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To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2014.953772

Published online: 18 Nov 2014.

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Issues of identity and African unity surrounding the introduction of an exogenous African language, Swahili, at tertiary level in South Africa

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(Received 26 August 2013; accepted 21 March 2014)

This paper reports on a study that examines the attitudes of university students and immigrants to the introduction of Swahili at a tertiary institution in South Africa. Data were obtained from a questionnaire survey and interviews with questions that covered the domains in which Swahili could be most useful, who should learn it and the reasons why they should learn it. The data were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively within a theoretical framework which drew on theories of identity, multilingualism, migration and language ecology. The findings were categorised in terms of the main themes emerging from the analysis, including intercultural communication, African unification and Swahili as a lingua franca. The attitudes of the immigrant sector were then compared to those of the South African students and the informal sector. Although there was consensus on the viability of Swahili in South Africa, the two groups differed in the emphases they placed on the various themes. The immigrants favoured the learning of Swahili within the South African context, for the promotion of intercultural communication which would facilitate their integration into the community, and for African unification. The South African respondents saw value in learning it for travelling beyond the borders of South Africa. The study concludes with a consideration of the implications of such findings for promoting the learning and teaching of Swahili as an additional language in the South African context.

Keywords: language; identity; multilingualism; language ecology; language learning

Introduction

An individual whose horizons are limited to the borders of his or her own country or society is not yet sensitized to the international implications of social existence. (Mazrui and Mazrui 1995, 1)

The above quotation has been taken from a discourse examining the role that Swahili1 may have played in the ‘detribalization’ of Eastern African societies. For Mazrui and Mazrui (1995), Swahili was an important factor in politicising racial consciousness among Eastern African communities, especially in opposition to an alien colonial language such as English. According to Mazrui and Mazrui (1995), Swahili culture was originally based on a combination of Indian, Arab and African cultures, thus creating a ‘hybrid’ culture which diverse groups could identify with. Swahili was also linked to the process of urbanisation, serving as a lingua franca for diverse ethnolinguistic groups, especially for trading purposes in the major metropolitan areas of East Africa. In this way,
Swahili facilitated a growing sense of ‘African Nationalism’ among different East African ethnic communities.

The rapid spread of this language across the eastern and southern parts of Africa as a language of trade and commerce, as a symbol of African unity and as a language used for military operations in the African states, that once harboured the exiled African National Congress (ANC) cadres during the Apartheid era, makes it an attractive candidate for facilitating new allegiances for the diverse ethnic groups in South Africa. However, this could be in competition with the increasing focus of the South African government on the promotion and development of the indigenous African languages, particularly in more formal domains such as higher education. The question is, therefore, what ‘space’ would there be for Swahili in such a context and how open would various stakeholders be to learning it as an additional language? In other words, the question addressed by this study is: ‘How would Swahili be received as a subject at tertiary level in South Africa and what contribution could this make to our understanding of the complex issues of migration, language learning and use, and issues of identity?’

From a language ecology perspective, South Africa is a truly multilingual country with multiple and fluid identities. In the post-apartheid period, researching and understanding such identities are especially challenging given the flow of people to and from the African continent and the movement of people within it, their struggles to establish themselves within communities that are themselves struggling to improve their life prospects and the linguistic and cultural challenges that these struggles necessarily bring with them. The major metropolitan areas in South Africa are host to many ethnicities, cultures and languages. This is due, in part, to the increasing impact of globalisation and urbanisation, causing both internal migration from rural areas to the cities, and increasing waves of immigrants, especially from other African countries to what they perceive to be the land of economic opportunity or a safe haven from their own war-torn countries. This applies equally to immigrants who gain access to one of the metropolitan universities, and to those who attempt to make a living in the informal sector. For example, from 1996, about 100,000 nationals from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) have become South African citizens (SAPA, 22 May 2001; www.Saflii.org). In 2010, a total of 2000 people applied daily for asylum in South Africa.

It is in such a complex multilingual and multicultural context that the current research took place. At a university in the province of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, Swahili has recently been introduced as an optional language for the Bachelor of Arts degree. Other languages currently offered at this university include Zulu, English, Afrikaans, Italian, French and German. Spanish is offered on a part-time basis. Given the emphasis on European languages at a university which is attempting to establish a firm ‘African’ identity, the offering of a second African language should be in keeping with the university’s projected image of itself. In addition, this African language represents a broader constituency of speakers beyond the borders of South Africa, thus encouraging a more ‘Pan-African’ identity. This is all the more possible given that a truly collective ‘South African’ national identity might still be difficult to achieve given the fragmentation of South African society into very distinct and different ethnic groupings – a situation that still persists from the apartheid era. In such a scenario, an identity that avoids the complex questions of a ‘national’ identity, but rather goes beyond it to a broader more collective ‘African’ identity on a continental scale, might engender a positive response.

The question of what constitutes a ‘national identity’ has been examined by Cinpoes (2008, 5) in relation to what he terms an increasing ‘allegiance’ to the European Union as
opposed to separate nation states. For Cinpoes, a ‘national identity’, on the one hand, is a collective identity which includes a common culture that plays a crucial role in the process of identity formation. The discourse of the European Union, on the other hand, is imbued with values such as peace, unity, friendship and cooperation, which tends to represent Europe as a ‘human’ community with shared values with which one can also identify (Brutter 2005, 128). This leads to the notion of ‘multiple identities’ that are compatible and that can co-exist. Attachment to the European Union can also be based on what Habermas (2001) terms ‘Constitutional Patriotism’ which rests on a ‘sense of a collective cause and on human rights shaped by a political culture shared by all citizens of Europe’ (7). To some extent this is happening in modern Africa with the formation of the African Union and notions such as Africanisation, decolonisation, Pan-Africanism and trade relations with broader implications for an African collective identity. One could further argue that a society comprised of bound and internally homogenous cultures would be increasingly challenged by migration and globalisation (Hack-Polay 2009). Such transnational processes create diasporic communities which, in turn, create hybrid and transcultural identities.

In postcolonial contexts in particular, the ‘group’ as construed in terms of intergroup communication theory (Giles and Coupland 1991), although essentially ‘ethnolinguistic’ in nature, can soften its boundaries in order to include other ethnic groups which, together, form a larger ‘group’ in opposition to previous colonial oppression. This process would apply to a broader, more inclusive ‘African identity’ which goes beyond national boundaries. In addition, this process would be facilitated by individual mobility within and outside of national borders leading to increased softening of ‘distinctive group language habits’ (Giles and Coupland 1991, 125), linguistic creativity and an increased openness towards other languages and cultures, especially in such a ‘linguistic mosaic’ (Gorter 2006) as a modern, multicultural, multilingual city. Both research sites in this study are cosmopolitan cities. Johannesburg is the economic capital of South Africa and thus draws many immigrants who wish to improve their livelihoods and Durban is a cosmopolitan harbour city.

Otsuji and Pennycook (2010) coin the term ‘metrolingualism’ (which is an extension of the concept of metroethnicity) to describe the creative, transcultural language practices found in cosmopolitan urban areas which contain increasing numbers of diverse language groups. Such creative language use also contributes to the complex process of maintaining and establishing both ‘fixed and fluid linguistic and cultural identities’ (Otsuji and Pennycook 2010, 240). Metrolingualism, however, does not ‘assume connections between language, culture, ethnicity, nationality or geography’ (244), which the current study does by taking a perspective more in line with language ideology. As South Africa moves into its third decade of emancipation and democracy, there is an increasing focus on Africanisation which includes its languages. The essential argument here is that such a process could include an exogenous African language as well.

Increased contact with immigrants from other African countries, whether as co-students or as traders in the informal sector, could also help in making group boundaries even more permeable. In this respect, regular interaction between individuals and groups in such contexts could impact identities in multiple ways and bring fresh opportunities for redefining ‘self’ and ‘group’. These opportunities would arise from what Omoniyi and White (2006) term ‘performance moments’ in which various identities are enacted between individuals. Identity thus becomes emergent, fluid, dynamic, ‘processual’ (Block 2006) and multiple from a poststructuralist perspective (Coupland 2003; Blommaert 2010; Norton and Toohey 2011; Norton Peirce 1995). This would also serve to soften the boundaries of
ethnolinguistic groups which would then lead to declining ‘ethnic behaviour’ (Mazrui and Mazrui 1995) as an individual increasingly assumes a cosmopolitan identity. This would allow for ‘new loyalties and allegiances’ even across national borders as occurred for the East African communities described by Mazrui and Mazrui (1995). Omoniyi and White (2006), quoting Pennycook (2003), refers to the re-articulation of identities, especially in postcolonial contexts, as transcultural identities. He used the term to refer specifically to song lyrics and fusion music but it could apply equally well to the increasing permeability of South African ethnic identities in relation to the prospect of a broader, collective African identity. For Otsuji and Pennycook (2010, 244) ‘one of the driving forces to be different and multiple and dynamic is the interaction between fixed and fluid cultural identities’. For these authors, hybridity and cultural interactions do not exclude ‘monolithic ascriptions of culture and identity’ (Otsuji and Pennycook 2010, 244).

The introduction of Swahili as an optional African language for study at tertiary level in a South African higher education institution might be an appropriate tool for achieving the broader ‘African identity’ described earlier. In addition to this, interactions between South Africans and immigrant groups, especially those from East African countries, on the one hand, would provide opportunities for exposure to the language, which, as a language from the Proto-Bantu language family also shares some structural similarities with South Africa’s indigenous languages. On the other hand, with increasing government support and promotion of the South African indigenous languages, one might expect a return to identity constructions based more on ethnicity, i.e. an increasing ‘psycholinguistic distinctiveness’ (Giles and Coupland 1991, 111). While ‘essentialism’ in terms of the notions of nation and language has been critiqued (Auer 2005, 403), particularly with reference to traditional European language ideologies, we nevertheless find it a useful perspective in describing the status quo for South African languages from the point of view of South Africa’s language policy. The policy itself works with perceived linguistic boundaries among languages and takes no account of actual hybrid, i.e. metrolingual, language practices as they emerge in complex cosmopolitan settings.

The university in Durban where Swahili is to be introduced has recently implemented a bilingual language policy which allows for both English and Zulu to be used in teaching and learning (Balfour 2007). The focus of the university community is thus very much on the implications of this policy for both staff and students as there is an explicit requirement for non-African-language-speaking staff, in particular, to learn Zulu. Given the current focus of this academic community on the indigenous African language, the question is whether Swahili would receive any attention at all. This concern is reflected in the negative responses from the academic staff in the survey, but not the students. The University Language Policy, however, has a clause that concedes the need for other languages to be learned, taught and used at the university, so the introduction of Swahili is simply meeting these requirements.

The reception of Swahili as part of the metrolingual landscape by South African society, as well as the willingness to learn a South African indigenous language on the part of the immigrants would also depend on the degree of integration of the immigrants into this society. The literature on migration reveals four classical dimensions of integration which, according to Favell (2003), refers to ‘the process of settlement, interaction with the host society and social change that follows immigration’. The dimensions are cultural, social, economic and political (Favell 2003; Hamberger 2009; Penninx 2004). The cultural dimension refers to knowledge of the destination language/s and society, and respect for its basic norms. The social dimension refers to insertion into the education and welfare systems. The economic dimension refers to access to employment and the labour market
and the political dimension, the final stage of integration, refers to the right to vote and stand for election. Successful integration could also depend on the cultural and economic capital, such as previous education and language skills (Chiswick, Lee, and Miller 2006), that the immigrants bring with them to the host country. However, previous education or work-related skills might not be as important as willingness to adapt to the culture of the host country and learn the indigenous languages.

The reasons for the migration of the informal sector immigrant group to South Africa, and their length of stay, may have a bearing on their attitudes towards their South African hosts and the viability of Swahili in relation to this group. They would have had time to experience interactions with the South African informal sector and engage in language practices for purposes of survival. The success or not of such practices and interactions may be gauged from their responses. A variable that is often operative in such interactions is power. This would relate to the amount of linguistic and cultural, or 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu 1991, 58), that the immigrant brings to the new host country, which would, in turn, relate to the reasons why they left the country of origin. According to our data, 53.3% left to find work and ‘a better life’, 33.3% left because of war and 13.3% gave no response. The first category, i.e. seeking better economic conditions, would place these immigrants in Papastergiadis’ (2000) first ‘model of migration’, i.e. the ‘voluntary push–pull model’ which perceives the driving force behind migration as ‘rational choice and individual agency’. According to this model, the immigrants would be free to move, have the financial means by which to do so and the skills and intellectual capability to contribute meaningfully to a host society. In other words, the ‘capital’ which they bring with them would be valued highly. This would also correlate with their level of education. In our study, 43.3% held a matric certificate, 26.6% had an undergraduate degree and 26.6% held a primary certificate. The majority were thus educated. This would place the immigrants in a more powerful position than one in which they were forced out of their own countries because of conflict. The question of whether or not the immigrant group feels powerful in their host country would be revealed in their responses to the questions in this study. It would also have a bearing on how they see their language positioned relative to the other languages in their new context.

The study

Research questions

Our main research questions, therefore, investigated how the various stakeholder respondents would react to the idea of Swahili being offered at a South African university, in which domains they would consider it useful, the particular students whom they thought should learn it and whether they would encourage students to learn it. The questions on the various domains in which they would find it most useful and whether they thought it would be useful for future employment will not be dealt with in this study.

The respondents

In order to ascertain the respondents’ attitudes in terms of the questions described earlier, the researchers designed a questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews for the different stakeholders. The 200 respondents were drawn from two main sectors: the education sector and the informal business sector from both Durban and Johannesburg. The education sector was comprised of 100 undergraduate students, 20 postgraduate students and 20 lecturers from the various language disciplines at two metropolitan
universities in Durban and Johannesburg respectively. The undergraduate students were mainly South Africans with the exception of three students who came from other Southern African countries, i.e. Zimbabwe (2 students) and Mozambique (1 student). The 20 postgraduate students came from Swahili-speaking countries including the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (17), Burundi (5), Tanzania (15), Kenya (7), Uganda (3) and Rwanda (5). These students were included in order to provide some input from Swahili speakers in the formal sector. The lecturers taught various languages courses such as Afrikaans, African languages, African literature, English, French, German, Italian, linguistics, sign language and Zulu. South African respondents were in the majority at 140 (70%), 52 (26%) respondents from various African countries where Swahili is fairly widely spoken including Burundi, DRC, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda, with Tanzania and the DRC being in the majority, i.e. 32 (16%) of the respondents. Three (1.5%) were from ‘other African’ countries, 4 (2%) were from European countries including France, Germany and Italy and 1 (0.5%) was from Canada. We therefore had the following breakdown for the three major groups: South African (70%), Foreign African (27.5%) and Foreign European (2.5%).

The university in Durban was the site where Swahili was to be introduced as an optional language and so it was necessary to gauge how existing students of language and their lecturers responded to this. The university in Johannesburg was an additional source of comparable data. The informal sector was comprised of 30 South African respondents from the central business districts in both Durban and Johannesburg, and 30 immigrants, Swahili-speaking respondents from both cities. The South African informal sector was included as these respondents were in regular contact with immigrant groups and, therefore, with Swahili speakers. This experience on a daily basis would have had some influence on their attitudes towards both the language and its speakers and we wanted to ascertain whether this was positive or negative. The immigrant groups in the informal sector were included in order to know the extent to which their experiences of interactions with South Africans in the informal sector would have had some influence on their attitudes. We also wished to see the extent to which this group felt that knowledge of Swahili might enhance intergroup relations between themselves and the South African informal sector. On a more general level, we wanted to see whether the attitudes and motivations of the diverse groups converged, if at all, and, if so, in which respects. The Swahili-speaking students were included on the basis of their positioning in the South African educational domain from which they could comment on the viability of introducing Swahili as a language offering based on their ‘lived experience’ of language use in this context.

In terms of age, 151 (75.5%) of the respondents were between 18 and 35 years of age, while 49 (24.5%) of them were between 36 and 65 years. The relatively young age of the respondents was due to the undergraduate students who comprised 50% (100) of all the respondents, being the stakeholders who would be most affected by the offering of a new optional language in the curriculum, i.e. our future graduates. With reference to qualifications, only 47 (23.5%) had matric or lower, of which 13 (6.5%) had completed primary level schooling and 34 (17%) had obtained a matriculation certificate, 114 (57%) were undergraduates studying towards a Bachelor of Arts degree which included languages, 25 (12.5%) were postgraduate students with an honours or master’s degree and 14 (7%) held a doctorate. There was thus a range of educational levels with the middle, the undergraduate group being in the majority as the major stakeholders for the introduction of Swahili.
The questions relating to language practices included number of languages spoken by the respondents and their levels of confidence in using them. The linguistic profiles of the different groups of respondents are presented in Table 1 and are differentiated according to site.

It is clear from Table 1 that the majority of the respondents (144 or 72%) speak three or more languages, thus making them multilingual. Only 56 (28%) of the respondents were bilingual, the majority of these being the students, the Durban students comprising the highest number of bilingual speakers at 23 or 11.5%, with their Johannesburg counterparts comprising 15 (7.5%). There was no significant difference on the site variable for either the lecturer group or the informal sector. Figure 1 provides a graphic representation of the multilingual nature of the various groups.

‘Series 1’ represents one or two languages and ‘Series 2’ represents three or more languages. The values are relative to each individual group and not to the total number of respondents as each group differed in terms of total numbers. The informal sector was the most multilingual at 83.3%, followed by the Swahili-speaking postgraduate students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>No. of respondents</th>
<th>One or two languages</th>
<th>Three or more languages</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lecturers – Dbn</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturers – Jhb</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students – Dbn</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students – Jhb</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate students – both sites</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiswahili informal – Both sites</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South African informal – both sites</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The informal sector is the most multilingual at 83.3%, followed by the Swahili-speaking postgraduate students.

![Figure 1](image-url). Levels of multilingualism for the different respondent groups.
Lecturers (75%) and undergraduate students (62%). The degree of multilingualism of the different respondent groups will be compared to their responses in terms of the major themes arising from the data.

A further variable which influenced our interpretation of the responses was the different languages which formed part of the linguistic repertoires of the various respondent groups. We wished to know whether the immigrants spoke any of the indigenous African languages, and, conversely, whether any of the South Africans spoke Swahili or any other African language outside South Africa. Such repertoires could shed light on their responses to the questions. We allowed for four languages in descending order of confidence in speaking. Table 2 shows the linguistic profiles for each respondent group.

The other South African languages included Sotho, Pedi, Tswana, Venda, Tsonga, Ndebele, Swati, Xhosa and South African Sign Language. Other African languages included those spoken by the other respondents which will be discussed later and other European languages included mainly French, Italian, German, Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch. These languages were mostly spoken by the lecturers and students who were learning these languages. However, a significant number of the immigrants also spoke European languages.

Table 2 shows that of the 30 South Africans from the informal sector, the majority spoke other South African languages (160%), Zulu (86.6%) and English (80%). Swahili, other African languages and other European languages did not feature. The reason for the 160% other South African languages figure is that all the other South African languages were grouped together, and many individuals spoke at least two each. Zulu, however, was dominant in this group. These figures reflect the linguistic situation in South Africa where the most widely spoken indigenous languages are Zulu and Xhosa, with 23 million speakers and 17.5 million speakers respectively (Statistics South Africa 2012).²

The majority of the immigrant respondents from the informal sector spoke Swahili (86.6%), 70% spoke another African language including KinRwanda (7%), Lingala (20%), KiRundi (10%), KiFuliru (3%), Kinyamwazie (7%), Izalaam (7%), Kidigo (3%), Meru (3%), Nyakyusa (3%), ChiChewa (3%) and Ndengeleko (3%). In terms of European languages, 73% spoke English, 43% spoke French, 10.6% spoke Portuguese and 3% spoke Spanish. In terms of the South African languages, 36.7% spoke Zulu and 3.3% spoke another South African language. In terms of intergroup relations in the informal sector then, the immigrant group spoke more South African languages than the South Africans spoke Swahili or other African languages. This is logical considering that migration out of South Africa has not really occurred in relation to the informal sector which tends to remain in the home territory. If their responses to learning Swahili in

<table>
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<th>Languages spoken by respondents.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA informal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrants informal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PG students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UG students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SA, South African; OSA, other South African languages; OA, other African languages; E, English; OE, other European languages; AFR, Afrikaans; UG, undergraduate; PG, postgraduate.
South Africa turn out to be positive, it could be in terms of ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1983) and this, in turn, could signal economic reasons, or a desire to travel and explore other territories, particularly in Africa. In addition, both groups from the informal sector scored highly for English and for the immigrants this was probably the language of interaction and negotiation in South Africa.

The postgraduate students were dominant in English (100%), Swahili (95%) and other African languages (75%). They also spoke other European languages (mainly French) (55%). Their profiles were similar to those of the immigrants in the informal sector although their language competence was generally higher. These are highly educated individuals who are studying through the medium of English. Their knowledge of other European languages also reflects their countries of origin similar to those cited earlier for the informal immigrant sector. However, their linguistic profiles also show that they use English for interaction and survival in the host country because they spoke no South African language. This could be a factor influencing their responses to the research questions, which will be discussed later. The undergraduate students had the lowest scores for their linguistic repertoires possibly because they were younger and were still learning their languages. They were dominant in English (94%) which makes sense as they were studying through the medium of English and needed to be proficient in it. However, the scores for all other languages except Swahili (which was not spoken at all) fell below 50% so this group was not as proficient in their multilingualism as the informal sector or the postgraduate students. The lecturers were teaching languages so their scores reflect this with 100% speaking English and 75% speaking other European languages. Afrikaans scored 15%, Zulu 45% and other South African languages 30%. Other African languages and Swahili did not feature in their repertoires.

What emerges from the above profiles is that the ex-colonial language, English, still holds a dominant position with respect to most of the groups, and more so especially in intergroup communication. The immigrant group needed a lingua franca in order to communicate with the South African population, and this could not be Swahili, given that none of the South Africans spoke it. Neither did they speak any other African language. However, 36.7% of the immigrant group are beginning to use the indigenous South African languages, mainly Zulu. This could reveal the pressure on this group to accommodate to the dominant African language in the area. What needs to be established is whether the South Africans would be as receptive to the introduction of Swahili in South Africa.

The survey

The data were collected over a period of three months from September to November 2012. Each respondent group received a questionnaire specifically designed according to the respondents’ profiles, i.e. the questions on employment designed for the lecturers and informal sector groups were not given to the students as they were not relevant for this group. Apart from this, the questionnaires covered the same content. Background information included age group, educational level, nationality and employment. The next section asked about language practices, including the number of languages spoken by each respondent and their level of confidence for each language, the domains of language use and length of time they have been speaking the languages. The domains of language use included the family home, community, friends, work colleagues and customers. The respondent profiles thus created by the questions on their backgrounds could eventually be matched with their responses to the questions on the learning and teaching of Swahili.
At this point the lecturer respondents had an additional section on language learning and teaching in general. It included questions on the language/s they taught at the university, the length of time they had been teaching these languages and their student profiles. The final question in this section asked lecturers in which domains the languages they had been teaching were useful for their students. These domains included education, trade, travel and tourism, governance, cultural activities, employment, religion, family interaction, sport or other.

The final section in the questionnaire applied to all respondents and asked about the learning and teaching of Swahili at the university. The first question in this section asked for a Yes/No response to whether Swahili should be introduced at a tertiary institution for interested students to learn and the reasons for their answers. The following questions asked respondents which category of students should learn Swahili, in which domains it would be useful for them and whether they believed it would help students get jobs. In addition, the lecturers were asked whether they knew of any other tertiary institutions in South Africa where it was currently being taught and, if so, how it was perceived in these contexts. Responses to the questionnaire could then be analysed and matched to the respondents’ profiles.

As the questionnaire contained both open and closed questions, the data were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. For the quantitative analysis, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used and the data were subjected to a Chi-Square analysis in order to reveal any significant differences in responses from the various respondent groups. The qualitative data, which were derived from the open questions which probed the reasons for the answers to the closed questions, were subjected to a thematic analysis. The main themes arising from the data were those of African unity (i.e. Swahili was perceived as facilitating an ‘African’ identity that transcended national borders), intergroup/intercultural communication (which also included openness towards others on the part of the South Africans, and a desire for greater integration on the part of the immigrants), Swahili as an international lingua franca, Swahili as a Bantu language, travel (mainly for work purposes) and trade. From the students and lecturers we identified a further theme, namely, the study of languages as an intellectual exercise. For the purposes of this study, the trade theme will not be discussed.

The following findings arise from the key questions relating to the measures of identity as described earlier. They will be presented in terms of the questions (Table 3).

The majority of the respondents (89%) were in favour of the introduction of Swahili. There was no significant difference across sites. Those who were not in favour (11%) cited the dominance of English (‘Everyone learns English anyway’ [WES1]), the number of official languages already in South Africa (‘It is not one of our already large list of official languages and thus will have no local benefit’ [KIS5]) or competition with local

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>89.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Responses to the introduction of Swahili.
The university wants to remove already existing languages. Adding another does not seem like a good idea at this time. Interestingly, 9 of the 22 responses were from students.

The following question asked for the respondents’ opinions regarding which categories of students they felt would benefit from learning Swahili. The various choices are provided in Table 4.

The majority of respondents (62%) felt that all categories should be included, and 30% were more specific in their choices, i.e. students learning African languages or African-language-speaking students. This group regarded Swahili as an African language whose influence may not go beyond the continent.

The reasons for the various responses to the above questions were related to the following themes that became apparent from the data:

**Category 1** relates to the theme of intercultural communication. South Africans should be more open to other cultures and languages.

**Category 2** relates to the theme of African Unity. As Swahili is an African language, South Africans need to learn it. It is the language of the African Union.

**Category 3** relates to Swahili as an international language. This theme refers to the wide dissemination of Swahili in Africa, its development and its capacity to act as a lingua franca.

**Category 4** relates to the usefulness of Swahili for travel outside South Africa.

**Category 5** relates to learning languages as an intellectual pursuit.

**Category 6** focuses on Swahili as a Bantu language which shares structural similarities with South African languages.

Tables 5 and 6 present the responses per group for each of the above themes. Table 5 reflects responses for the reasons why respondents chose certain categories of students for learning Swahili and Table 6 reflects responses to the question, ‘Would you encourage South African students to learn Swahili?’ As the data relate to the same themes, they will be discussed together.

### Table 4. Categories of students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students learning African languages</th>
<th>Students from other African countries</th>
<th>All categories of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African language speaking students</td>
<td>Students from outside Africa</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 5. Reasons for learning Swahili.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Intercultural communication (%)</th>
<th>African unity (%)</th>
<th>Swahili as international (%)</th>
<th>Travel (%)</th>
<th>Learning languages (%)</th>
<th>Bantu language (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SA informal</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant informal</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UG students</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PG students</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturers</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SA, South African; UG, undergraduate; PG, postgraduate.
The responses to the two questions differed in some respects although they were related to the same themes. This could have been the way the questions were phrased which could have triggered a different focus for the respondents.

For the South African informal sector, travel seemed to be the most important reason for learning Swahili. The higher responses related to this theme could be due to the increased exposure of the South Africans to immigrants in the informal sectors through trade and commerce in the central business districts in the cities. This could have created a perception of border crossing as a means of improving one’s livelihood, or more ‘permeable’ identities thus awakening their curiosity about other African countries. Some of their responses follow (the quotations are followed by the coded symbol for the various respondents in terms of data capturing):

> It is important to learn other people’s language because if one finds himself in Swahili speaking country (sic) I am not going to speak a South African language (JCE1).
>
> We are all in Africa. Some day we may all have to go abroad for work-related situations (DCE7).

The undergraduate students and the lecturers also chose this option:

> It opens the horizons (sic) of communication and enables students to consider working in East Africa instead of going overseas (WAS2).

The next highest score was for intercultural communication. The South African informal sector commented as follows:

> Some of the people who can speak Swahili can also speak South African languages so we must also know their language (JBR3).
>
> This is Africa. If you meet with people who speak Swahili, you should be able to communicate with them (DCE9).

The Swahili-speaking immigrants appeared to feel the need for closer intergroup contact in both formal and informal sectors. They perceived Swahili to be a means to this end and also to provide a bridge across cultures, as very few of the immigrants spoke an indigenous African language:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Intercultural communication (%)</th>
<th>African unity (%)</th>
<th>Swahili as international (%)</th>
<th>Travel and trade (%)</th>
<th>Learning languages (%)</th>
<th>Bantu language (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SA informal</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant informal</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UG students</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PG students</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturers</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SA, South African; UG, undergraduate; PG, postgraduate.
They will get to know more about Africa (CBD9).
For easier interaction with Africans from Swahili-speaking countries especially the French
speakers from Congo and Rwanda (SJB12).

However, as most of the immigrants spoke English and obviously used it as their *lingua
franca*, the choice of this theme signals an identity issue – the desire to use a language
that would be closer to their own cultural roots. However, the South African respondents
from the informal sector commented as follows:

As Africans we are not supposed to use English to communicate because it is a foreign
language. Swahili can be used to communicate among Africans (JCE8).
We need a common language for communication in Africa. Sometimes Africans cannot talk
together because of language (SBE4).
We must learn to mix with all kinds of people (JBR1).

Both the undergraduate and postgraduate students felt that students should be encouraged
to learn Swahili for intercultural communication. The undergraduate students scored
highest for this theme (54%). Some comments follow:

It will lead to better communication between South Africans and other fellow African
speakers of Swahili (WAS15).
It would open the doors for cross-cultural communication. It would also help to close the gap
between foreign and South African students at the university (KAS7).

The following comment was from a Swahili-speaking postgraduate student:

As one of the most widespread African languages, Swahili would help South African
students to be more open to the rest of Africa (SJB8).

In relation to the theme of African unity, both groups in the informal sector responded
positively although the Swahili speakers outnumber the South African respondents. Their
experiences of a broader ‘African’ identity having come from the continent might be
responsible for this. Njubi (2009, 106) states that ‘Kiswahili has facilitated both
horizontal and vertical integration by fostering trade and popular-culture links across
ethnic boundaries and the grassroots level’.

They commented as follows:

We are all Africans so they have to know an African language like Swahili (HJB3).
They are African (SBE2).
When people are fighting the Blacks we can use one common language that will make it
difficult for people to know the difference (CBD2).

The South African informal sector echoed similar sentiments:

We are all Africans so it’s good to know the language (JBR7).
It is good for every African to learn another African language so that we can understand
ourselves (*sic*) (DCE5).
We are one people so we should be able to learn an African language (DCE9).
The lecturers also commented on a broader African identity:

We need an African language that will be spoken commonly in Africa (WAL1).

For the theme of Swahili as an international language, greater interest came from the Swahili-speaking immigrants and Swahili-speaking postgraduate students. However, the lecturers also had a broader vision of the wider significance of Swahili on the continent. Their attitudes reflect the international recognition of the role of Swahili in Africa. Mukuthuria (2006, 1) indicates that:

Today, there is no doubt that Swahili is one of the greatest indigenous languages on the continent […] The whole of [the] East and Central African region is using this language for wider communication, improving literacy, galvanising unity, commerce and many other roles.

Some of the responses from the Swahili group in relation to this theme follow:

It is the only language that everyone can share. Even in some European countries there are some people who speak Swahili (HJB4).
Swahili is the lingua franca for African countries and it is the official language of the African Union. This will assist in linking us with the whole African continent (KZL1).
Swahili is now assumed to be an international language (HJB10).

Interestingly, there were no responses to this theme from the South African informal sector which could be from a lack of exposure to Swahili as a widely spoken language beyond South Africa’s borders.

The theme of learning languages arose mainly from the undergraduate students and some of the lecturers. This reflects the context in which they find themselves, as they are all students of languages and are obviously highly motivated towards language learning in general. So the emphasis seems to be on the intellectual pursuit of learning a new language, but also of the benefits that this could bring in the longer term:

I think everyone benefits from learning other languages. It teaches us to respect other languages and honour them (KAS2).

Finally, there were varied response levels for the recognition of Swahili as a Bantu language which shares structural similarities with South African languages. Some responses follow:

People who speak African languages can learn Swahili easily because most of the terms in Swahili come from Bantu languages (SBE5).
It is also a Bantu language like their own languages and therefore easy to learn. It is also spoken by many in parts of Africa and is rich in vocabulary (SJB14).
Zulu and Swahili have common words and terms (SBE6).

Conclusion

In general, responses were positive to the introduction of Swahili in South Africa from all sectors. The Swahili-speaking immigrant groups displayed a broader perspective and understanding of the role of Swahili in Africa, probably due to their ‘lived experiences’ of
other cultures in Africa. This was evident in their responses to the themes of Swahili as a unifying factor in Africa and also as a potential lingua franca. In relation to the theme of intercultural communication, the Swahili speakers felt that by learning Swahili South Africans would broaden their horizons and encourage greater intercultural understanding and communication with other African cultures and peoples. This could be due to their experiences of South Africans not speaking their languages with the result that the Swahili speakers, as immigrants, could feel alienated. The data revealed that none of the South African respondents recorded Swahili as one of their spoken languages. However, very few of the immigrants spoke South African languages and the majority had been living in South Africa between 4 and 6 years according to their profiles. This could be an area of vulnerability for the immigrants so they would view the introduction of Swahili positively.

The South African respondents revealed an openness to learning the language for intercultural communication and as a means of achieving unity among Africans. In this respect, they also demonstrated a broader perspective on their self-identification as ‘Africans’ as learning Swahili could soften the boundaries between themselves and other African cultures, allowing for enhanced communication and understanding. They began to look beyond the borders of South Africa, perceiving Swahili as a means for greater intra-continental mobility and an opportunity for travel. This indicates a potential change in the way these respondents ‘locate’ or ‘position’ themselves and their country in relation to the African continent, on the one hand, and the ‘West’, especially Europe and America, on the other hand. The focus in South Africa on the importance of English as an international language could well swing towards a perspective that sees the term ‘international’ as inclusive of the African continent and its languages. Such a perspective would also allow for the possibility of an African lingua franca.

Acknowledgements
The authors wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for their very constructive comments on our initial drafts of this study.

Notes
1. The African languages mentioned in this study are referred to without the noun class prefix. This is the custom in international publications when referring to the African languages. The South African Constitution, however, refers to them with their prefixes, e.g. isiXhosa, Sesotho, isiZulu, etc. The same would apply to KiSwahili.
2. The South African Census data only refer to the languages spoken at home. It does not reflect the number of citizens who may actually use the language regularly, as a second, third or fourth language. To some extent, this was captured in our data for other South African languages.

References


