustrated in their learning. Socially, there is a divide generated by different schooling and life experiences as well as by different patterns of language use.

Students who returned from non-English and non-Arabic speaking countries have problems with both Arabic and English and their associated patterns of schooling. While they attend the English language courses made available by the university, they are not able to build on Arabic as a shared first language nor on shared cultural experiences. Socially, they are in a minority in regard to both Arabic and English pattern students. These students gradually pick up the pidgin Juba Arabic from the streets and the market place, and also English through their university experience.

The university staff are similarly varied in their patterns of language use. While the Vice-Chancellor and many senior staff are highly fluent in English and committed to its use, most of the lecturers across the disciplines are not well versed in English and so are struggling to teach in English. Nevertheless, the English staff at the university consider that the majority of their colleagues see the change as healthy, provided the support is there. In other words, if there are adequate facilities and if opportunities for training are offered, then there is no objection. Some, however, oppose the change: they see it as undermining or delaying their progress, and are specifically concerned about wasting their time in English language training, delay in promotion, and age as

a factor against their language learning. Nevertheless, they avoid displaying a strong negative reaction in appreciation of the fact that many of their colleagues had to adjust to teaching in Arabic back in the 1990s and had to undergo similar training and anxieties.

The policy cycles of Arabisation and English-isation are clearly challenging for developing and maintaining working proficiencies in both languages, or indeed a consistently high proficiency in either one. For effective English-medium university studies, the shift from Kachru's 'outer circle' of English, where English was the language of instruction in schools, to the 'expanding circle' where English is merely a subject, clearly has had detrimental effects. Addressing these effects is a high priority for the University of Juba.

The University of Juba as a site for English: Practicalities, 2008-2011

The English language proficiencies described above clearly raise issues of practicality for the university, particularly during this Interim period of two-system government in Southern Sudan, prior to the 2011 referendum. To restore systems once destroyed or discouraged may not be easy. An attitudinal shift is needed. Thus, for the university to have an effective on-going English language program strong support is needed both by the Government of National Unity (GNU) and the Government of Southern Sudan (GOSS), as well as national and international non-government organizations and foreign governments.

To address the implementation of English as the medium of instruction, the university has the following strategies in place, all of which are, however, highly dependent on adequate resourcing:

- Assessment of the English language proficiencies of all students and staff (teaching and non-teaching)
- Intensive 3 week course (potentially 6 weeks) for first year students prior to the start of the academic year
- Ongoing mandatory English courses – both General English and English for Academic Purposes – for those assessed as in need
- Transformation training for staff (teaching and non-teaching)
- Action to improve the standard of English among university entrants by becoming more involved in both primary and secondary levels of education and teacher education

This last strategy takes a long-term perspective, and also indicates the university's intended role as a partner with the Ministry of Education in the government's push to re-build the education system across all levels. It is likely to involve affiliation of the primary (Regional) teacher training institutes to the University; in-service courses for secondary school teachers; the resumption of 1-3 year training for primary teachers; and a role in school

curriculum development and materials development. The training of English Language teachers will be a priority at all school levels. Already, the Department of English Language and Literature has put in place a program for in-service English courses for secondary school language teachers. This is just the first step in the long-term plans of the College of Education.

To address the deficiencies in English language development among staff and students, the university authority has an intention to establish a separate Centre for English Language to be equipped with well-qualified staff and modern language teaching facilities and self-access resources, including multi-media facilities, internet access, a variety of English textbooks and learning materials. The strategy of conducting intensive and follow-up English language courses is going to become a practice common to the all three Universities (Bahr El Gazal, Juba and Upper Nile), where the staff in the Departments of English will be deployed together to run them. At the same time, English oriented staff from other disciplines will be engaged to teach English for specific purposes in their respective colleges. It is planned to build ongoing capacity for the Centre through funded projects, staff scholarships and exchanges, and collaborative research.

It is expected to be the responsibility of the Centre to address the English language development needs not only of the students and staff of the three English medium universities in Southern Sudan, but also those of all GOSS Ministries, State Ministries, and other organs of government, including the organized forces. This is part of a broader vision for the University of Juba, prepared under the leadership of the Vice Chancellor, Professor Sibrino Barnaba Forojalla, as a concept statement for funding and presented to the Government of Southern Sudan on 11th January 2008.¹⁴ This vision indicates a determination to return Southern Sudan to membership of the 'outer circle' of English language users, and directly illustrates the hopes that Southern Sudan has invested in the English language. Clearly, the English speaking world has a vital part to play in bringing those hopes to fruition.

¹⁴ This concept statement was first drafted in early 2008 by an Australian volunteer team comprising Mr Mariano Ngor, Ms Rosie Antenucci and Dr Jenny Barnett, in collaboration with staff of the University of Juba's Department of English Language and Literature: Mr Natania Baya Yoasa, Mr Peter Charles Aramaya, Mr John Christopher Jagu. It is now in process of further development.

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