Interpreting past language policies: An analysis of a linguistic law for the Belgian Congo of 1908 and its present-day effects

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When in 1908 the Belgian government took over the Congo from the Belgian King Leopold II, a charter was drafted that would serve as a constitution-like statutory code for the Belgian Congo. This ”Colonial Charter” contained one article, article 3, on language and linguistic rights in the colony. Its text is the expression of a complex microcosm of ideologies and political considerations that surrounded language, identity, community, and human rights at the time of its creation. Already hard to understand by laymen in its own time, the text certainly defies ready interpretation when read today in the absence of sufficient historical and contextual information.

Presented is, first of all, a historical explanation of article 3, as well as an account of the backgrounds and contexts of its genesis. One of the findings here is that article 3 epitomized the duality of language questions with which the Belgian colonizers remained faced until Congolese independence in 1960, i.e. the tension between on the one hand the French-Dutch language question (relating to communication among the Belgian population), and, on the other, the indigenous language question (relating to vertical communication between colonizer and colonized).

Secondly an account is also given of the intended or unintended effects which article 3 had throughout Belgian colonization until 1960, and which it still shows to have had on the linguistic landscape of the independent Congo until the present day. In this part, the analysis will zoom in on the official French monolingualism of the Congo, as well as on the ”weak” position of the four national lingua francas, all a consequence of early Belgian language-political decisions.

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