European Journal of Applied Linguistics Studies
ISSN: 2602 - 0254
ISSN-L: 2602 - 0254
Available on-line at: http://www.oapub.org/lit

DOI: 10.46827/ejals.v9i1.719 Volume 9 | Issue 1 | 2026

COLONIAL LANGUAGE POLICY IN KENYA: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF TEXTS, POWER RELATIONS, AND EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

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Abstract:
This study investigates colonial language policy in Kenya through the lens of critical discourse analysis, focusing on how policy texts both reflected and shaped sociopolitical interests and educational outcomes. Drawing on Fairclough's multidimensional framework, the research analyzes key colonial-era documents, including reports from the United Mission Conference, Phelps Stoke Commission, Prator-Hutasoit Commission, Beecher Report, and Binns Commission, to reveal the complex interplay between language, power, and education. The findings demonstrate that language policy was strategically used to advance missionary, colonial, and elite agendas, with lexical choices and argument structures privileging English and, at times, Kiswahili, while marginalizing indigenous languages. The analysis highlights the ambivalence and contestation surrounding mother tongue education, showing how policy recommendations often mask deeper power dynamics and practical challenges. By situating colonial language policy within broader sociocultural and historical contexts, the paper contributes to ongoing debates about multilingual education and equity in postcolonial societies. The study offers insights relevant to scholars and policymakers seeking to understand and reform language policy in multilingual educational environments.

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Keywords: colonial language policy; Kenya; critical discourse analysis (CDA); language and power; education; linguistic imperialism; postcolonial studies

1. Introduction

Language policy in colonial Kenya was far more than a set of administrative directives; it was a dynamic instrument for shaping educational practice, social hierarchies, and cultural identities (Barasa, 2023). Colonial authorities and missionary organizations crafted language policies that reflected shifting priorities, ranging from the propagation of Christianity through mother tongue instruction to the promotion of English as a marker of elite status and the suppression of Kiswahili due to its role in anti-colonial mobilization. These policies were articulated through a series of influential reports and commissions, each embedding its own rationale, argument structure, and power relations within the policy texts (Howarth, 2010).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) offers a powerful lens for examining how language policy texts both reflect and construct social realities (Khan & Zaki, 2022). By analyzing the lexical choices, modal verbs, and discursive strategies present in colonial-era documents, this study reveals the contested and ambivalent nature of language policy in Kenya. The findings highlight how policy texts served not only educational and administrative functions, but also advanced broader sociopolitical agendas, often at the expense of indigenous languages and equitable multilingual education.

This paper situates colonial language policy within the wider context of multilingual education and social sciences, contributing to ongoing debates about language, power, and educational equity in postcolonial societies.

2. Literature Review

The literature on colonial language policy in Kenya reveals a complex interplay between educational objectives, missionary interests, and sociopolitical power. Policy documents from the colonial era—such as those produced by the United Mission Conference (1909), Phelps Stoke Commission (1924), Prator-Hutasoit Commission (1952), Beecher Report (1949), and Binns Commission (1952)—serve as primary sources for understanding how language policy was constructed and justified (Nganga et al., 2023).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), as articulated by Fairclough, provides a multidimensional framework for examining these texts (Han, 2015). CDA focuses on the relationship between language, power, and society, analyzing how lexical choices, syntactic structures, and argumentation strategies reflect and reinforce dominant ideologies. In the Kenyan context, colonial language policy texts often employed modal verbs ("should," "be") and state verbs ("facilitate," "urge") to advance particular agendas, such as the propagation of Christianity through mother tongue instruction or the elevation of English as the sole medium of education.

Missionary influence is evident in early policy recommendations, which prioritized the use of indigenous languages in lower primary education to support religious conversion. However, subsequent commissions shifted focus toward English, framing it as a tool for elite formation and national integration. The exclusion or marginalization of Kiswahili—especially during periods of political mobilization—highlights the strategic use of language policy to suppress anti-colonial sentiment and maintain colonial hegemony (Munyai & Phooko, 2021).

The literature also underscores the ambivalence and contestation surrounding indigenous languages. While some reports advocated for the preservation and teaching of selected vernaculars, practical challenges such as the lack of teaching materials and trained personnel limited their implementation. Argumentation within policy texts often masked deeper power dynamics, with recommendations reflecting the interests of colonial authorities rather than the needs of local communities

Overall, the reviewed literature demonstrates that colonial language policy in Kenya was not a neutral or technical exercise, but a site of negotiation and struggle. The legacy of these policies continues to shape debates about multilingual education, equity, and language planning in contemporary Kenya.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing documentary analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine colonial language policy texts in Kenya. Primary sources include official policy documents, commission reports, and archival materials from the colonial period, such as the United Mission Conference (1909), Phelps Stoke Commission (1924), Prator-Hutasoit Commission (1952), Beecher Report (1949), and Binns Commission (1952). These documents were selected for their significance in shaping language policy and educational practice during the colonial era.

The analysis follows Fairclough's multidimensional CDA framework, which integrates textual analysis, discourse practice, and sociocultural context. Textual analysis focuses on lexical choices, syntactic structures, modal verbs, and argumentation strategies within the policy documents. Discourse practice examines how these texts were produced, circulated, and interpreted by various stakeholders, including colonial authorities, missionaries, and local communities. Sociocultural analysis situates the policies within broader historical and political contexts, exploring how language policy reflected and reinforced power relations and social hierarchies.

By combining documentary analysis with CDA, the methodology enables a nuanced understanding of how colonial language policies were constructed, justified, and contested, and how they continue to influence multilingual education and language planning in Kenya.

3.1 Colonial Language Policy as a Text

Colonial language policy as a text means seeing the policy as a discursive product that carries colonial values, assumptions, hierarchies, and intentions (Catalano & Waugh, 2020; Wodak, 2015) .

An examination of colonial language policies through a CDA lens reveals that the primary concern in policy papers is the rationale behind the policy; that is, the reasons for implementing the language policy as suggested by those in authority. This investigation employs Fairclough's multidimensional analysis, namely text, discourse practice, and sociocultural analysis. Language policy as text is a written document that regulates language usage; texts are a product of discourse, which is a form of social action. Text analysis involves the internal examination of a language policy document, focusing on lexical and syntactic units such as vocabulary words, phrases, or grammatical structures, as well as discourse elements like topoi and genre (Fairclough, 2013). The data analysed reveals various linguistic features of language policies, including lexicalization, syntax, modal verbs, topoi (common-sense ideas used as arguments), and argumentation.

3.2 The Shaping of Early Language Policy in Colonial Kenya

Early language policy in colonial Kenya did not emerge spontaneously—it was shaped through a series of political, missionary, and educational influences. The process reflected competing interests, power struggles, and broader ideological goals of the colonial state (Johnson, 2015; Nganga et al., 2023).

The documentary analysis of language policies demonstrated that the most significant language policy discourse in the country took place at the United Mission Conference. The language policy states that:

> **Extract 4.1:**
> *"Mother languages in the catchment area are to be used in the first three years of learning in primary school, as this would facilitate the spread of Christianity Kiswahili to be used for the transition to middle school for the next two years (days 4 and 5). English to be used in the remaining classes up to university."* (United Missionary Conference in Kenya RPT, 1909)

From Extract 4.1, it is evident that the intention behind the adoption of the use of the mother tongue in the first three classes of primary school was to propagate Christianity. Missionaries regarded the MT as a crucial tool for spreading Christianity. The initial line of Extract 4.1 exhibits an invalid causal link syntactic feature, implying that if one fact is accurate, the next one must also be accurate. Consequently, it can be inferred that the decision to either include or exclude the teaching of Indigenous languages from the language policy was either influenced by the prevailing political climate or dictated by the interests of missionaries. The recommendations expose the power dynamics among policy agents, illuminating the conflicts between language policy and its practical application.

The use of metalanguage (MT) in primary education has been shown to facilitate the spread of Christianity among local populations, according to the examined data. This strategy, known as lexicalization, involves the use of lexical items from different register fields (Fairclough, 2013). In the current study, lexicalization was achieved using lexical items that advanced language policy-related issues. Such lexical items provide clues to the intended message of the text producer, either overtly or covertly. The lexical features examined in this study pertain to the selection of words, phrases, or expressions (diction) in the language policy for the representation of Indigenous languages. Specifically, the study focused on nouns, verbs, and voices.

Extract 4.1 demonstrates the use of verb state verbs (facilitate) to advance the use of MT at the lower primary level for the purpose of spreading Christianity among the local population. (van Dijk, 2017) (1998) argues that social actors implement ideologies in their discourse and other social practices. This suggests that the language policies that were adopted were constructed in a particular way that reflected the agenda of an invested group and were shaped according to a particular structure that is beneficial for that group.

However, extract 4.1 also features a widespread elision of human agency, as it uses inanimate nouns such as Christianity to describe the spread of the religion. This may reflect a deliberate attempt to depict the process as more natural or inevitable than the result of human actions and decision-making.

3.2 Modality and Power in Colonial Language Policy

Modality refers to linguistic resources, especially modal verbs such as *should, must, may, ought to, will,* that express obligation, permission, necessity, or possibility. In colonial language policy documents, modality was not merely grammatical: it was a discursive tool for expressing power, authority, and ideological positioning.

Extract 4.2 from the Phelps Stoke Commission of 1924 shows the use of modal words as shown below:

> **Extract 4.2:**
> *"The language of instruction* ***should*** *be the native language in early primary classes, while English is to be taught from upper primary up to the university. Schools were urged to make all possible provisions for instruction in their native language. Kiswahili should be excluded from the education curriculum, except in areas where it was the first language."*
> (Phelps Stoke RPT, 1949)

Extract 4.2 uses the modal auxiliary verb ***should***: Modal auxiliary verbs are the most straightforward and widely used by many people to express modality or uncertainty towards something, whether in written or spoken form. The use of the modal verb "should" shows that it is especially important for Kenya to obtain a national and educational language policy that can contribute to the development of both quantitative and qualitative aspects of African education. The text shows that rhetorically, the text

constructs the members of the Phelps Stoke Commission of 1924 as rational about the role of Indigenous languages in education: "*languages of instruction should be the native language in early primary classes*" and consensus-oriented: "*schools were urged to make all possible provision for instruction in the native language*." Schools were urged to make all possible provisions for instruction in the native language. For instance, the verb urged depicts the hierarchical power relationship between the government, the MoE, and local stakeholders.

3.3 Policy Discourse and Educational Practice

The documentary data of the Prator-Hutasoit Commission of 1952 made some radical recommendations on language policies. The commission recommended the following:

> **Extract 4.3:**
> *"English **be** the only language of instruction in all schools in the country at all levels at the expense of local languages."* (Prator-Hutasoit RPT, 1952)

The endorsement in Extract 4.3 shows that the policy aims to boost English at the expense of local languages. From the above excerpt, the Prator-Hutasoit Commission of 1952 rhetorically advocated for English exclusionist status, which directed that only English should be used as the medium of instruction in Kenyan schools at all levels. Lexical choices, such as English be the only language of instruction in all schools, in the recommendation show that the Prator-Hutasoit Commission of 1952 discursively intended to maintain and promote English monolingualism as the normative medium of instruction in all schools. Consequently, this report gave birth to the English-medium approach, where teachers were trained only in the English language and all instructions were given in it (Nabea, 2022).

The analysed data reveals the features of the argument structure in language text policies. Argumentation in language policy is the process of creating and defending a case for a specific language-policy decision, typically using evidence, reasoning, and persuasion to convince stakeholders of the merits of a particular policy proposal. This can include the analysis of linguistic data, demographic trends, economic factors, and social and cultural considerations, among other factors, to construct a persuasive argument in favour of a specific language policy. The argument structure in language text policies is signaled by lexical features such as verbs, adverbs, and modals. Extract 4.4 from The Beecher Report of 1949 reveals the use of discourse markers that indicate certain argument components but are not included in the actual annotation of argument components, as shown in Extract 4.4 below:

> **Extract 4.4:**
> *"The use of 20 mother tongues **be** reinstated in primary schools in the first 3 years of primary schooling. Kiswahili **be** the language of instruction and literature in primary schools in towns."* (Beecher RPT, 1949)

The use of the verb *be* in Extract 4.4 plays an important role in identifying the argument components. A verb is a signal stance expression that indicates the presence of a major claim. A close analysis of the Beecher report of 1949 shows that the commission recognises Kenya as a multilingual state, as framed in line 1 (the use of 20 mother tongues in primary schools be reinstated). By rhetorically recommending the use of 20 mother tongues in primary schools, this study observes that social actors accept the importance of the mother tongue in cognitive, linguistic, personal, and educational development. However, the policy did not show how the challenges faced in the implementation of Indigenous languages were addressed. Thus, as much as the Beecher Report of 1949 recommended the use of 20 mother tongues in primary schools, it faced the problem of the unavailability of teaching materials (Musau, 2003). Moreover, the mother tongue was used as a medium of instruction and taught as a subject for only three years in an individual's school career (ironically shorter than the four years the colonists gave it). The adverb 'also' above emphasises the importance of a premise.

3.5 Kiswahili's Reinstatement and English Hegemony

Extract 4.5:
"Kiswahili also be reinstated and made an alternative medium of examination. English be retained as the language of instruction from intermediate school." (Beecher RPT, 1949)

The status of Kiswahili was reinstated, making it an alternative medium for examination, while English was retained as the language of instruction from intermediate school. This implies that the Beecher report of 1949 was tilted in favour of English and, to some extent, Kiswahili at the expense of the mother tongue(s). In this case, the Beecher report of 1949 buttressed English hegemony. It was based on British colonialists, who had mounted a campaign to create Westernised elites in the country, and they supposed that such an elite group would protect their interests in independent Kenya.

The documentary review reveals that in 1950–1951, the Education Department Reports, which included Beecher's (1949), Binns (1952), and the Drogheda Commission of 1952, pointed out that it was inappropriate to teach the three languages at primary school. The documents recommend the following:

Extract 4.6:
"English was introduced in the lower primary school to be taught alongside the mother tongue and called for the dropping of Kiswahili in the curriculum, except in areas where it was the mother tongue. The implementation of this policy took effect between 1953 and 1955." (Binns RPT, 1952)

The recommendation in Extract 4.6 frames the colonial government as enthusiastic, but impedes the use of other languages in schools, such as Kiswahili. The colonisers' education policy was guided by their interest in creating a few English-

speaking elites to support their hegemony. From the excerpt above, the study observes that the language in education policy in the three reports enhances the importance of English as the language of business and education at the expense of the native language and Kiswahili, which had been eliminated from the school curriculum. The English language was hence revealed as the mark of the educated and civilised native, and African Indigenous languages were quickly shunned in schools, as many began seeking education. They were regarded as second-class languages and as the hallmark of how primitive people spoke. The excerpt also shows that such recommendations during the colonial period were the beginning of England's hegemonic and divisionary tendencies among the elite and masses. Moreover, they also have implications for the status and position of English as a prestigious language. This position has been propagated through education commissions and subsequent task forces. Ingeniously, Kiswahili was dropped from the education system because it was mobilizing people in the freedom struggle.

In summary, many Africans strongly opposed the Beecher Report. The African interpretation of the report was that it led to Europeanisation rather than the Africanisation of education, and it sought to maintain the status quo of keeping Africans in low-wage positions.

3.6 Argumentation, Modality, and Ambivalence in Colonial Language Policy

The Binns Commission of Education (1952) displays the lexical features of verbs, adverbs, and modals, as shown in Extract 4.7:

> **Extract 4.7:**
> *"The report strongly recommended preserving selected tribal vernaculars while advocating the general elimination of the Kiswahili, except where it was a local vernacular. They argued that retaining Kiswahili as a lingua Franca impeded the learning of both the vernacular and English languages. Binns recommended four years of vernacular teaching."* (Binns RPT, 1952)

In Extract 4.7, the policy strongly uses the adverb to emphasise the importance of a premise. Furthermore, the policy indicates the use of contextual features which play a major role in identifying argument components. For instance, there is a corresponding claim as shown in this sentence (*they argued that retaining Kiswahili as a lingua Franca impeded the learning of both vernacular and English languages*). This sentence covers the argument component of the sentence preceding it. The use of the verb '*argue*' in the above signals a stance expression which indicates the presence of a major claim.

Extract 4.7 shows how the position of Indigenous languages in the curriculum is represented. Based on recommendations I and II, it is clear that the report favoured the teaching of Indigenous languages. Further, the report shows the addition of one more year of Indigenous language teaching in schools. Argumentation in extract 4.7 is achieved by expanding upon or adding to the meaning potential or suppressing and filtering meanings, the nature of which relies on links to past texts and discourses as well as the

current ideological zeitgeist within the new context. Thus, from a CDA point of view, the study observes that the Binns report shows that to improve the quality of education, it has to make local languages part and parcel of primary education. This implies that, including the teaching of local languages, it was possible for Kenyans to have national integration and development. However, the addition of local languages to the curriculum without teachers using them may not foster quality education or national integration. Moreover, this report advocates for the selection of Indigenous vernaculars. This means that not all Indigenous languages were considered in the teaching and learning curriculum.

The data in Extract 4.7 also show that language policy was often ambivalent before independence. The study observed that the status of the three languages, English, Kiswahili, and vernacular, was encouraged and discouraged frequently for different interests. This has implications for the creation of teaching and learning personnel and resources in Indigenous languages. The excerpt shows that the Binns report advocated for the removal of Kiswahili, except where it was the local vernacular, from the education syllabus altogether. This is because it was seen as the medium of mobilisation for the struggle for independence, which fueled Kenyan freedom struggles (Nabea, 2022). The elimination of Kiswahili was therefore due to the uproar for independence, and hence the colonial master did not want people to communicate easily between communities. Recommendation II in this case achieves recontextualization by suppressing and filtering meanings, in this case, the significance of the national language to Kenyans. The study shows that CDA shows how local policy activities connect to larger policy texts and conversations, while ethnography shows how the meaning of a language policy in a community develops through a process of interpretation and use that is unique to that community.

Extract 4.8 below shows a case where modal verbs like *'should'* and '*could*' are frequently used in argumentative discourse to signal the degree of certainty when expressing a claim, as shown:

Extract 4.8:
"English ***should*** *be introduced in lower primary school as a subject and taught alongside the recommended mother tongue in early primary classes."* (Binns RPT, 1952)

Extract 4.8 shows that the Binns report advocated for the introduction of English as a subject in lower primary school, and that it should be taught alongside the recommended native language in early primary classes. Extract 4.7 shows how the position of Indigenous languages in the curriculum is represented. Based on recommendations I and II, it is clear that the report favoured the teaching of Indigenous languages. Further, the report shows the addition of one more year of Indigenous language teaching in schools. Argumentation in Extract 4.7 is achieved by expanding upon or adding to the meaning potential or suppressing and filtering meanings, the nature of which relies on links to past texts and discourses as well as the current

ideological zeitgeist within the new context. Thus, from a CDA point of view, the study observes that the Binns report shows that to improve the quality of education, it has to make local languages part and parcel of primary education. This implies that, including the teaching of local languages, it was possible for Kenyans to have national integration and development. However, the addition of local languages to the curriculum without teachers using them may not foster quality education or national integration. Moreover, this report advocates for the selection of Indigenous vernaculars. This means that not all Indigenous languages were considered in the teaching and learning curriculum.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

This study applied critical discourse analysis (CDA) to colonial language policy documents in Kenya, focusing on the rationale, linguistic features, and power dynamics embedded within policy texts. Using Fairclough's multidimensional framework, encompassing textual, discourse practice, and sociocultural analysis, the investigation revealed that language policy documents served as instruments of social action, reflecting the interests of colonial authorities and missionaries.

Textual analysis highlighted the strategic use of lexicalization, modal verbs, and argumentation. For instance, the United Mission Conference (1909) advocated for mother tongue instruction in early primary years to facilitate the spread of Christianity, followed by Kiswahili and English in subsequent stages. This policy rationale was shaped by missionary priorities, with language choices reflecting broader sociopolitical objectives. The elision of human agency in policy texts, such as attributing the spread of Christianity to language use rather than explicit actors, further underscores the ideological framing of these documents.

Subsequent commissions, such as the Phelps Stoke (1924) and Prator-Hutasoit (1952), introduced modal verbs like "should" and "be," signaling both recommendations and hierarchical relationships among stakeholders. The Prator-Hutasoit Commission's endorsement of English as the sole medium of instruction marked a shift toward English monolingualism, marginalizing indigenous languages and reinforcing colonial power structures.

The Beecher Report (1949) and the Binns Commission (1952) recognized Kenya's multilingual reality, recommending the reinstatement of mother tongues and Kiswahili in specific contexts. However, practical challenges—including insufficient teaching materials and trained personnel—limited the implementation of these policies. The argument structures within these documents often masked deeper conflicts between policy intent and practical application, with recommendations reflecting the interests of colonial elites rather than local communities.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that colonial language policy in Kenya was characterized by ambivalence, contestation, and shifting priorities. The frequent encouragement and discouragement of English, Kiswahili, and vernacular languages reflected changing political climates and the strategic interests of colonial authorities.

The critical discourse analysis of colonial language policy documents in Kenya reveals that language policy was not a neutral or purely educational endeavor, but a site of ideological negotiation and power. Policy texts were crafted to advance missionary and colonial interests, often at the expense of indigenous languages and equitable educational practice. The legacy of these policies, marked by English hegemony, the marginalization of Kiswahili, and the selective inclusion of vernaculars, continues to shape language planning and multilingual education in Kenya today. Recognizing the historical roots and discursive strategies of colonial language policy is essential for informing contemporary debates and fostering more inclusive and effective language policies in postcolonial contexts.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Dr. Samuel Nganga Chege is an Applied linguistics lecturer and researcher at Muranga University of Technology. He focuses on Discourse Analysis, Language maintenance and revitalisation, and language planning and policy. His expertise lies in Discourse Analysis. Chege also contributes to Language Planning and Policy by exploring the complex processes of language policy development and implementation in multilingual societies. Chege's diverse research agenda advances linguistic scholarship, and has significant implications for language education, cultural preservation, and language policy formation.

Professor Geoffrey Maroko is a highly regarded language lecturer and researcher, with extensive experience in the fields of Applied linguistics and education. He has made significant contributions to the study of emerging issues in language and has participated in numerous multidisciplinary and multi-institutional research projects. In addition to his academic accomplishments, Professor Maroko has also served in various administrative capacities within the university system. As an accomplished academic, he is committed to using his expertise to promote the advancement of knowledge in his field. **Dr. Anashia Nancy Ong'onda**, a Senior Lecturer at Machakos University, has made significant contributions to the field of Applied Linguistics through her extensive publication record. The focus of her research is on language usage, discourse practices, and sociocultural implications, with a particular emphasis on the impact of linguistic power on society and language ideologies. Dr. Ong'onda's work has advanced the boundaries of knowledge in critical discourse studies, language, power, and ideologies. Her publications, which include articles, research papers, and academic publications, are of great value to scholars and students in these fields.

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