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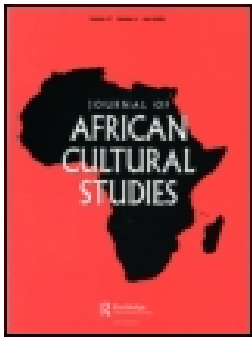


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The colonial linguistics of governance in Sudan: the Rejaf Language Conference, 1928

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This paper explores the discursive history of ‘language-making’ in the context of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, focusing on a significant colonial moment of standardisation: The Rejaf Language Conference (RLC) of 1928. Through inspecting the report of the proceedings of the RLC, the paper contends that this institutional event contributed to the construction of racial and regional differences by, then: (1) being informed by scientific theories of racial categorisation as an epistemological basis for creating a stratified local sociolinguistic system; (2) with a Eurocentric audience design, inventing ‘technical versions’ of ‘local vernaculars’ and ‘language groups’ imbued with specific indexical values, anchored to specific localities and social identities; (3) relationally, vernacularising Arabic by reworking its ideological load and orthographic order determined by a colonial economy of education; (4) artefactualising a pluralistic image of the society as an effect and function of institutional linguistic classification of forms tied to specific localities and people; and (5) resulting in the planned absence of a perceived ‘indigenous’ lingua franca in the Southern Sudan. The RLC as a relatively regimented format, characterised by a rationalised absence of the ‘local voice’, was one of the significant contexts in which the very disciplinary identity of linguistics was rationalised, resisted, and maintained.

Keywords: Rejaf Language Conference; de-Arabicising Arabic; language grouping; missionary linguistics; invention of vernaculars; linguistic graphic harmonisation; Arabic

1. Introduction

The modern history of Sudan¹ can be re-articulated in terms of the ways in which top-down language planning is a function as well as an effect of inequality in the distribution of and access to resources of various forms (on the relationship between policy discourses and patterns of domination, see [Bauman and Briggs 2003](#); [Bourdieu 1991](#); [Hymes 1996](#); [Joseph 2006](#); [Phillipson 1992](#); [Ricento 2006, 2015](#); [Shohamy 2006](#); [Suleiman 2004](#); [Tollefson 1991](#)). Before the separation of the Southern Sudan in July 2011, Sudan had been at war with itself since the eve of independence from Britain in 1956 (as we write the two nation-states are engaged in an armed conflict about, among other issues, colonially inherited demarcating borders).² The struggle by the South against the official postcolonial, monolingual policies of Arabisation (and Islamisation) culminated in a relatively short-lived ‘symbolic’ recognition of the subjugated linguistic resources within a national social order (for a review of language policies in the South–North peace accords, see [Abdelhay et al. 2011](#); [James 2008](#); [Idris 2005](#); [Miller 2003](#); [Sharkey 2008](#)).³ Within the pre-2011 contemporary Sudan,⁴ metadiscursive or cultural categories of communication and interaction (e.g. ‘indigenous languages’, ‘pidgin Arabic’, ‘native people’, etc.)

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took their roots in colonial contacts (Abdelhay, Abu-Manga, and Miller 2015; Abdelhay, Makoni, and Makoni 2010; Mahmud 1983; for a discussion of language-making processes, see Agha 2003; Errington 2008; Makoni and Pennycook 2007; Silverstein 2003; Gal and Woolard 1995; Koyama 2009). These constructs have been employed as instruments of discursive governance and management of diversity.

Situating the paper within the framework of colonial linguistics, which studies and critiques linguistics as a colonial enterprise and as a practice implicated in the construction of a particular cultural representation of non-Western societies and individuals (Errington 2008; Makoni and Pennycook 2007), we examine the history of ‘vernacular-construction’ in the context of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, with a focus on the Rejaf Language Conference (RLC) of 1928. The knowledge-producing strategies and processes leading to the emergence of specific categories of speech and language groups can be understood by reviewing metapragmatic activities performed at synchronic moments; that is, by inspecting social practices designed to organise and regulate the form and function of language at institutional events such as colonial conferences (for comparative accounts, see Meeuwis 2011; Makoni, Dube, and Mashiri 2006; Makoni and Pennycook 2007; Seghers 2004). Through inspecting the Report of the RLC, we contend that this language-making event contributed to the construction of racial and regional differences by: (1) being modelled on scientific theories of racism as an epistemological basis for planning language; (2) with a Eurocentric audience design, inventing ‘technical versions’⁵ of ‘local vernaculars’ and ‘group languages’ imbued with specific indexical values anchored to specific localities and social identities; (3) relationally, pedestrianising (vernacularising) Arabic, by reworking its ideological load and orthographic order determined by a colonial economy of education; (4) artefactualising a pluralistic image of the society as an effect and function of institutionalising its constructed categories of interaction; that is, the reality is now being officially considered as ‘multi-cultural’ as a result of the products (e.g. language groups) of their intellectual exercise; and (5) resulting in the planned absence of a perceived ‘indigenous’ lingua franca in the South (‘perceived’ because, in this colonial context, the existing lingua franca (a variety of Arabic) is perceived by the missionaries as ‘non-indigenous’).

Although one of the objectives of this colonial conference was to develop a common writing system for (presumably pre-existing) ‘local languages’ for educational purposes, the choice of a unified orthographic system was a contested ideological act: the histories of the choices (e.g. choosing between the Lepsius system and an IPA-based orthography, see below) and the objectified ‘native people’ were both a site of struggle between various systems of representation. Thus, the colonial regime of language (particularly its official policies and regulatory statements) was characterised not by a single monologic discourse but heteroglossic and complementary discourses operating within a totalising scheme of colonial governance (Pennycook 1998). The RLC as a relatively regimented format characterised by a rationalised absence of the ‘local voice’ was a significant discursive context in which the very disciplinary identity of linguistics was rationalised, resisted, and maintained.⁶

This paper demonstrates the ways in which the options suggested in relation to the script were in themselves strategically manipulated as a display of epistemic power. As is shown below, the choice between the different systems of writing for local vernaculars is a field of conflict between the missionaries on one hand, and governmental officials and professional linguists on the other. Our critical analysis of the RLC is thematically selective in the sense that we highlight the main contributions and points of contention that emerged as a response to the set agenda. The aim here is to understand how a dialogically constructed text within a particular locality is mutually shaped by a wider ideological, historical, and socio-political agenda.

The paper is organised as follows: in the next part, we sketch the wider political frame for the RLC, and in the third part, we critically examine the positioned contributions and interventions of the participants. The final part concludes the paper.

2. The socio-historical context: the Condominium and the creation of social stratification (1899–1956)

Sudan was a British colony, though the colonial system was symbolically termed as the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (1899–1956). For socio-economic convenience, the Condominium initially governed the country as a united entity with a particular ‘regime of language’ (Kroskrity 2000) in which Arabic and Islam occupied a place of pride (particularly in the northern part), while other symbolic resources (including English) were downscaled.⁷ Christian missionaries were allowed open access to the southern part of the country, which was conceptualised as ‘pagan’ and was relatively underdeveloped in contrast to the northern part.

Shortly, the British colonial system changed its agenda and divided the country into two self-contained spaces with antagonistic socio-cultural systems: the Arabic-speaking Muslim north vs. a vernacularised Christian south (with English as a *lingua franca*). This separatist policy came to be known as ‘the Southern Policy’ (1920–1946). The north was recognised through administrative intervention, by complex centring or harmonising forces including the adoption of Friday as a ‘public’ holiday; the honouring of Muslim feasts; the visibility of Muslim regiments, and the adoption of Arabic as the official language (Miller 2003; Trimmingham 1948). Consequently, Arabic was invested with ‘prestige’ and power in relation to other communicative forms in other places. Notwithstanding its linguistic status as one of the orthographically well-harmonised languages, the institutionalisation of Arabic as a ‘monoglot standard’ (Silverstein 1996) in Sudan has its roots in the British colonial system of governance.⁸ In effect, Arabic has become the hegemonic ideology indexing or enacting a relatively exclusive social status, anchored to specific space within the colonial and postcolonial sociolinguistic regimes of language (‘Arabic-Muslim-north’). This discursive image still ideologically mediates the geopolitical relations between the two Republics (Sudan and the South Sudan).⁹

By contrast, the colonial rule, which was aided by Christian missionaries preoccupied with translation of the Bible into local idioms, intended to ‘build up a series of self-contained racial or tribal units’ in the south (The 1930 Memorandum on Southern Policy, as quoted in Abdel-Rahim 1965, 20–23). Coercive measures restricted the movement of the Arabic-speaking ‘northerners’ to the south and the deportation of Arabic-speaking merchants and officers from the region (Abdelhay et al. 2011). The ideological aspect of the policy required a top-down discursive control of diversity (e.g. through official language educational policies) to construct a politically united, yet internally pluralised, southern front rooted in language and religion. This policy aspect also needed one of the key officially recognised systems of socio-cultural reproduction: an education system peculiar to the south (on education as a mechanism of social reproduction, see Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). To deal with the issue of linguistic standardisation and the unification of the various orthographic conventions, the colonial government coordinated and funded a language-making event that came to be called the Rejaf Language Conference of 1928.¹⁰

3. The RLC and the construction of ideological categories Rejaf Language Conference of interaction

In this section, we critically review the report of the six-day RLC. We focus on the enregistering (Agha 2003) of formal categories with a specific social meaning, the reflexive commentaries of the participants, and their underlying ideological schemes to understand the origin of the multiple

indexicalities (socio-cultural meanings) attributed to specific forms. First, we briefly examine the official memorandum that set the objectives of the conference and its key underlying epistemological assumptions, and then, we synthesise and analyse the points and themes of the conference.

According to the memorandum on the objectives of the conference (dated 30 October 1927) by Mr J.H. Matthew, the Secretary for Education and Health, the key agenda of the RLC was as follows:

- (1) To draw up a classified list of languages and dialects spoken in the Southern Sudan.
- (2) To make recommendations as to whether a system of group languages should be adopted for educational purposes and, if so, what languages would be selected as the group languages for the various areas. In this connection the following considerations will arise:
 - (a) Whether owing to their kinship two or more languages or dialects can share a single literature.
 - (b) Whether a local vernacular can be expanded, particularly in the matter of borrowing words from foreign sources, to convey new meanings.
 - (c) Whether any particular vernacular is worth adopting and developing on the grounds that there is a definite demand for education among the people speaking it.
- (3) To consider and report as to the adoption of a unified system of Orthography.¹¹ It is suggested that the most practical means of attaining this end is to consider and report as to whether the Memorandum issued by the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures can be adopted with or without modification.
- (4) To make proposals for co-operation in the production of text-books; and the adoption of a skeleton grammar, reading books, and primers for general use. (RLC 1928, 4)

Further, the memorandum stated that ‘this Conference¹² will be carrying on the valuable work initiated at the conferences held at Arua in 1918 and Aba in 1924’¹³ (RLC 1928, 4).

Before proceeding to examine the views raised during the event, let us briefly comment on the above programmatic statement. Firstly, the memorandum enacts an institutional voice of authority, by virtue of being issued by the Secretary for Education and Health, explicitly marking the active intervention of the government officials in the process of language-education planning, which had been the exclusive responsibility of the missionaries. Secondly, the statement uses key cultural metaphors including ‘languages’, ‘dialects’, ‘local vernacular’, and ‘literature’ as unproblematically transparent. From a colonial linguistic perspective, the distinction between these terms is based on an idealised version of writing, thus this perspective confuses writing with speech. This indicates that the participants shared a commonly organising linguistic ideology. Our critique of the use of metalinguistic categories such as ‘language’ and ‘dialect’ is also based on the inappropriateness of these terms as used in traditional philology, which was then the dominant framework of thinking about language, and which (traditional philology) reflects the tendency to view language through Western lenses, and overlooks the metaterms about language practices emerging from African contexts (for a discussion of ‘language ideologies’, see [Blommaert 1999](#); [Kroskrity 2000](#); [Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998](#); [Silverstein 1996](#)).

More importantly, the first objective of the RLC ideologically implies that ‘languages’ and ‘dialects’ pre-exist linguistic classification, and the technical task was ‘to draw up a classified list’. The expectation of accurately capturing the languages ‘out there’ does not take into account that the terms being used were in themselves one specific manner of creating and inventing languages ([Makoni and Pennycook 2007](#)), which was tied to a specific culture-based view of language and may have generated unintended negative consequences. In our view, an analysis of the collateral damage arising from language policies constitutes an important area of analysis; however, this is frequently overlooked as attention is restricted to (synchronic) textual analysis

of the policy statements without a serious consideration of the historical trajectories and the wider historical conditions of the constitution of these policies.

The second objective in the memorandum signals that externally observed linguistic variation in the southern region was conceptualised in negative terms (e.g. ‘whether any local particular vernacular is worth adopting and developing’). To manage the linguistic diversity in the south, the memorandum recommended the adoption of ‘a system of group languages’ for educational purposes. However, taking into account the wider historical and socio-economic circumstances in which the RLC was embedded, we argue that the mechanical designing of ‘group languages’, semiotically associated with districts in the south and institutionally regimented through the education system, would lead to the production of a particular colonial image of the whole country: an ‘imagined’ (Anderson 1991) caricature, but with potentially serious consequences, of a politically singular yet polyglot southern regional front united against a monoglot ideology of Arabisation through a graphically scripted version of pluralism (‘group languages’ anchored to localities or formally demarcated missionary ‘spheres of influence’). In other words, although the South is now linguistically seen as ‘multilingual’, it is still constructed by the colonial system as a single front against the Arabic-speaking North.

The RLC participants are also worth noting. Although the Secretary for Education stated, ‘I hope very much that it will be possible to make the Conference fully representative’ (RLC 1928, 4), this representation was exclusively restricted to Christian mission representatives (e.g. American Mission, Church Missionary Society, Italian Catholic Mission, and Africa Inland Mission) and governmental officials (e.g. of Sudan, Uganda, and Belgian Congo; RLC 1928, 5). Not only were ‘native voices’ conspicuously absent, but the inconsistency and contradiction of participants’ positions were also not foregrounded.

The memorandum also mentioned one of the most visible (and hearable) voices: the ‘expert adviser’ embodied in the institutional capacity of Diedrich Westermann, Director of the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures. Westermann made significant contributions to the colonial archives on non-Western languages and peoples but did so from the perspective of a particular linguistic ideology in the service of a particular theology. Westermann had already been in the south of Sudan (August–November 1910) to study the Shilluk and their traditional practices including their language, with commissioning and funding by the United Presbyterian Church of North America. The point here is that, in terms of epistemology, the relationship between Western linguistics and theology within the context of colonialism is very complex (see Westermann 1912, VII)

3.1. An engineered absence of a perceived ‘indigenous’ lingua franca in the south

The first day of the conference (Monday, 9 April 1928) opened with a message from the Governor-General of the Sudan, read by Mr Matthew, which stressed the significance of creating a unified system of orthography for pedagogic ends. The Governor-General, an institutional voice at the highest scale level of political power, expressed awareness of a potential lack of consensus over the ways ‘languages’ can be ‘selected’ from ‘the large number of dialects’. The word ‘selection’, we maintain, implies a choice of a variety from a set of pre-existing dialects and not an active process of construction (e.g. codification) of a dialect as ‘standard’. Two significant correlations stand out in his message: first, the official stance drew a link between graphic harmonisation and educational process in the sense that the former was viewed as ‘essential’ for schooling, and the conference determined the nature of this schooling. The assumption was that the role of language was only technical: there is no education that can be carried out without and outside language, and language use in itself is a form of education. The related second correlation established was between ‘language’ and ‘education’ (‘language education’), with the negative

implication that ‘dialects’ could not qualify as media of instruction. One of the consequences of this linguistic ideology, which is still very much with us today, is that ‘language education’ is misleadingly reduced/restricted to the ‘domain of the school’. In other words, the function of the education system is to make learners first ‘unlearn’ (or forget) what they culturally know about their communicative forms and ‘relearn’ the school’s version of what they are supposed to speak (cf. Bourdieu’s 1991 ‘legitimate language’).

In a detailed opening statement, Mr Matthew rehearsed the objectives of the RLC, emphasising the need to produce ‘a classified list of languages and dialects spoken in the Southern Sudan’, and noting that ‘a preliminary list of languages and dialects and their distribution has been compiled from the replies to the questionnaire and other sources’ (RLC 1928, 8). Most significantly, for the basic principles to be observed for choosing a means of instruction, Mr Matthew quoted the recommendations of the US-based Phelps-Stokes Commission’s report ‘Education in East Africa’ (based on a Commission’s tour in East Africa in 1924 at the request of missionary societies and with cooperation of the British government) for choosing a teaching medium, which he believed were particularly relevant to the context of the Southern Sudan:

- (1) that every people have an inherent right to their Native tongue;
- (2) that the multiplicity of tongues shall not be such as to develop misunderstandings and distrust among people who should be friendly and co-operative;
- (3) that every group shall be able to communicate directly with those to whom the Government is entrusted; and
- (4) that an increasing number of Native people shall know at least one of the languages of the civilized nations. (RLC 1928, 9)

Based on the above considerations, the Commission made the following specific recommendations to guide educators and governments in determining the usual procedure in most African colonies:

- (1) The tribal language should be used in the lower elementary standards or grades;
- (2) A lingua franca of African origin should be introduced in the middle classes of the school if the area is occupied by large Native groups speaking diverse languages;
- (3) The language of the European nation in control should be taught in the upper standards. (RLC 1928, 9)

These guiding principles thus create a hierarchy of linguistic resources reflecting their users’ social statuses. Using European languages at upper levels and local languages at the bottom or local level enacts an ideology in which education is a process of becoming European.

Some observations should be made here. Firstly, linguistic diversity (‘the multiplicity of tongues’) was discursively correlated with ‘misunderstanding’ and lack of ‘co-operative’ interaction in terms of the Phelps-Stokes Fund’s educational policy. This view stemmed from a denotational ideology of language: understanding or misunderstanding was attributed to the intrinsic structure of the linguistic variety, not to its social use. Secondly, the evaluative metaphors with which Mr Matthew (and the RLC in general) intertextually aligned were invested with specific indexical values: ‘native tongues/tribal language’ were employed to stand for non-European ‘Native people’, while ‘languages’ were used in reference to ‘civilised’ nations’. Finally, the epistemological basis of the Phelps-Stokes Fund’s education policy for Africa was ‘naturalist’ and ‘essentialist’ (the right to ‘native tongues’ was viewed as ‘inherent’, and this ethnicising ideology is implicit in the current mainstream theory of language rights; Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 1994; for a critique see Canagarajah 1999). The teaching of European languages was restricted to ‘upper standards’ (high school). The interpretation here is that the Phelps-Stokes Fund’s policy

framework was intended to produce a select class of natives in colonial languages who could coordinate with the colonial rule (Hungwe 2007; Seghers 2004; Sharkey 2003).

A third significant observation is that Phelps-Stokes' philosophy of education was entirely racial in orientation and modelled on a version of social Darwinism which believes in the 'inferiority' of the blacks (Rudell 1982; Seghers 2004). Seghers (2004, 463–464) stated that the Phelps-Stokes Fund's policies were modelled on the conviction that 'education had to be "adapted" to the limited intellectual capacities of black men and limited possibilities of the "Negro world"'.

The Phelps-Stokes Fund's educational policy (with its Orientalising vocabulary and racial categories) was translocally 'entextualised' (Silverstein and Urban 1996) as the set of guiding principles for the RLC and became a significant instrument for creating and reproducing unequal race relations between the south and the north, on the one hand, and between the entire colony and the metropolis, on the other hand. Further, the basis upon which the metadiscursive enumeration of forms in the south was constructed was unclear. Mr Matthew himself admitted that 'there is little doubt that some of the tongues conventionally enumerated as separate languages are in reality local variants of a common form of speech, and that the names by which they are known are tribal rather than linguistic' (RLC 1928, 10). He went a step further to state that 'this may be held to apply to the names enumerated in our list under the headings of Bari, Latuko, Madi, and no doubt others' (RLC 1928, 10). A serious interpretation of this statement points to the artificial creation, over the course of European colonisation of Africa, not just of languages but also of racial/tribal identities in Sudan (see Wakoson 1980).¹⁴ Southall rightly noted:

We ought to recognise not only that Nuer were never Nuer and Dinka never Dinka, but that when they said 'we are Naath' or 'we are Jieng' they were not saying 'We are the Naath tribe' or 'We are the Jieng tribe' but just saying 'We are People' each in their own distinctive way. (1976, 487)

The point here is that the missions and officials were not simply 'discovering languages' (whether separate or grouped) but actively inventing them using their own ideological definitions of what a language and its speaker should look like. The ways in which these Orientalising (abnormalising) self-image-creating strategies are grounded in a particular cultural world view determined the nature and goal of education policies (for a discussion of Orientalist ideologies, see Said 1978).

For Mr Matthew, the management of linguistic diversity for the sake of education meant the reduction of 'the multiplicity of tongues by selecting one of the dialects as the basis of a literary medium for the whole group' (RLC 1928, 10). Inspired by the Phelps-Stokes Fund's policy that a lingua franca should be of African origin (read: 'indigenous'), he expressed his opposition to the use of pidgin Arabic, based on the assumption that it was not of African origin, notwithstanding the prestigious status Arabic (in whatever '-lect') had entertained in the south. Mr Matthew detemporalised Arabic by categorically denying it any communal functionality in the social biography of at least some southern districts. Thus, he believed that there was no need to teach or even develop a language of intercommunication (a lingua franca) for the Southern Sudan at this stage. Mr Matthew stated that it was official policy 'that English should as soon as possible become the language of official correspondence in the Southern Sudan' (RLC 1928, 10). His statement also indicates that Arabic had indeed been the preferred lingua franca by the government before the issuing of the separatist Southern Policy. However, some participants noted that establishing English as the language of official correspondences was not sufficient to warrant the eradication of Arabic from the south. Some speakers even suggested the choice of Bangala, Swahili, or English as a lingua franca for the South. However, the opposing view was that if English were to be used in the South as a lingua franca, it would 'almost certainly degenerate to something approaching the pidgin English of the West Coast' (RLC 1928, 22–23).

If this position proved one thing, it was that neither the missions nor (at this stage) the government was interested in the imposition of English on the south but rather in the artificial

categories of ‘group languages’ and standardised versions of ‘local vernaculars’. Mr Matthew settled the debate when he stated that it was not necessary to develop a lingua franca in the south. The point here is that Arabic was nearly unanimously rejected in its lingua franca function. And more seriously, the instrument of the language grouping (the creation of self-contained and graphically harmonised language groups) and the replacement of Arabic by English effectively resulted in the engineered absence of a perceived ‘indigenous’ lingua franca in the Southern Sudan. More significantly, because the locals were physically and linguistically managed as self-contained tribal units, the possibility of interethnic communicative language, a part from Arabic, was not encouraged to emerge bottom-up.

3.2. A Eurocentric ‘audience design’ for African languages

Mr Matthew suggested three main options for developing a unified system of orthography: (1) a phonemically based alphabet with certain distinctions disregarded and left to the reader to recognise from the context; (2) a Roman alphabet with dots and diacritical marks (Lepsius system); or (3) an IPA-based orthography adapted for African languages (with new additional letters and shapes). The choice between the Lepsius and the International Phonetic Association (IPA) orthography was a site of intense conflict between the missionaries and the professional linguist. The former, which uses diacritical marks with letters, was designed by R. Lepsius, a professor at University of Berlin, at the request of British Missionary Societies (RLC 1928). The latter was based on a set of alphabets developed by the IPA with adaptation to African languages and was supported by Westermann.¹⁵

Regarding the production of educational materials and grammar, Mr Matthew stated:

We should, I think, not only consider the educational requirements of the native, but also the needs of the Government Officials and the Missionary studying a vernacular. We urgently require a series of grammars and vocabularies to assist the ever increasing number of those wishing to learn native languages. (RLC 1928, 12)

We evidently contend that the ‘audience design’ (Bell 1984) for the discursive construction of ‘languages’ was not the ‘natives’ but the missionaries and the colonial officials. The emphasis on the missions and the government officials was even repeated in the final resolution of the conference (see Section 5). In this connection, we argue that standardised ‘local vernaculars’ in the south situated within this colonial economy of education were artificial inventions. The very construct of ‘native speaker’ in the local sociolinguistic regime was provided mainly by European Christian missionaries. Consequently, the output of the metapragmatic activities would be a technically imagined version of ‘mother tongues’ to be taught to the ‘natives’ anchored to specific localities. In other words, the RLC was not just a mechanism for the cultural production of languages but also of places with specific indexical configurations (a similar strategy was copied in the Nuba Mountains; see Abdelhay 2010; Salih 1990).

According to Mr Matthew, the group languages that were believed to exist prior to the conference were (1) Dinka Nuer; (2) Shilluk Acholi; (3) Bari Latuko; (4) the Bahr el Ghazal languages, excluding Dinka; and Madi (RLC 1928, 14). Each language group was assigned a committee, and a committee was created to produce textbooks. We contend that ‘languages’ and ‘language groups’ were brought into existence by the very institutional naming practices performed by the missionaries and government officials such as Mr Matthew. The tendency in the use of terms such as ‘Shilluk Acholi’ and ‘Bari Latuko’ was founded on an implicit assumption of the validity of ethno-linguistic categories.

Westermann, a professor of linguistics, addressed the conference (on the second day) on the topic of orthography. Westermann noted that a unified system of script or orthography was possible because ‘we are dealing with a definite group of African languages’ that are inter-related and

spoken in a circumscribed geographical area (RLC 1928, 14). He made the following significant statement:

The script we want to introduce is intended for use by Africans, not for use by Europeans who want to learn the language. We should keep this constantly in mind. It means that we should try to look at the problems from the African's point of view, not from our own. His difficulties are not always ours; we are to remember that our views on orthography are always hopelessly restricted by the historical orthography of our European languages. (RLC 1928, 14–15)

Westermann's above statement can be interpreted as an outright rejection of Mr Matthew's argument that the European image of literary language should be taken as a frame of reference for the development of African languages. Westermann's position was also a refusal of the chairman's view that the intended audience of the orthographies should primarily include government officials and missionaries. The professional linguist maintained that the guiding principle should be the nature and the actual structure of the African linguistic forms, which could be revealed by taking on board the perspective of the actual users of these forms (the Africans). Westermann defended the use of the Roman script in the phonetic version as originally introduced by the IPA and later adapted to African languages in the Memorandum on Orthography, published by the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures (IILAC) in London. The principle of the phonetic script, he explained, was to use new letter forms instead of diacritical marks to express sounds peculiar to group languages in the Southern Sudan (RLC 1928, 15). In short, Westermann rejected the use of the Lepsius system in favour of an IPA-based orthography which was embraced by the IILAC.

Further, Westermann urged participants to agree on the main features of the orthography applicable to most of the language groups before they proceeded in their respective committees to discuss the sound system of each language. Most of the proposals were accepted by the delegates; however, a few features stirred controversy.¹⁶ The epistemic conflict became heated in the afternoon session when Mr Matthew asked the conference to accept the memorandum and to avoid the diacritical marks (the Lepsius system). At this point, Archdeacon Shaw and Bishop Kitching (of the Church Missionary Society), who supported the diacritical system, 'both felt it to be inconsistent on the part of those responsible for the memorandum to object to diacritical marks below the letter while using such symbols as the glottal stop, the mark indicating nasalization' (RLC 1928, 19). Mr Matthew responded that the memorandum 'had already been adopted in other parts of Africa, and it was to be feared that by rejecting it we would fall behind the times', and he suggested that 'if this Conference found itself unable to adopt it, it should have weighty reasons for such a refusal' (RLC 1928, 19–20).

Archdeacon Shaw counter-argued that 'the alphabet was based on that of the International Phonetic Association; that is to say, on an alphabet produced by scientists for the use of scientists, in which Greek letters were used and other letters were turned upside down' (RLC 1928, 20). He added that the Christian missions were already conscious of the importance of creating a uniform writing system for African languages and that the system developed by the IPA proved impractical in the African context. He explained that at the Arua Conference in 1918, the missions had carefully studied the IPA system and rejected it, and they instead developed a simple system. The point here is that the Arua system of orthography did not allow the use of more than one letter to represent sounds, as IPA-based memorandum did. Thus, it allowed the use of diacritical marks because they were not defined as letters. Unlike the IPA system, it discouraged the use of new letters to represent sounds. In the context of discussing the principles of the Lepsius diacritical system which was adopted by the Arua Conference in 1918, Archdeacon Shaw argued that 'the Natives themselves pointed out to them the necessity of certain diacritical signs which they had hoped to avoid', and he added that 'the Arua system could easily be used on typewriters' (RLC 1928, 21). He disputed the calligraphy of the letters, which in his view should be suitable

not just for scientists but also for ordinary people. The missions, whose predetermined goal was to Christianise the African populations through (a version of) local idioms, were strongly against the use of modern Western or European educational materials and products (cf. Meeuwis 2011). To support this position, Archdeacon Shaw rejected Westermann's argument that the IPA orthography of the memorandum had been a success in West Africa.

In response, Westermann agreed that the IPA system was not specifically developed for Africans, but he rejected Shaw's claim that it was intended for scientists. The point here is that the choice of a unified writing convention was a contested political act: the histories of the choices and the objectified 'native people' were both a site of contestation between various systems of knowledge. Thus, the RLC was characterised not by a single monologic discourse of power but heteroglossic (Bakhtin 1981) and complementary discourses operating within a totalising scheme of colonial governance (for a comparative case, see Meeuwis 2011; Seghers 2004).

The tension between different views of language had one feature in common: the assumption was that linguists and missionaries knew more about languages than did the speakers of those languages. Expertise here was reinforced by issues about power. The more powerful were treated as experts, while the less powerful were not viewed as experts even in their own areas of social-political experiences. Consequently, this way of categorising languages legitimated some knowledge and delegitimated other types of knowledge, leading to an intriguing distinction between experts and local informants.¹⁷

3.3. *The 'de-Arabicisation' of Arabic*

As to the third objective of the RLC, Matthew suggested that the medium of instruction at the level of primary education should be the vernacular, while English should be used for higher education. This suggestion adhered to Phelps-Stokes Fund's policy, which was reproduced as the guiding principle (see previous section).

Most significantly, it was noted that in certain districts in the Southern Sudan, Arabic was used not just as a lingua franca but also as 'the vernacular of a community' (RLC 1928, 23). While Father I.B. Crazzolaro of the Italian Catholic Mission in Sudan denounced the existence of an Arabic teaching school at Malakal, Mr Matthew defended the use of Arabic in some districts if it is the community's vernacular. Similarly, Archdeacon Shaw stressed the necessity of using Arabic as a medium of instruction in elementary schools in districts, where Arabic was spoken as a mother tongue. For him, Arabic in these certain districts was the available medium of approaching the communities.¹⁸ The condition for the use of Arabic as a medium of instruction in places where it was spoken as a vernacular (read: mother tongue/colloquial) was to 'de-Arabicise' it: to decouple it from Arab, Islam and Arabic script and 'Romanise' it in a new orthographic system.¹⁹

However, the suggestion to Romanise Arabic was not completely accepted. For example, Mr S. Hillelson, Assistant Director of Intelligence in Sudan, argued that 'it was impossible to draw a rigid line between the North and the South and the political and administrative connection with the Northern Sudan could not be disregarded' (RLC 1928, 26). In short, the most dominant missionary voices (e.g. the Church Missionary Society) and the government representatives (e.g. Minister for Education) could accept Arabic not in its lingua franca capacity but in its vernacularised and Romanised identity as a medium of instruction in elementary schools

3.4. *Institutionalisation of ideological differences: the production of textbooks and grammars*

On the fourth day of the conference, some discussion was generated as to the participation of the mission authorities in the choice and designing of teaching materials. Mr Matthew suggested that

the resolution adopting the minutes should indicate that ‘the Education Department should work in collaboration with the Mission authorities’ (RLC 1928, 24). For the printing cost, Archdeacon Shaw suggested that societies in England might help. The point here is that a complex system of participation at various scales was involved in the process of material production, circulation, and uptake (local, regional, global, etc.). Furthermore, the government emphasised its need for the economic assistance of the missions in the production of textbook materials. However, this financial help by the mission societies was not epistemologically unconditional. In connection with the point of producing grammar and vocabularies ‘for the use of the Missionaries and Officials’, the delegates, particularly Westermann and Hillelson, expressed the need for linguistic expertise in African languages with speciality in phonetics, linguistics, and anthropology (RLC 1928, 24).

The fifth day of the conference (Friday, 13 April) involved the adoption of the recommendations of the Textbook Committee. Most of the day was dedicated to the discussion of a list of alphabets suggested for various languages, with renewed conflict over the use of diacritical marks. Although Archdeacon Shaw’s request for using dots under letters instead of using ‘th, dh, and nh’ that had been accepted by Shilluk Committee and Nuer part of the Dinka Nuer Committee was defeated by 24 votes against to 12 votes for, Shaw accepted the decision for the sake of uniformity. Later he protested that ‘if the orthography now recommended were adopted, Missions would be put to a considerable expense in printing new textbooks which they could not easily meet’, and asked whether the government was willing to help them (RLC 1928, 29). For our purpose, this disclaimer implies a control condition: since the missions would significantly incur the cost and had the required experience to implement the educational plan, they should determine the choice of the orthography, and not the professional linguists or the government. The controversy overlooked that there is no monolithic and uniform type of grammar. From a colonial linguistic perspective, all kinds of grammar are political acts founded on assumptions of a firm distinction between prescription and description, with the latter used as a rallying cry among contemporary linguists. We argue, however, that prescription and description are different sides of the same coin and they all reinforce aspects of power hidden behind texts.

3.5. Language grouping and the construction of a pluralistic society: the RLC’s resolutions

The Conference is of the opinion that the following group languages are suitable for development and that the preparation of text-books in these languages for use in the elementary vernacular schools of the Southern Sudan is a matter of urgency:

Dinka. Bari.
Nuer. Latuko.
Shilluk. Zande.

Acholi and Madi are in a different category, as only a very small proportion of the people speaking these languages live in the Sudan. Literature for these languages must therefore be drawn from elsewhere. It is recognized that in sub-grade schools the use of other vernaculars may still be necessary. Colloquial Arabic in Roman script will also be required in certain communities where the use of no other vernacular is practicable. (RLC 1928, 30)

The third resolution recommended the adoption of the memorandum of the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures on Practical Orthography of African Languages. The final resolution adopted the recommendations of the Textbook Committee, which included (1) collaboration between the Education Department and mission societies for selection and compilation of textbooks, (2) attention to cost-effective and convenient printing of the books, (3) availability of the books for the study of ‘important language groups’ for missionaries and government officials, and (4) consultation with a ‘specialist’ regarding a ‘model grammar’ to be used in preparation of vernacular grammars (RLC 1928, 31).

The final report of the proceedings is included in the appendix and included revised lists of languages and group languages. Two points should be mentioned here. Firstly, the production of the textual artefacts was a necessary metapragmatic activity to circulate and stabilise the constructed categories of languages and language groups (for a discussion of practices of artefactualisation, see [Agha 2003](#); [Blommaert 2008](#); [Johnstone 2009](#)). Since these historical groupings and classifications were used as the basis upon which the local education system and the subjectivities of the educator/educated were largely determined, we argue that the official pluralistic image of the society was itself an effect and function of a concerted colonial action. Crudely, multiculturalism which is a product of institutional intervention and engineered division of social and material labour is a historical construction.

4. Conclusion

This paper discussed the RLC, one of the key colonial language-making events in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (1899–1956), and sketched the wider historical context in which the conference was embedded. This colonial conference was a political platform involving metadiscursive practices that led to the production of a stratifying set of abstract categories of interaction. The epistemological basis upon which the native education policy was rationalised was centrally determined by the Phelps-Stokes Fund's philosophy of adaptive education, which was patterned on a scientific theory of racial categorisation. We have argued that these constructs did not predate the social practice that produced them as an effect. We have demonstrated that the intended audience for the cultural products was primarily the missions and the government officials. The 'native voice' was strikingly absent. Arabic was rejected in its functional role as a lingua franca yet accepted in its Romanised version as a medium of instruction in elementary schools in certain districts where it was spoken as the vernacular of the community in question.

Additionally, the creation of 'language groups' tied to localities and the replacement of Arabic with English as a medium of interethnic communication resulted in the planned absence of a perceived 'indigenous' lingua franca for the Southern Sudan. As a result of the objectifying (artefactualising) processes of 'group languages', a pluralistic image of society was produced. The process of choosing a unifying orthographic system was a contested ideological action. The discursive contestation between the theological discourse and the social scientific discourse of linguistics reflected the ways in which complementary and contradictory discourses dialectically operated within a coherent sociolinguistic regime of governance. Even though we tried to argue for the importance of addressing the conditions in which the 'local voice' is erased or (mis)represented as well as its sociolinguistic orientations (e.g. theories, practices, etc.), we discourage a tendency to romanticise notions about what constitutes 'the local'. The local may vary, and there may not be a uniform view about what is valid or acceptable as 'local' across social dimensions such as ethnicity, gender, and age.

More concretely, although we have demonstrably showed that during the colonial period in Sudan, 'languages' were developed by the missionaries, often supported by professional linguists, in the planned exclusion of the locals themselves, the question of how to 'recover' this 'local voice' or to imagine its resistance to this dynamic is a significant question that requires access to materials of a different order from the one reviewed here. Two of the most significant methodological and epistemological questions about the nature of 'the local voice' or 'local resistance' which should be raised here are: (1) What is the nature of the linguistic practices that predated the colonial linguistic policy intervention, or more specifically, beyond the Western representation or perception of what should count as 'the local'? And (2) what happens, instead, if we locate the resistance in our own time, and if we find evidence of the continuities and discontinuities with that moment in colonial time? In other words, since the resistant local is inaccessible in this archive,

how do we reconstruct it, how do we find it, where are its traditions and linguistic theories today? Has it emerged? Is local resistance (then) legible now?²⁰ These questions, in our view, boil down to the question as to the nature of the non-Western cultural discourses within which the 'local voice' is constructed. So if we want to recover this 'local voice', we need to reconstruct the entire discursive bundle. But the questions that impose themselves here are: if this is at all possible in the absence of unregulated non-Western materials during the colonial time, how can we do this without falling into the essentialising trap of using our ideological discourses to mould the 'local body' into an image of our own imagination? To what extent does this 'reconstituted local' still remain 'local'? And 'local' for whom? What is the discursive tradition within which this reconstruction is performed? And who did this reconstruction? In whose interest?

These questions are generally intended to liven up and widen the debate on the nature of the 'local voice' in the context of colonial Africa. We would like to (re)open this debate by the claim that the 'local' is invariably 'a discursive construction', otherwise the entire project of African cultural studies would immediately collapse.

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Notes

1. Unless otherwise mentioned, we restrict our attention to the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (1899–1956).
2. <http://www.enoughproject.org/conflicts/sudans/tensions-two-sudans>, accessed 4 June 2015.
3. Naivasha language policy generally recognised the multicultural identity of the country; however, the language policy was rarely observed, if not completely ignored, as a result of the preoccupation with control and manipulation of material resources (e.g. oil) during the peaceful six-year Interim Period (see Abdelhay et al. 2011).
4. The South (now called the Republic of South Sudan) has been an independent nation-state since July 2011 based on a vote by Southerners to separate from the united Sudan.
5. When some materials are abstracted from the local speech and then described from the perspective of the Latin grammar, they are no longer 'local speech' but 'technical' versions' of the local speech constructed by the (missionary) linguists for, for example, translating the Bible for local consumption.
6. In the context of this conference, the resistance to the canons of linguists is not done by the locals but from within the system itself: by the Christian missionaries who opposed the use of the IPA-based orthography because, for them, it is constructed by Western linguists.
7. In contrast to the French assimilationist pattern, the British colonial mode of governance was generally viewed as 'adaptationist' and was based on Lugard's (1926) theory of 'indirect rule'; however, it was significantly interventionist and inventionist in orientation (see Makoni and Pennycook 2007).
8. Orthographic harmonisation refers to the creation of a standardised system of writing for a cluster of (mutually unintelligible) languages or linguistic varieties (see Prah 1998). The relatively mutually incomprehensible dialects of Chinese share a standardised written form. The same observation applies to the cluster of linguistic varieties under the label of 'English'. However, in each case, the shared orthographic convention is different: logographic system in the case of Chinese and alphabetic writing system in the case of English (Roy-Campbell 2003, 95).
9. We use the term 'Sudan' to refer to the 'Republic of Sudan', and we employ 'Southern Sudan' to refer to the region when it was part of the Republic of Sudan (before its 2011 separation). And we use 'Republic of South Sudan' to refer to the 'same' region after it has become an independent State.
10. A more technical version of this paper ('The Cultural Politics of Writing in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan') is planned to appear in the proposed book *The Tyranny of Writing: Ideologies of the Written Word*, edited by Constanze Weth and Kasper Juffermans (London: Bloomsbury).

11. Initial-capitalised in the original.
12. Initial-capitalised in the original.
13. There is a significant dearth of materials in the literature on these two conferences. However, the references to these two events during the six-day conference confirm that they were organised by Christian missionaries and dedicated to the development of principles of orthography based on the Lepsius diacritical system.
14. Note that the explicit objective of the Southern Policy was to ‘build up a series of self-contained racial or tribal units’ in Southern Sudan (Abdel-Rahim 1965, 20; see Abdelhay et al. 2011).
15. One of the reviewers of this paper noted that the distinction between linguists and missionaries is contrasted in the context of this colonial conference but not sufficiently evaluated. This is a question about the problematic nature of the distinction between ‘missionary linguistics’ and modern ‘institutional linguistics’. It is true that the relationship is much more complex. In the context of this paper, we have deliberately simplified the distinction for the purposes of clarity. In fact, there are substantial differences even within linguists themselves, as there are also differences between missionaries themselves who worked on the codification of linguistic resources during the British colonial period in the Southern Sudan.
16. Most of the discussion surrounded technical issues such as the representation of long and short vowels, nasal sounds, etc.
17. We found it necessary to use a theory-heavy approach because we are planning to establish modes of analysis which are relevant to different African contexts, and even to different historical periods in a way, which we hope, should shed a critical light back on the theoretical concepts themselves. A key example here, which is rightly picked up by a reviewer, is the theoretical construct of the ‘local’.
18. The point here is that some missions (e.g. Father Crazzolaro of the Italian Catholic Mission) were diehard opponents of Arabic in whatever capacity, while others (e.g. Archdeacon Shaw of the Church Missionary Society) were accommodating, provided that Arabic had been in use as a local vernacular (mother tongue) in order for the missions to gain access to them.
19. It is clear that some of the missionaries looked at Arabic as a ‘colonial language’ or at best as ‘a dangerous language’ given its ideologically constructed relation with Islam. The colonial officials, on the other hand, viewed Arabic in its instrumental function as a means of administrative convenience. In fact, as Sanderson and Sanderson (1981: 78) noted, ‘to the ordinary Southerner, the Condominium Government presented itself as an Arabic-speaking institution’. Although the proceedings do not tell us much about how the locals themselves evaluated Arabic, there are some intuitions and hints which index that the locals had no problem with Arabic because it is, for some of them, a community vernacular, and for others, a lingua franca.
20. We thank very much a reviewer for the first key question, and Carli Coetzee for the second specifying set of questions.

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