

LINGUISTIC PLURICENTRISM AND EPISTEMIC JUSTICE: SOME PERSPECTIVES IN LIGHT OF THE CONCEPT OF LINGUISTIC CITIZENSHIP

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Abstract

In light of the concept of Linguistic Citizenship, this article reflects on some theoretical and epistemological notions that allow us to problematize the classification of two languages spoken in six countries of southern Africa, including Mozambique, as pluricentric languages. The research adopts a qualitative methodological approach, of an ethnographic nature, within the framework of linguistic ethnography, based on focus group discussions with educated speakers of two African languages. The results of this study suggest the need to consider linguistic pluricentrism without losing sight of the disinhibition of subjectivities imposed by colonialism. But also, as a potential mechanism for reversing the colonial technology of domination based on exclusion. This involves, on the one hand, looking at their generating criteria as unfinished 'products', susceptible to (re)interpretations. On the other hand, it involves, in their rereading, considering the context of use, the adverse colonial past to which African languages were subjected, and the 'logos' of 'peripheralized' subjects. From this framework, we argue that Nyanja and Changana, the languages analyzed, suggest pluricentric scenarios.

Keywords

Pluricentric Languages, Epistemic Justice, Nyanja, Changana, Language Citizenship.

Resumo

À luz do conceito de Cidadania Linguística, este artigo reflete sobre algumas noções teóricas e epistemológicas que nos permitam problematizar a classificação de duas línguas faladas em seis países da África Austral, incluindo Moçambique, como línguas pluricêntricas. A pesquisa



adota uma abordagem metodológica qualitativa, de cunho etnográfico, na vertente da etnografia linguística, a partir de discussões em grupos focais com falantes cultos de duas línguas africanas. Os resultados do presente estudo sugerem a necessidade de repensar o pluricentrismo linguístico sem perder de vista a desinibição de subjetividades impostas pelo colonialismo. Mas também, enquanto mecanismo potencial de inversão da tecnologia colonial de dominação baseada na exclusão. Isso passa, por um lado, por olhar para os seus critérios geradores enquanto 'produtos' inacabados, suscetíveis de (re)interpretações. Por outro, passa por, na sua releitura, considerar o contexto de uso, o passado colonial adverso a que as línguas africanas foram sujeitas e o 'logos' dos sujeitos 'periferizados'. A partir deste enquadramento, defendemos que o Nyanja e Changana, línguas analisadas, sugerem cenários pluricêntricos.

Palavras-chave

Línguas Pluricêntricas, Justiça Epistémica, Nyanja, Changana, Cidadania linguística.

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Introduction

Linguistic pluricentrism (e.g. Clyne, 1992; Ammon, 2005; Muhr, 2012) has traditionally been associated with European and Asian languages (Palma, 2017), with very limited consideration given to languages outside these regions. In the variationist tradition (e.g. Silva, 2016), only a few African languages (such as Kiswahili, Barber, Hausa and Somali) have been recognised as pluricentric (Ammon, 2005; Kristiansen, 2014). This gives rise, amongst other things, to three main problems, namely: (i) the 'restriction' of the principles and/or criteria for classifying pluricentric languages to a group of languages, namely, but not limited to, former colonial languages (German, Spanish, French, English and Portuguese); (ii) linguistic subordination and/or silencing (Carrera, 2020); and (iii) conceptualising pluricentric theory (solely) on the basis of intellectual canons situated in the Global North.² Seen in this light, linguistic pluricentrism takes the form of a measure of dominance, serving as an old colonial technology of linguistic valuation (Kerfoot, 2025). This fact highlights the fact that the contemporary classification of languages (as pluricentric or non-pluricentric) does not adequately account for the role colonialism played in the pluricentric nature of some languages, and should help us problematise the contemporary segmentation of languages.

For this reason, there is an urgent need to reverse the colonial technology of domination based on exclusion, by dismantling the colonial edifice of language (Stroud & Chimbutane, 2025), which, in the African context - with the exception of Kiswahili -

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² The terms 'Global North' versus 'Global South' constitute a metaphor that links power, exploitation and history to the production of knowledge (Stroud & Chimbutane, 2025). As such, in this study they are used not as geographical concepts, but rather in relation to the empowerment of states, as historical subjects and key actors on the contemporary international stage (Fonseca, 2016).



reduces languages to an “absent presence” (Kerfoot, 2025, p. 179) in global knowledge and resource networks.

The denial of the status of a pluricentric language to most African languages appear to stem from the mistaken notion that associates these languages with an ‘inability’ to construct the narratives upon which nation-states are founded, a concept stemming from old colonial ideologies, yet essential to this type of linguistic classification (cf. Clyne, 1992; Muhr, 2012, 2016; Kalternegger, 2020).

As is well known, exclusion undermines the full exercise of voice and agency among citizens who, in their daily lives, rely on these languages not only as repositories of language and (local) memory, but also as a resource for building active linguistic citizenship, which can influence contemporary language policies and/or ideologies. In fact, rather than helping African languages to become, alongside the former colonial languages with which they coexist in the field in which we operate, an essential dimension of the repair of colonial memory and epistemic (re)construction (Fraser, 1995; Anderson, 2012), linguistic pluricentrism has been used as a technology of postcolonial domination, with the concomitant differential of sociocultural valuation of speakers and linguistic communities (Stroud & Chimbutane, 2025; Kerfoot, 2025). Thus, this linguistic taxonomy precludes the promotion of pluralism – as a characteristic of the knowledge-construction ecosystem in the Global South (Mignolo, 2009, 2011; Quijano, 2000; Grosfoguel, 2011; Mbembe, 2016). On the contrary, it highlights the parameters of legibility within the epistemic field of modernity (Vázquez, 2011), which underpins the universality of European knowledge (Vázquez, 2011: 27; Kerfoot, 2025, p. 181), without careful consideration of the factors that may work against this, namely the existence of alternative models of thought.

It should be noted that languages which do not meet the legibility criteria set out in the ‘exclusionary’ standards established by the intellectual canons of the Global North are relegated to the margins of modernity (Stroud, 2018). They are therefore subject to epistemic injustice (Friker, 2003; Anderson, 2012; Stroud & Kerfoot, 2020). This demonstrates how the coloniality of language (Veronelli, 2015) is deeply rooted in Western political structures and thought (Kerfoot, 2025).

In light of Linguistic Citizenship (Stroud, 2001; 2018; 2025), a theoretical concept from the Global South that serves to ‘raise awareness’ (Bowen, 2006), as we shall see in (2.1), it is imperative to consider linguistic pluricentrism without losing sight of the need to dismantle subjectivities imposed by colonialism (Bock & Stroud, 2019). Linguistic Citizenship is also a potential mechanism for reversing the colonial technology of domination based on exclusion.

On the one hand, this involves viewing their generative criteria (cf. Clyne, 1992; Muhr, 2012, 2016) as unfinished ‘products’, open to (re)interpretation. On the other hand, there is a need, in their reinterpretation, to consider the context of use, the adverse colonial past to which African languages were subjected, and the ‘logos’ of ‘peripheralised’ subjects. In other words, the rationality of speakers of marginalised languages (Stroud & Chimbutane, 2025), contrary to what we have observed in many studies on this subject, favours an essentialist conception of language, based on claims of universal



relevance (Stroud, 2007). Although these studies are relevant, they appear to fall short in several respects, including: (i) ignoring the tensions between what is historically and institutionally imposed and the everyday lives of language speakers, a starting point for epistemic (re)construction; (ii) suggesting the omission of the potential of acts of Linguistic Citizenship in terms of offering pathways to reverse the prevailing linguistic marginalisation and alienation of the most vulnerable populations (Chimbutane, 2018). There are numerous instances in which speakers of African languages have been labelled 'pejoratively' as minority language speakers, due to the divisions that some European countries created during the colonial period when drawing the current borders between African nation-states. Henriksen (2026) refers to Mozambique and other neighbouring countries, including South Africa.

The primary aim of this article is to reflect on theoretical and epistemological concepts that will enable us to examine the classification of some African languages as pluricentric languages. Following this introductory note, we shall then explain the methodological procedures and a theoretical framework (cf. (2)) within which the key points of various concepts, such as Linguistic Citizenship (cf. (2.1)) and Linguistic Pluricentrism (cf. (2.2)), so that we may understand the proposal to include other African languages as pluricentric languages (cf. (3)). As mentioned earlier, this inclusion is essentially based on a (re)interpretation of the criteria that define pluricentric languages. In fact, we seek to undertake a (re)reading that leads us to subvert the vestiges of the 'silent' legacy of the colonial past, encapsulated in the criteria proposed by Clyne (1992) and continued by his followers (e.g., Ammon, 2005; Muhr, 2012; 2016; Kristiansen, 2014; Silva, 2016; 2018). Finally, we will move on to the Concluding Remarks in (4), a section in which we will highlight the main conclusions of the text and point towards future research.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a qualitative methodological approach (Kalthoff, 2013), of an ethnographic nature (Jankowski & Wester, 1995 [1991]), within the field of linguistic ethnography (Shaw, Copland & Snell, 2015). The data analysed were collected in Mozambique using semi-structured interviews (Ketele & Roegiers, 1993), involving two focus groups of participants comprising higher education students who are native speakers of one of the African languages under analysis, namely *Nyanja/Chewa* and *Changana/Tsonga* (hereinafter referred to as *Nyanja* and *Changana*)³.

Each focus group included three (3) participants. Besides being native speakers, the following criteria were used for their selection: (1) students had to demonstrate strong linguistic awareness; (2) have knowledge of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial linguistic policies and practices; (3) gender and numerical parity, that is, of a total six participants comprising our sample, half should be female and the other half male; (4)

³ The designation of the analysed languages varies by geography. For example, in Malawi, political reasons have led to the *Nyanja* language being referred to as *Chewa*. This is not the case in Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Similarly to *Nyanja*, *Changana* is called *Tsonga* in South Africa and Eswatini. However, *Tsonga* is the generic term covering all African languages of the Bantu group within the S50 zone, namely *Changana*, *Ronga* and *Tshwa* (cf. Guthrie, 1967–71; Maho, 2009).



participants also had to be in one of the last two levels (3rd and 4th years) of the Bantu Language Teaching course at Faculty of Arts of Eduardo Mondlane University. We believed that at this stage of schooling their sociolinguistic maturity would be high. Therefore, they would be able to discuss and interpret complex linguistic issues with some expertise. However, it should not be true that by opting for a 'seemingly' smaller universe of participants, we essentially intended to minimise social biases associated with interviews conducted with large focus groups. On the other hand, we aimed to record in detail their subjectivities and alternative constituency.

The interviews resulted in two and half hours of audio recording, from which, among other aspects, the following emerge as themes: (1) awareness that some African languages are the same in several countries; (2) awareness that, among the various linguistic varieties, there are differences (especially lexical) but they are mutual intelligible; (3) a militant stance – to claim, raise awareness and try to change the mentality about the understanding of what is language, dialect and reference variety; (4) awareness of negative consequences of colonialism in relation to the devaluation of Bantu languages and their formal teaching; (5) asymmetries between linguistic policies and practices of different European colonizers; and (6) a claim regarding the issue of the symmetrical use of languages (ex-colonial and native languages), including their linguistic varieties. The recorded conversations were then transcribed in full, so that we could subject them to a more detailed analysis – based on the themes that emerged, especially those related to the topic under study – a form of content analysis (Bardin, 2013).

Thus, the transcripts analysed are not merely the result of applying the conventional technique of a traditional focus group interview – based on questions and answers – but also stem from the participants' self-reflection – a dimension that sought to capture the influence of language comprehension on the informants' reasoning. Consequently, through this technique, we were able to 'record' the subjectivities and alternative constructions of the interviewees. The data analysed were collected using an approach we shall term a 'logos-based interview', which led us to an emic interpretation. This is a complementary data collection technique using autoethnography, viewed as "a form of inquiry, writing, and/or performing that puts questions and 'issues of being' into circulation and dialogue" (Bochner, 2013, p. 54).

During the collection of (primary) data, informants were asked to provide informed consent authorising the use of the information in scientific studies. Furthermore, the data was processed in accordance with the ethical procedures in force at Eduardo Mondlane University and the University of Porto, particularly with regard to the redaction, cataloguing and anonymisation of the information prior to its release to the public. It is important to emphasize that, out of the total of six (6) 'transnational' languages shared between Mozambique and neighbouring countries, our choice was *Nyanja* and *Changana* for two reasons: (1) they were the African languages with the highest number of students in the aforementioned course, in the semester in which one of the co-authors of this study was teacher in those classes; and (2) they are languages located in equidistant regions, with *Changana* spoken in the south and *Nyanja* in the north of Mozambique, as we will see in due course.



Linguistic Citizenship

Linguistic citizenship is an 'awareness-raising concept' (Bowen, 2006) and a decolonial concept, which "emerged from the contradictions surrounding educational programmes and practices in mother-tongue and bilingual education in the 1990s, in the context of the Global South" (Stroud, 2025, p. 85). However, it has evolved rapidly over the years, on the one hand to address the need to rethink our understanding of language through the lens of citizenship and historical democratic participation, whilst at the same time inviting us to reconsider our understanding of citizenship through language (Stroud, 2018). On the other hand, it aims to "establish a perspective that situates speakers' linguistic practices and representations within the context of their everyday socio-political efforts to achieve agency, transformation and participatory citizenship" (Stroud, 2025, p. 86).

Indeed, Linguistic Citizenship "critically examines the historical, socio-political and economic constraints on language construction, whilst identifying the linguistic, structural and institutional conditions necessary for change" (Stroud, 2025, p. 88). Linguistic Citizenship thus has the potential to provide tools for thinking beyond the problems of language in education, by considering utopian elements such as 'love', 'hope' and 'care' as an existential dimension of *homo sapiens amans* (Maturana & Caberon, 2018).

'Love' embodies a form of selfless recognition of the 'Other' as distinct from the 'Self', even whilst coexisting with the 'Self'. It presupposes allowing the 'Other' to emerge on their own terms. An important aspect of citizenship in shaping new and better futures involves caring for others and for the world in which we live. 'Care' involves concern for the well-being of the 'Other' and the environment in which we live, values that must not be sacrificed in the name of our dreams. 'Hope' presupposes the dream of a better future, foreshadowed in the present and guided by an ethic of inclusion, harmony and sharing (Chimbutane & Stroud, 2025, p. 257).

It is in this sense that, when classifying pluricentric languages, we consider the use of acts of linguistic citizenship to be beneficial. "In the sense that, through the semiotics of hope, [for example,] a better world is foreshadowed, one that may become a reality in the future" (Chimbutane & Stroud, 2025, pp. 257-8). However, the concept of Linguistic Citizenship also emerges in this study to help us recognise that speakers themselves can exercise control over their language, deciding what counts as a language or languages, what it or they signify, and how linguistic issues may be discursively linked to a variety of social, political and historical issues (Stroud, 2018; Magona, 2020). From this perspective, Linguistic Citizenship informs epistemic justice (Friker, 2003; Anderson, 2012; Chakraborty, 2024) by focusing on the potential of languages for the ontological reshaping of 'selves', socialities and concomitant knowledge, offering a way to (re)signify linguistic attitudes and ideologies, including an awareness of the sense of linguistic community as a transformative epistemology (Fraser, 1995; Stroud, 2025). In fact, Linguistic Citizenship goes further than this, recognising the need to deconstruct and reconstitute social life and its institutions on the basis of a reconfiguration of language



(Fraser, 1997; Stroud, 2025). Therefore, in the light of linguistic citizenship, language is conceived as one of the semiotic means of resistance, through which the most vulnerable communities claim the exercise of voice and agency. In other words, on this basis, exclusionary ideologies are rejected.

It seems to us that this perspective is not being adequately considered when classifying languages as pluricentric or non-pluricentric, a fact which highlights that the parameters of this linguistic taxonomy are not based on the recognition of cultural, historical, political and identity-related inequalities, or of the collective values embodied in the concept of Linguistic Human Rights (Stroud, 2001).

Whilst we recognise that linguistic human rights are “depoliticised and ahistorical” (Yeatman, 2001, cited in Stroud, 2025, p. 88), it is nonetheless worth noting that their “appeals are situated in local space and time and filtered through contingent political, social and economic structures” (Stroud, *ibid.*). On the contrary, what is evident regarding the taxonomy under consideration is that it establishes practices which uphold the universality of ‘exclusionary’ criteria, inherited from the status quo of linguistics narratives from the Global North, which are closely associated with colonialism and do not appear to be in tune with the socio-political structures of the Global South. Within this framework of ideas, in the present study, we challenge this essentialist understanding of language, which is based on claims of universal relevance, as previously discussed. Thus, we draw upon the sensitising, transformative and decolonial nature (Fraser, 1995; 1997) of the notion of Linguistic Citizenship to ‘critically interrogate the historical and socio-political constraints’ (Stroud, 2025, p. 88) that shape the classification of pluricentric languages. At the same time, we call for epistemic justice (Friker, 2003; Anderson, 2012). This implies that there is a need to establish an alternative mode of thought based on accounts provided by speakers of so-called ‘subaltern languages’ (Mbembe, 2016), situated within a historical and geopolitical context distinct from that of the Global North (see, for example, Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2009, 2011; Grosfoguel, 2011). In fact, allowing for a contextual, temporal, and apolitical reinterpretation of the criteria that define the classification of pluricentric languages is, in our view, a way to ensure the epistemic liberation of minority languages – thereby healing the ‘scars’ left by the consequences of colonial linguistic ideologies. It also means paving the way for us to view language as a semiotic means of resistance and of historically redressing linguistic silencing. Furthermore, it means acknowledging that the languages of communities in the Global South are one of the semiotic means of producing autonomous knowledge, which may be valid in other contexts. For this to be feasible, among other measures, it is necessary to reverse the prevailing marginalization of African languages in both local and international socio-political spheres, including in linguistic taxonomies such as the one examined in this research.

Linguistic Pluricentrism

When examined from the perspective of Cognitive Sociolinguistics (Silva, 2016, p. 12), the concept of pluricentric languages is associated with “Georg V. Stepanov (1957), Alexandr D. Shvejtser (1963), Heinz Kloss (1967, 1976) and William Stewart (1968)”



(Clyne, 1992, p. 1; Ammon, 2005, p. 1536). However, its approach in modern linguistic theory gained prominence thanks to the seminal 'Pluricentric Languages', edited and published in the 1990s by the German-Australian linguist, academic and intellectual Michael Clyne (1939–2010).

Clyne's (1992) contribution would lay the foundations for a discussion of national varieties from the perspective of interacting centres, in contrast to the earlier model, which regarded linguistic varieties as 'deviations from the centre' (Silva, 2016, p. 12; see also Kristiansen, 2014; Silva, 2018). According to Ammon (2005, p. 1536), the two terms used to address this type of categorisation are: (i) the *centre of a language* (e.g. Great Britain); and (ii) the *standard variety of a language* (e.g. British Standard English). Thus, the definition of a pluricentric language refers to "[...] codified standard varieties of a language which are said to differ in various states in which the language is used" (Kristiansen, 2014, p. 9). On the other hand, pluricentricity tends to be "a special case of lethal variation, characterised by issues of national identity and power" (Silva, 2016, p. 12). From this perspective, a pluricentric language must be capable of being institutionalised in the sense that it comprises different varieties, each with its own standard (cf. (3)). Besides, according to Silva (2018, p. 113), "all languages are, to a certain extent, pluricentric, insofar as they contain dialectal variation and different local norms". It is within this theoretical framework that our aim to reinterpret the criteria that generate the pluricentricity of a language fits, thereby including African languages – the subject of our analysis – as pluricentric.

On Nyanja and Changana – languages under consideration

Before we get to the heart of the matter, we should first point out that the languages spoken in Africa belong to four different language families, namely Afro-Asiatic (covering those spoken in North Africa), Congo-Kordofanian (those spoken in sub-Saharan Africa), Nilo-Saharan (spoken south of the Sahara Desert) and Khoisan (spoken in south-western Africa) (cf. Guthrie, 1967–71; Maho, 2009).

The *Nyanja* (N31) and *Changana* (S53) languages, according to Guthrie's (1967–71) referential classification, belong to the Niger-Congo subfamily of the Congo-Kordofanian family. As part of the Bantu language group, they are spoken predominantly in sub-Saharan Africa's southern region (Magona & Wilson, 2023).

Nyanja is a 'transnational' language spoken in Mozambique, Malawi and Zambia (Ngunga *et al.*, 2022), where it enjoys, in the first country, the status of 'national language' (cf. Constitution of the Republic of Mozambique, 2004) and, in the other three countries, the status of 'lingua franca' and 'symbol of national unity' (Taylor, 2020). It is also believed that there are *Nyanja*-speaking communities in other countries, notably Zimbabwe and South Africa (cf. Reilly, 2016, 2019; Taylor, 2020).

In Zimbabwe, the *Nyanja* language is the third-most widely spoken, behind only *Shona* and *Ndebele* (Taylor, 2020). The total number of speakers across the five countries is unknown; however, in Mozambique, 1,568,701 speakers are recorded (INE, 2019). The language comprises three dialectal variants: *Cinyanja*, *Chichewa*, and *Cingoni* (Ngunga



et al., 2022, p. 124). The *Nyanja* spoken in Lusaka is sometimes referred to as 'urban *Nyanja*', as opposed to 'rural *Nyanja*', spoken in rural areas and other parts of Zambia (Taylor, 2020). It should be noted that the standard dialectal variant is *Cinyanja* of Tete (in Mozambique), also known as Central *Nyanja*.

With a standardised and harmonised writing system (Banda, 2008; 2016), this language is used in the education system in three countries, namely Mozambique, Malawi and Zambia, where so-called transitional bilingual education programmes with early or late transition are offered. These teaching models involve using L1/the non-dominant language as the medium of instruction in the early years of schooling, with L2/the dominant language introduced progressively throughout the curriculum (cf. Hornberger, 1991). This continues until the pupil has acquired 'some' knowledge of Portuguese or English, the dominant languages in their respective countries. Subsequently, L2 (Portuguese or English, as the case may be) becomes the language of instruction, usually after the first three years of schooling – the early-exit transitional model – or in the fifth or sixth years – the late-exit transitional model (Chimbutane, 2009, p. 29).

The educational objectives advocated in this model of bilingual education result in a degree of monolingualism in L2. As such, its programmes are based on the mistaken notion that L1 must be removed from the curriculum after a period of use so that L2 can be effectively learnt (Benson, 2009, p. 63).

Changana is also a 'transnational' language, spoken in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Eswatini and the Transvaal province of South Africa. As with *Nyanja*, the total number of speakers across the four countries is unknown; however, in Mozambique, there are 1,926,879 speakers (INE, 2019; Ngunga *et al.*, 2022), making it the third-most widely spoken 'national language' in the country (Chimbutane *et al.*, 2023). On the other hand, there appears to be a consensus that *xihlanganu*, *xidzonga*, *xin'walungu*, *xibila* and *xihlengwe* are the attested dialectal variants (Magona & Wilson, 2023). Of these, *xidzonga* (also known as *xitsonga*) – spoken in the vast region stretching from Mozambique to South Africa, encompassing the districts of Magude, Bilene and part of Massingir (in Mozambique) to the Transvaal province (in South Africa) – is taken as the reference variant. In other words, the standard dialectal variant, for the purposes of linguistic standardisation, including the production of school textbooks and use in the classroom.

In addition to their use in education, the languages under analysis are also used in the mass media, notably radio and television. Furthermore, they provide translation and/or interpreting services (at rallies and other types of campaigns, including during elections). However, their coverage is localised, extending only to the communities that speak these languages. Furthermore, these languages are widely used in religious services and in ancestral invocation practices (e.g., in *kupatla*⁴ ceremonies – among the *Changana* people).

⁴ This is a ceremony in which permission is sought from the ancestors to carry out a particular activity, such as the construction of public infrastructure.



Pluricentric Languages: A classification for liberation or for linguistic subjugation

Africa is, in itself, a continent of great linguistic, ethnic and cultural diversity (cf. Bamgbose, 1991), home to around 25% of the world's 8,000 languages (Zavale, 2026, p. 248). In this context, any discussion of the pluricentric nature of the languages spoken there must consider the historical relationships among the peoples there. In other words, the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial history of contemporary African nation-states can reveal a great deal about whether or not African languages are included in the linguistic taxonomy under consideration. This is further reinforced if we consider that linguistic pluricentrism is a non-apolitical phenomenon (e.g. Muhr, 2012; Kalternegger, 2020), more readily perceived within models of knowledge production and validation from the Global North, closely associated with old monolingual ideologies (cf. Chimbutane, 2026; Zavale, 2026) and colonial governance structures (cf. Stroud, 2025). This explains, for example, why the underlying idea of 'inseparability' between (i) the status of a language, (ii) codification (e.g. language norms), (iii) the centre of a language, and (iv) the standard variety of a language (cf. Ammon, 2005).

A pluricentric language is a language that is used in at least two nations where it has an official status as state language, co-state language, or regional language with its own (codified) norms that usually contribute to the national/personal identity, making the nation a norm-setting centre by the deliberate use of the norms native to this specific nation (Muhr, 2016, p. 16).

From Muhr's (2016) definition, it can be inferred that "language is not powerful on its own it is a means to gain and maintain power by the use powerful people make of it" (Reising & Wodak, 2009 cited in Pinto, 2021, p. 31). In fact, this highlights the fact that linguistic issues are discursively linked to social and political issues, as mentioned earlier. Thus, if we take strict adherence to the above definition at face value, then the *Nyanja* and *Changana* languages, for which we propose to suggest the status of pluricentric languages, cannot be included in this group. Firstly, because they do not meet the 'state language'⁵ requirement – on the basis of which, according to the narratives of the Global North about pluricentric languages, one could (or might) claim the status of a 'centre of a language' (Ammon, 2005, p. 1536), at least across a considerable part of their territory, namely in Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Zambia in the first case, and in Eswatini, Mozambique and Zimbabwe in the second case.⁶ This is due not only to the legacy of monolingual colonial ideologies (cf. Lines 4–9, Excerpt 1), but also to the failure to take into account both the context (the place where the languages are situated) and local

⁵ In contemporary Africa, due to the consequences of colonial ideologies regarding language, a strategy of avoidance prevails. Avoidance is a technique adopted by most African countries and is characterised by sparing the government the unpleasant political consequences that any pronouncement on language policy may provoke in sections of the population (Bamgbose, 1991). Therefore, although many African languages are, from a demographic, social or dialectological point of view, they are still not, from a 'political' point of view, 'eligible' for the status of official, regional or lingua franca.

⁶ *Nyanja* is a lingua franca in Malawi and Zambia, where it also has the status of a regional language. In contrast, *Changana* is an official language only in South Africa (cf. Makoni & Pennycook, 2007; Reilly, 2016; 2019; Taylor, 2020).



history (the historical past of contemporary language communities), aspects that emerge clearly in excerpt (1) below:

Excerpt 1			
1	E	Acha que o colonialismo contribuiu negativamente ou positivamente para o estágio em que se encontram as línguas africanas na atualidade?	Do you think that colonialism contributed negatively or positively to the present stage of the African languages?
5	P1	Só que nós não levamos isso em conta, porque em algum momento nós fomos colonizados, ou seja, aculturados. Na verdade, adquirimos aqueles que são os hábitos e costumes do povo colonizador. O que desencadeou se calhar na mais valorização das línguas estrangeiras. Estou a falar muito mais do português.	We don't take it into account, because at some moment we were colonized. I mean acculturated. In fact, we acquired the habits and customs of the colonizing people. That means that the foreign language was more valued. I am talking about Portuguese, specifically.
10	P2	O que motiva a isso, eu acho que são as próprias políticas adotadas pelo país, que foram deixadas pelo colono. Essas políticas influenciaram a vida das pessoas. Enquanto que o colono britânico tinha apressado as línguas, a língua <i>nyanja</i> , o colono português proibia o uso dessa língua.	I believe the reason for this lies in the policies adopted by the country itself, which were left behind by the colonisers. These policies have shaped people's lives. Whilst the British colonists had embraced the languages, or <i>Nyanja</i> , the Portuguese colonists prohibited the use of that language. This led to a situation where, even today, people continue to hold negative attitudes towards our language, unlike in Malawi and Zambia.
15	P3	Então, isso causou essa continuidade, continuidade que, até hoje as pessoas continuam a ter atitudes negativas em relação a nossa língua, diferentemente do Malawi e Zâmbia.	Colonial language policy, in our case, was a negative policy. This policy was ongoing. It continues to this day, which is why our languages have been placed in a less privileged position. (...) the coloniser promoted the use of Portuguese rather than the local language itself – the mother tongue of the majority of Mozambicans.
20		A política linguística colonial, para o nosso caso, foi uma política negativa. Essa política foi contínua. Até agora continua, razão pela qual as nossas línguas ficaram numa posição menos privilegiadas. (...) o colono ensinou a validação do português do que a própria língua local – língua materna da maioria dos moçambicanos.	

Excerpt (1) not only highlights the asymmetries between colonial politics and linguistic practices, but also reveals the underlying 'coloniality of language' (Veronelli, 2015). In the context in which we operate, this fact is made visible by the lack of awareness of the limits imposed by colonialism, which is reflected, for example, in the government's lack of commitment to the need for an ontological reconfiguration of colonial ideologies, policies and language practices, including within education systems (cf. Lines 18–21, Excerpt 1). Despite this situation, there seems to be a consensus that, in the African context, national languages "usually contribute to national/personal identity", given that they constitute one of the main semiotic means through which peoples identify themselves (cf. lines 7–15, Excerpt 2). Furthermore, they represent a worldview (e.g. anthropological, philosophical, cosmogonic, sociological, etc.), as they are the primary



repository of the local collective memory, namely African existence and thought. (cf. Line 11, Extract 2; Lines 17–18, Extract 4).

Excerpt 2			
1	E	Enquanto falantes de uma das variantes de uma língua africana, vocês sentem-se legítimos proprietários dessa língua ou consideram-se apenas parte da comunidade falante da língua? Por quê?	As speakers of a variant of an African language, do you consider yourselves as legitimate owners of that language or do you consider yourselves as part of the community of speakers of that language? Why?
5	P3	Eu, em particular, sinto-me proprietário da língua. Bem, porque a língua como eu disse faz parte, ou seja, é identidade de um povo. Então, se eu nasci, por exemplo, dentro de um determinado sítio, por exemplo, num determinado sítio, cresci ali, não é? ((faz pergunta retórica)) A minha forma de poder ter a identidade, então, a língua é como um elemento da minha forma de viver. Então, eu nasci naquele local, cresci ali, aprendi aquilo e daquela forma. Então, aquilo pertence a mim. Identifica-me como alguém que pertence aquela comunidade. Então, eu sinto-me legítimo proprietário da língua. É minha língua.	I, myself, feel I am an owner of the language. Well, as I said previously, language is part of the identities of people. So, if I was born, for example, into some place, for example, grew up there, you know? ((rhetoric question)). My way to have my identity, so the language functions as an element of my manner of living. So, I was born and grew up in that place, and I learnt this and that. Now that belongs to me. I am identified as someone who belongs to that community. So, I feel like I am a legitimate owner of the language. That is my language, I mean.
10			
15			

In this context, Muhr’s (2016) definition, whilst well-crafted, seems too narrow to be comprehensive: on the one hand, by ignoring contextual issues – which are essential for understanding the terrain in which we operate; on the other hand, by failing to consider the colonial monolingual ideologies practised by some colonisers, notably Portugal (cf. Lines 17–22, Excerpt 1). The definition also overlooks the arbitrariness involved in the drawing of the borders of contemporary African nation-states by the European imperialist powers at the Berlin Conference, which defined the current geography of African countries. Furthermore, by emphasising the idea associated with codification, it is partly within the framework of these ideas that the need for an epistemic reconfiguration of the notion of pluricentric languages is situated. This implies recognising the need to promote, contextually, an understanding of language by speakers in the Global South (cf. Lines 10–16, Excerpt 1); on the other hand, it suggests the need for a differentiated application of the criteria generated by pluricentric languages, or indeed, their alignment with the specificities of different linguistic landscapes. In doing so, however, it is necessary to overcome the limitations imposed by the narrative that underpins the idea of “epistemic exclusion and silencing” (Zavale, 2026, p. 248), which suggests, amongst other aspects, the idea that languages eligible for this linguistic classification must be, albeit to varying degrees, ‘prototypically pluricentric’ (Silva, 2018).



Although the *Nyanja* and *Changana* languages have guiding writing standards (cf. (2.3)), i.e. standardised and harmonised writing – shared across the different nation-states where they are spoken (cf. Banda, 2008; 2016; Ngunga *et al.*, 2022), demanding strict adherence to this aspect without careful consideration of the fact that these languages belong to an oral tradition – and have only been written down recently – contributes to the legitimisation of the ‘coloniality of language’, reflected in subjugation, linguistic silencing and the perpetuation of epistemic injustices (cf. Anderson, 2012; Chakraborty, 2024) to which African languages have been and continue to be subjected since the colonial period (cf. Lines 18–23, Excerpt 1).

Thus, our informants suggest that it is impossible to establish a strict correlation between what is conventionally referred to as strict conformity and/or alignment between the criteria of linguistic pluricentricity and the actual situation of the context in which we operate. Among the reasons given, linguistic hegemony stands out, reflected in the excessive valuing of colonial monolingual ideologies (cf. Lines 7–9, 18–23, Excerpt 1). In this context, it is necessary to challenge the “parameters of legibility of the epistemic field” (Kerfoot, 2025, p. 227) that underpin the universal relevance of some languages and the knowledge associated with them. Repudiation constitutes a form of resistance and/or alternative approach in the epistemic reconstruction (Friker, 2003) of the criteria for the legibility of a language’s pluricentricity. This reconstruction must, however, not only transcend the limits imposed on African languages by colonialism (cf. Lines 20–23, Excerpt 1), but also capture the idea that all languages are, to a certain extent, pluricentric (Silva, 2018, p. 113).

To accept this premise is to pave the way for historical redress for linguistic subjugation and silencing. But it also, without reservation, enables those situated on the margins of modernity’s narratives (cf. Quinjano, 2000; Mignolo, 2009) to fully exercise their plural voices and agency, given that, through this, they are recognised as having control over their languages (Stroud, 2018; Bock & Stroud, 2018). In fact, they are allowed to become active agents in the (re)configuration of the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the linguistic taxonomy under consideration. Consequently, the pluricentric theory is no longer viewed as an exclusionary taxonomy in which languages are classified on the basis of, but not limited to, the centre/periphery dichotomy. On the contrary, it serves, albeit in a symbolic sense, as a platform for sociolinguistic dialogue, challenging, amongst other things, the prevailing continuity of colonial ideologies, policies and linguistic practices.

From a theoretical and practical perspective, this means acknowledging that micro- and/or macro-dialectal variations – namely, *xihlanganu*, *xin’walungu*, *xibila* and *xihlengwe* (in the case of *Changana*) or *Chichewa* and *Cingoni* (in the case of *Nyanja*), including their standard variants (cf. (2.3)), transcend the limits of artificial colonial borders – which favoured monolingual ideologies. On the other hand, it means recognising that these are legitimate diatopic variations. Indeed, they even reflect what Silva (2018, p. 112) refers to as the ‘political militancy of separation and autonomisation’ (cf. Lines 11–12, Excerpt 3). Thus, rather than drawing an analogy with what happens with the languages of the Global North, particularly the so-called ‘neo-imperialist languages’, namely Portuguese, English, Spanish, French and German (Mohanty, 2009,



p. 8), the dialectal variants referred to above should be seen as legitimate candidates for the establishment of their own norms and/or centres of a pluricentric language, in the local sense and context in which we operate, as emerges more explicitly in the following statement:

Excerpt 3			
1	E	E se tivessem que escolher uma variante a ser usada em fóruns internacionais, que critérios é que vocês considerariam? E porque desses critérios?	If you had to choose a variant to be used in international forums, what criteria would you consider? And why those criteria?
5	P3	Iria olhar até onde a minha variante dialetal chega. Até onde a minha variante chega ((secunda)). Do ponto de vista de distribuição geográfica. E, se calhar, estabelecer uma comparação com uma outra variante dialetal.	I was going to see how far my dialectal variant extends. How far my variant extends ((repeats)). From the point of view of geographical distribution. And perhaps draw a comparison with another dialectal variant.
10	P2	Para mim, a questão, também, de influência política de, de, dessa variante. Temos uma variante que é <i>Cingoni</i> só que é uma variante que é falada, é falada nesse caso em dois distritos. Só que lá é onde existe a influência política que é o que se chama <i>nkosizama</i> . Enquanto <i>nyanja</i> padrão é falado em muitos sítios. Então, deveria-se adotar o <i>nyanja</i> que é falado em muitos sítios, portanto, em Moçambique, em Malawi, ahmm... é falado em Moçambique, em Malawi, tanto em Zâmbia, queria dizer.	For me, the issue is also one of the political influences of this particular variant. We have a variant known as <i>Cingoni</i> , but it is a variant that is spoken - in this case - in two districts. However, that is where the political influence lies, which is what is known as <i>nkosizama</i> . Whereas standard <i>Nyanja</i> is spoken in many places. So, one should adopt the <i>Nyanja</i> that is spoken in many places, that is, in Mozambique, in Malawi, ahmm... it is spoken in Mozambique, in Malawi, and in Zambia, I mean.
15			

Within the framework of linguistic citizenship, empowering these linguistic variants amounts to promoting alternative models of thought. Furthermore, it entails granting the right for “speakers of these varieties to establish legitimate forms of schooling, [for example]” (cf. Kerfoot, 2025, p. 226). Furthermore, it means recognising that the criteria underpinning pluricentric languages should not be based solely on the landscape and understanding of the Global North’s models of rationality, which are closely associated with the invisibilisation of minority languages, notably African ones. On the contrary, one should consider the local context and time as potential factors for assessing the specific characteristics of different linguistic landscapes (cf. lines 9–16, Excerpt 3). It must be acknowledged, however, that “the history of colonial impositions makes this a complex and sensitive debate” (Kerfoot, 2025, p. 225).



Linguistic pluricentrism as a space for sociolinguistic dialogue

As we have seen, many of the criteria used to determine whether a language is pluricentric are out of step with the African context and stem from a Eurocentric view of languages, which are generally divided along nation-state lines - a result of historical circumstances quite different from those described here. If the speakers of the languages in question are spread across several countries, this, as mentioned, stems from the arbitrary division that Europeans imposed on Africa, disregarding the ethnic and historical realities that existed prior to their arrival. We might even consider that, for the two languages under study, they occur “in at least two nations that function as ‘interacting centres’”. However, it can no longer be claimed, in the terms of Clyne, Muhr and followers’, that “the national varieties function as norm-setting centres.” This is because the countries are strongly multilingual and, in the case of Mozambique, given the avoidance strategy announced in due course, none of the native languages is officially recognised as a “national variety”. However, they are used in both bilingual and monolingual education, where, in the latter case, they serve as resources for learning Portuguese, the country’s official language. This is particularly evident in rural areas where the former colonial language is scarcely taught (cf. Magona, 2024).

On the other hand, if neither language has official status in at least two countries, we can say that both are regional languages (such as Catalan in France, an example cited by *Pluricentric Languages*). Whilst the number of French speakers of Catalan is estimated at 125,000 (Ferrer, 2022), the Mozambican speakers of *Nyanja* or *Changana* undoubtedly carry greater weight. It is difficult to regard these languages as ‘minority’ languages, not least because their teaching in bilingual education implies ‘official recognition’ by the authorities (cf. INDE, 2003; MINEDH, 2020). If they do not have explicit official status⁷, they do have at least official recognition (RM, 2004) and are accompanied, at the very least, by a strong ethnolinguistic awareness (cf. Lines 5–14, Lines 15–19, Lines 21–24, Extract 4) among the communities that speak them in the various countries (Lines 28–29, Extract 4). Undoubtedly, these languages contribute, as mentioned, to a strong sense of ethnic and individual identity, as evidenced in Extract (4) below:

Excerpt 4			
1	E	E, qual é a relação que vocês têm com essas pessoas? do ponto de vista linguístico, como é que vocês se vêem, se vêem como sendo falantes de línguas diferentes, de variedades diferentes ou de comunidade de uma língua?	And what is your relationship with these people? From a linguistic point of view, how do you see yourselves – as speakers of different languages, of different varieties, or as part of a single language community?
5	P2		
10		Em relação ao <i>nyanja</i> que é falado tanto em Moçambique, Malawi e Zâmbia, uhmm, vou dizer que nos sentimos muito amigos, entre os <i>nyanjas</i> do Malawi e Zâmbia. Até somos muito mais apagados aos <i>nyanjas</i> do	As for the <i>Nyanja</i> language, which is spoken in Mozambique, Malawi and Zambia, well, I’d say that we feel very close to our <i>Nyanja</i> -speaking neighbours in Malawi and Zambia. In fact, we’re

⁷ In the sense of the absence of a legislative instrument, namely a Decree-Law.



15		Malawi e trocamos ideias, uhmm, a informação que partilhamos é a mesma, tanto o desporto, rádio, a informação que recebemos, portanto, é a mesma. Para dizer que nessa comunidade, nos vemos, queria dizer nos vimos como uma comunidade <i>nyanja</i> . Partilhamos os mesmos laços e somos amigos.	much closer to the <i>Nyanja</i> people of Malawi and we exchange ideas; the information we share is the same, whether it's sport, radio or the news we receive, so it's all the same. To say that within that community, we see ourselves – I mean, we see ourselves as a <i>Nyanja</i> community. We share the same bonds and we're friends.
20	P3	Queria acrescentar, que nós éramos uma comunidade alguém impôs as suas fronteiras e fomos divididos. Na verdade, partilhamos a mesma identidade, os mesmos conceitos sobre o mundo. Então, é legítimos reivindicarmos.	I would like to add that we used to be a community, but someone imposed their boundaries on us and we were divided. In fact, we share the same identity and the same views of the world. So, it is only right that we make our claims.
25	P1	É sabido que <i>changana</i> , também é falado na vizinha África do Sul, principalmente e, alguns grupos também, além da África do Sul, Swazi[lândia] tem falantes de <i>changana</i> . Então, eu considero que este povo aqui é da mesma comunidade. A África do Sul, ahmm, apesar de ter sido colonizada pelos ingleses ou britânicos, eles têm o inglês como língua oficial, mas cada distrito ou província tem aquilo que é a sua língua materna. Eles valorizam a língua materna daquela região.	It is well known that <i>Changana</i> is also spoken in neighbouring South Africa, primarily there, and some groups outside South Africa as well; Swazi[land] also has speakers of <i>Changana</i> . So, I consider these people here to be part of the same community. South Africa, uhmm, although it was colonised by the English or the British, and English is its official language, each district or province has its own native language. They value the native language of that region.

In this Excerpt (4), the informants not only highlight the recognition that some African nation-states accord to local languages, but also point out that language is an essential element of a people's identity. On the other hand, they are aware that, although speakers of the Nyanja and *Changana* languages are separated by artificial colonial borders, they belong to the same ethnolinguistic communities. Thus, the criterion of 'linguistic distance (Abstand)' appears to be present in the languages studied. Whilst we cannot refer to these as 'national varieties', we have confirmed, through the students' discussions, that they 'have enough linguistic (and/or pragmatic) characteristics that distinguish them from other varieties and can thus serve as a symbol for expressing identity and social uniqueness' (cf. lines 6–8, Excerpt 5) The fact that the students list differences between the language as they speak it and the language as it is spoken on the other side of the border is illuminating in this regard. Note extract (5) below:



Excerpt 5			
1	E	Existem traços comuns, existem palavras diferentes que vocês podem citar? Ainda que não sejam palavras muito frequentes aqui, mas que sejam frequentes lá, entretanto, que vocês compreendem.	Are there any common features? Are there any different words you can think of? Even if they aren't used very often here, but are common there, as long as you understand them.
5	P1	Sim, por exemplo: os sul africanos, nem!... tem o <i>changana</i> como uma língua, usam a palavra nitakuxaya que significa bater ((quer dizer, vou bater-te)). Enquanto que para nós, nem!, usamos muito mais nitakuba . Mas, há aqui alguma similaridade.	Yes, for example: South Africans, uhm!... They have 'changana' as a language, and they use the word ' nitakuxaya ', which means 'to hit' (as in, 'I'm going to hit you'). Whereas for us, uhm! We use ' nitakuba ' much more. But there is some similarity here.
10	P2		
15	P3	Em relação ao <i>nyanja</i> , há algumas palavras que por causa da..., da..., ((organiza o raciocínio)) da própria dimensão, da..., dessa expansão que o <i>nyanja</i> tem no Malawi, Zâmbia, em Moçambique, temos também.... (...) acabamos por criar algumas palavras que podem não entender, mas, ahmm..., o falante que fala <i>nyanja</i> vai conseguir preencher essa lacuna que é devido, principalmente, à variação fonética, fonológica.	As for <i>Nyanja</i> , there are some words which, because of the... the... ((organises his thoughts)) the very scope of the language, the... this widespread use of <i>Nyanja</i> in Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique, we also have... (...) we have ended up creating some words that you may not understand, but, ahmm... a speaker of <i>Nyanja</i> will be able to fill that gap, which is mainly due to phonetic and phonological variation.
20	P2		
25		Estaria a falar sobre a questão de criação de novos termos devido ao contacto de línguas ou, trata-se de empréstimos?	Are you referring to the creation of new terms resulting from language contact, or are you talking about loanwords?
		Ya! Posso dizer: há umas palavras, posso dizer, porque <i>nyanja</i> em Niassa tem fronteiras com outras comunidades linguísticas e acaba criando umas palavras daquela comunidade linguística, quanto o <i>nyanja</i> de Tete faz fronteira com..., ((I3 ^ahmm, sim)) com uma outra língua, acaba pedindo palavras dessa língua.	Ya! I can say: there are some words – I can say that –because <i>Nyanja</i> in Niassa borders other linguistic communities and ends up borrowing words from those communities, whereas <i>Nyanja</i> in Tete



			borders... ((ahmm, yes)) another language, so it ends up borrowing words from that language.
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Although resulting from contact, Excerpt (5) points to the existence of lexical differences. In fact, these differences are not exclusively the result of linguistic contact, as our informants suggest (cf. Lines 21–25, Excerpt 5). On the contrary, they extend to the intralinguistic level. For example, in *Xibila*, a dialectal variant of *Changana*, the word *bhuti* means ‘boy’, whereas *jaha* is used in *Xihlengwe*. Something similar occurs between *ximasi* and *xiqamelo* ‘cushion’, *kuhlamula* and *kuyangula* ‘to answer’, *xipixi* and *xingove* ‘cat’, *kuboha* and *kutsimba* ‘to tie’, *mbalu* and *volo* ‘blanket’, *kuchima* and *kutsundza* ‘to dirty’, *bewula* and *chate* ‘axe’, *n’wingi* and *mamanyana* ‘daughter-in-law’, words used in the dialectal variants *xilhanganu* and *xidzonga*, respectively. It should be noted, however, that this is not a case of pure synonymy. On the contrary, it reveals significant diatopic variation within the language.

It seems to us that the criterion of pluricentricity is met by speakers of *Nyanja* or *Changana*, as is clearly evident in Excerpt (6). Rather than a national identity, the language forms part of an ethnic identity (cf. Lines 14–16, Excerpt 2). This is because its speakers do not all belong to a single nation, but rather to the same group. There is, however, a strong awareness that these languages, spoken in this way, form part of the country’s sociolinguistic reality.

Excerpt 6			
1	E	Acham legítimo reivindicarmos o estatuto pluricentrico para as línguas africanas, nomeadamente <i>nyanja</i> e <i>changana</i> ? Por que?	Do you think it is justified for us to call for a pluricentric status for African languages, particularly <i>Nyanja</i> and <i>Changana</i> ? Why?
5	P3	Achamos legítimo. Bom, eu acho justo reivindicarmos o estatuto de línguas pluricêntricas. Por que, até a língua portuguesa, o inglês, francês, mais outras línguas partiram..., digamos de um estudo de seleção. A mesma forma como o português é usado ou o inglês, essas línguas expandiram-se. Então, se essas línguas foram expandidas para o uso, porque é que as nossas línguas não podem passar, também, pelos mesmos mecanismos? para ahmm..., digamos, com que as pessoas tenham acesso? Então, reivindicar o uso pluricêntrico dessas línguas, é legítimo.	We think it’s legitimate. Well, I think it’s fair for us to claim the status of pluricentric languages. Because even Portuguese, English, French and other languages emerged... let’s say, from a process of selection. In the same way that Portuguese is used, or English, these languages have expanded. So, if these languages have expanded into use, why can’t our languages also go through the same processes? So that, uhm, let’s say, people have access to them? So, claiming the pluricentric use of these languages is legitimate.
15	P1		Yes, it is only right that we make this claim. Because we have speakers too. So,



P2	Sim, é legítimo nós reivindicarmos. Porque nós também temos falantes. Então, se nós prestigiamos uma língua colonial, porquê é que não podemos prestigiar o <i>changana</i>, o <i>nyanja</i> ou qualquer língua ((africana))? É legítimos reivindicarmos.	if we value a colonial language, why can't we value <i>Changana</i>, <i>Nyanja</i> or any other ((African)) language? It is right for us to make these demands.
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In excerpt (6), when our informants compare the unequal treatment of the languages under study with that of the languages of the Global North – namely Portuguese, English or French – they challenge the reproduction of “symbolic power” (cf. Bourdieu, 1991), understood as “the imposition of categories of thought and perception upon dominated social agents, so that they continue to serve the ruling class(es) and ensure the maintenance of the prevailing social order” (Chimbutane, 2025b, p. 243). In doing so, they not only call for epistemic freedom, but at the same time, they resist. This resistance is reflected, for example, in the desire to see an end to hostility, subjugation, and the silencing of African languages (Lines 16–18, excerpt 6). This fact highlights *care* as a dimension of linguistic citizenship. In the taxonomy under study, this care should enable the humanisation of relations with others, including their language, granting it equal value.

We reiterate that this is one of the dimensions of Linguistic Citizenship that the criteria defining a language’s pluricentricity appear to deliberately ignore. Thus, if we continue to view Clyne and Muhr’s criteria solely through the lens of the Global North, without careful consideration of alternative models of thought, we are ‘blindly’ subjecting ourselves to the continued marginalisation of the languages of the Global South within this taxonomy, rather than attempting to remove the epistemic barriers that exclude them from this classification.

It also became clear that, in the case of *Nyanja* and *Changana*, we cannot speak of a national norm; therefore, we cannot assert that “the national norm has to be relevant to social identity and must be (to some degree) evident to the language community and lead “to at least some of its own (codified) norms.”⁸ However, we can say that the national varieties, including the local micro- and macro-varieties of the two languages spoken in Mozambique, are relevant to the social identity of the speakers, as evidenced by the data collected from the students. (e.g. Lines 10–16, Excerpt 2).

The final criterion, concerning the codification of the standard, does not hold true in the manner in which it is formulated in *Pluricentric Languages*; however, once languages have been described – namely in dictionaries (e.g. Siteo, 2014), grammars (e.g. Torrend, 1891; Watkins, 1937; Ngunga & Simbine, 2012), reports on standardisation and linguistic harmonisation (e.g. NELIMO, 1989; Ngunga & Siteo, 2000; Ngunga *et al.*, 2022) and, above all, where there are textbooks for bilingual education (cf. Ouane & Glanz, 2011; ADPP-Mozambique, 2018), with literacy provision included in them (cf. INDE, 2003), one

⁸ Retrieved from <https://pluricentriclanguages.org/pluricentricity/what-is-a-pluricentric-language/>



cannot claim that there is no form of codification in books. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, there are varieties considered standard, on which linguistic standardisation and textbook production are based.

Thus, even though not all the criteria for pluricentric languages apply to *Nyanja* and *Changana*, in the sense of narratives of the Global North, or only partially, the term 'pluricentric' can help us understand the linguistic reality of the populations who speak these languages. We therefore argue that the criteria in question should consider historical and linguistic realities that are quite different from those of languages unhesitatingly considered pluricentric, and be adapted to this specific multilingual reality. Alternatively, new criteria could be devised to extend the designation to concrete realities, such as the African context. But undoubtedly, the pluricentricity of *Nyanja* and *Changana*, even if it does not strictly adhere to Clyne and Muhr's criteria, is a concept that helps us reflect on languages as spaces for sociolinguistic dialogue.

To consider linguistic pluricentrism in the light of Linguistic Citizenship is to recognise the need to dismantle the linguistic injustices 'imposed' on African languages and communities since the colonial period. As noted, Linguistic Citizenship refers to "cases in which speakers exercise agency and participation through the use of language(s), registers or other multimodal means in circumstances that may be adjacent to, within or outside institutionalised democratic structures for democratic purposes" (Lim *et al.*, 2018, cited in Chimbutane & Stroud, 2025, p. 253).

Based on 'love', 'hope' and 'care' – the biological foundations of the 'loving human being' (*homo sapiens amans*) as described by Humberto Mutarana – from which language likely first emerged in a context of harmonious, attentive and hope-filled collaboration (Chimbutane & Stroud, 2025, p. 258), the concept of Linguistic Citizenship has shown us that it carries a significant theoretical distinction that enables us to understand and explain contemporary linguistic policies and practices. Thus, in the taxonomy under consideration, 'love' can be translated as "a fight for a fairer and more open world" (Muhr, 2025). That is, "in the creation of spaces for the acceptance, recognition and audibility of the 'Other', who is often marginalised and disrespected" (Chimbutane & Stroud, *ibid.*). In turn, the idea that "we should do everything we can to preserve our democracies to enable our research and contribute to the self-determination of people and the self-definition of underprivileged groups" (Muhr, 2025) helps to fuel the 'hope' of marginalised communities regarding the transformative power of the concept of Linguistic Citizenship. Through this, we can build "a better future based on the present. A future that may not have been possible to achieve in the past, but is attainable given the circumstances and aspirations of the present" (Chimbutane & Stroud, 2025, p. 258). Finally, 'caring' means reversing the neglect and marginalisation of languages and their dialectal variants. It is in a context such as this that we speak of

When there is variation in language, people are also able to differentiate themselves and develop an identity that may not correspond to the one demanded by political leaders. Linguistic variation is also a social variation that can only be controlled through extra effort. If it cannot be fully controlled, authoritarian systems will do whatever is necessary to extinguish



the social and personal self-determination associated with linguistic variation
(Muhr, 2025).

Muhr's quote above, if applied to Portuguese-speaking African countries, clearly warrants more reflection. During the colonial era, when Portugal was under a dictatorial regime, that totalitarian regime had no interest whatsoever in embracing multilingualism, and national languages were severely suppressed and devalued. That means "colonial language policy operated on the basis of exclusion" (Chimbutane & Stroud, 2025, p. 264) rather than seeking to promote African multilingualism. As Muhr points out, this measure, to a certain extent, allowed control over the multiple identities of the various peoples inhabiting the colonies. Obviously, the Portuguese dictatorship failed to control these identities, which remained alive. With the independence of African countries, native languages gradually gained greater recognition and importance. Now, if researching pluricentric languages is a 'war', in the interests of linguistic justice and to protect the less privileged languages and their varieties, perhaps we should start by looking at the criteria we use to the criteria we use to classify a language as pluricentric, from a new, decolonial and transformative perspective.

Conclusion

We have attempted to examine the classification of two African languages, spoken in six countries in southern Africa, as pluricentric. This would require some revision of Clyne and Muhr's criteria, in light of theories originating in the Global South, where these criteria cannot be applied in the same way as in the Global North because the sociolinguistic and historical contexts are very different. This situation stems, to a large extent, from the colonial policies of certain European countries. To fail to take these policies and their consequences for languages – in our case, African languages – into account amounts to maintaining an attitude of subordination towards the native languages of the speakers. Thus, after listening to a group of speakers at the university in Maputo, we considered that their perceptions indicate that these languages are strongly identity-defining for their speakers. On the other hand, they share a strong sense of community with speakers from other countries where they are spoken. They can also identify differences depending on where the language is spoken. And they are also able to problematize issues such as the standard variety of these languages and other varieties, pointing out, for example, lexical and phonetic-phonological differences. As we have also seen, these are described languages and possess standardisation tools, such as dictionaries and textbooks. Considering all these characteristics, we argue that the *Nyanja* and *Changana* languages are, in their own way, pluricentric. We, too, are "concerned with the variability of languages and the variation within a language that spreads across the borders of several countries. Whether this fact is recognised or not is not in the hands of the researchers [...]" (Muhr, 2025). Our conclusions about speakers' opinions serve as a starting point for our argument that the criteria used to determine the pluricentricity of languages need to be rethought.



We are aware that further steps could strengthen our argument. We would like to continue the research by investigating, first, how speakers of *Nyanja* and *Changana* from countries outside Mozambique view their language and their communities. It is important to know if they are aware that the language is spoken in other countries. It would also be worthwhile to draw a more consistent picture of differences between varieties of the languages, depending on the country where they are spoken. Here are our ideas for future research.

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