Guidelines for feedback

This draft was originally written targeting the *Sociology of Sport Journal*. The data and arguments mostly come from an ethnographic chapter of my PhD thesis.

Towards the last stages of preparing this draft, I have realised that I might have gone one step beyond what I should have been writing. I feel like this paper should be the second of a series of three articles on the sociolinguistics of knowledge production in Sport for Development. This paper should be preceded by another paper where I note the lack of engagement of Sport for Development research and practice with linguistic issues. I do that (too?) rapidly in this paper on page 3 (paragraph starting with “languages are key vehicles) and page 15 (paragraph starting with “the structures of SfD”). My intuition is that I should produce three articles:

* Article 1: a review paper noting the lack of engagement of SfD research and practice with linguistic issues
* Article 2 (broadly corresponding to this draft): an empirical paper showing how this lack of engagement unfolds in practice.
* Article 3: a theoretical paper taking the case of sociolinguistics to illustrate how SfD is an active vehicle of epistemic coloniality through engaging with the decolonial concept of “coloniality of language”.

Please take this into account when reading and preparing the discussion. Otherwise, I look forward to discussing any other aspects of this draft.

Thanks in advance for reading.

Arthur

# Eurocentric Monolingualism In The Evaluation Of Sport For Development Programmes

## Background

The last few decades have seen a stark increase of the use of sport in international development, forming the Sport for Development (SfD) sector. The SfD sector is underpinned by the idea that sport’s intrinsic transformational potential and benefits could succeed where international development has failed over the past century (Levermore & Beacom, 2008; Millington & Kidd, 2018). This idea permeates the highest spheres of international development policy, as United Nations (UN) agencies frame sport as an essential element to achieve the Millenium Development Goals and their replacement, the Sustainable Development Goals (Lindsey & Darby, 2019; Millington & Kidd, 2018; UNESCO, 2024a; United Nations, 2024b; United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), 2015). However, voices have warned against a potentially ‘evangelical’ view of SfD, pointing that SfD programmes should be scrutinised through rigorous evaluation in order to assess the efficacy of sport to trigger sustainable development (Coalter, 2013; Levermore, 2011; Richards et al., 2013; United Nations, 2012; Whitley et al., 2018, 2019, 2020). This led to the domination of the ‘lack of evidence’ discourse in SfD, whereby academics and policymakers called for systematic evaluation of SfD programmes (Adams & Harris, 2014; Engelhardt et al., 2018; Harris & Adams, 2016; Nicholls et al., 2010). Recently, UN agencies have invested important resources in advancing knowledge regarding the impact of SfD initiatives (UNESCO, 2024b; United Nations, 2024a). This phenomenon can be framed as a manifestation of the proliferation of neo-liberal auditing practices in international development and beyond (Mosse, 2011; Shore & Wright, 2015b, 2015a, 2020; Strathern, 2000). As a result, contemporary SfD programmes are systematically scrutinised through Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) procedures. Funders often require organisations to produce M&E data internally, whilst it is also common practice to bring in ‘experts’ and academics (often from the Global North) to conduct external evaluation in the (often Global South) locations where programmes are implemented (Harris & Adams, 2016; Jeanes & Lindsey, 2014; Lindsey & Jeanes, 2023).

In line with the aforementioned ‘lack of evidence discourse’, M&E tends to be approached with a positivist epistemological desire to measure the change enabled by SfD. Organisations need to produce the theories that underpin their conceptualisation of development/change. In turn, each component of these theories of change are matched with (often quantitative) indicators to show whether the theory works as planned. Quantitative indicators do not only operate a ‘seduction’ (Merry, 2016) in the SfD sector for their potential to prove, but also for the potential of cross-sectorial comparison implied by their generalised used. The use of common indicators (especially if they are designed or used by international organisations seen as authoritative, like the United Nations) could record social change, comparing across SfD programmes, and thus showing what are the ‘good practices’ in SfD and legitimising sport as a vehicle for development. Such tendency for SfD organisations and funders to resort to indicators in evaluating programmes can be linked to Sally Merry’s concept of “indicator culture” (Henne, 2017; Merry, 2016).

In the academic study of SfD, M&E centralises much debate, with researchers questioning the best ways of conducting theory-driven evaluation (Coalter, 2013; Coalter et al., 2020, 2021; Engelhardt et al., 2018), critiquing the power unbalances inherent to M&E fuelled by ‘indicator culture’ (Adams & Harris, 2014; Harris & Adams, 2016; Kay, 2009, 2012; Nicholls et al., 2010), and crafting innovative approaches to conduct evaluation (Collison & Marchesseault, 2016; Dao, 2020; Harris, 2018). A shared aspect of these academic endeavours is that they frame M&E as a central vehicle to produce knowledge about SfD. The global aspect of SfD, operating in transnational networks, means that it is a highly multicultural sector which bring together diverse individuals, communities, organisations, and institutions. This diversity implies a diversity of languages that permeates the SfD “constellation” (Naish, 2017, p. 140).

Languages are key vehicles in framing how people think and conceptualise the world that surround them, and thus are central to understanding people’s ontological and epistemological perceptions (Maturana, 2001; Wittgenstein, 1953). In that regard, it is important to note the stark absence of sociolinguistic considerations in the vivid debates in which SfD academia has engaged in relation to the production of knowledge about SfD through programme monitoring and evaluation. Indeed, most literature has centred around discursive analysis of M&E materials and individuals’ perceptions of M&E (Harris & Adams, 2016; Naish, 2016; Nicholls et al., 2010; Straume & Hasselgård, 2014). In many cases, English is used either as the language of fieldwork or as the language of writing after primary data has been translated to English. Beyond this, there is no engagement with the epistemic implications that examining M&E as a potential vehicle of the production of knowledge about SfD through a sociolinguistic analysis of M&E operations, materials, and practices could highlight. An initial explanation to this lack of consideration is SfD’s Anglocentrism, making sociolinguistic issues appear as less relevant to academic researchers and publishers predominantly working in British, US, Canadian, and Australian institutional settings (Joly & Le Yondre, 2021).

Nonetheless, notable exceptions have paved the way for engaging with M&E through a sociolinguistic lens. Darnell and Hayhurst explored the processes of translation of M&E materials from non-European languages to European languages, warning that the invisibilisation of translation can erase concepts that are complex or impossible to translate into the target language (Darnell & Hayhurst, 2014). Hayhurst coined this erasure as a “linguicide” resulting from a translation that they equate to a “technology of colonisation” (Hayhurst, 2016, p. 432). Moreover, other scholars have noted the tendency for practitioners in SfD organisations operating in Global South locations where multiple languages cohabit to privilege European languages over local languages, especially in the presence of Global North senior managers and academics (McSweeney, 2021; McSweeney et al., 2019). Finally, in a recent paper, Scott and Soares Moura (2024) conceptualised the ‘language of the context’, highlighting SfD’s sociocultural diversity. Yet, their analysis focused on the methodological importance for SfD ethnographers to adapt themselves to the varied ways interlocutors express themselves. Building on this initial work to address a blatant gap in the academic study of SfD’s knowledge production, this paper provides a sociolinguistic analysis of knowledge producing practices through M&E in SfD with the view to grasp how the structures of SfD affect M&E practices.

## Methodology

This article relies on ethnographic fieldwork conducted from September 2019 to June 2021 at Tackle, a UK-based SfD organisation that delivers sexual health education to young people across Africa through the use of football drills. Tackle’s methodology uses representations within football drills to allow local coaches to connect what happens on the football field to diverse issues of sexual and reproductive health and rights (see example in Figure 1).

A screenshot of a football game

Description automatically generated

Figure 1: Example of a Tackle football drill

As part of my doctoral research, I was involved in Tackle’s operations in various West African locations (in Côte d’Ivoire, Burkina Faso, and Senegal) as an M&E consultant. My role consisted of critically analysing M&E procedures, amending them, and crafting new ones in light of this critique. This involvement is what constituted ethnographic fieldwork for my PhD research in which I examined the processes of knowledge production in SfD through M&E. In an original initiative for SfD scholarship, I focused on individual practitioners’ practices that lead organisations to produce knowledge about their own work through M&E. In other words, I explored the “black box” (Mosse, 2005, p. 5; Scriven, 1999) of M&E in the SfD sector, which led me to examine the implementation of M&E policy in practice. This ethnographic focus on M&E practices within Tackle led me to conduct an organisational ethnographic study of Tackle. Doing an ethnography of practices in an organisation meant that the culture that I was analysing was the culture of the organisation, which prompted me to frame culture, in line with Van Maanen, as “the meanings and practices produced, sustained, and altered through interaction” (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 221). This conceptualisation of culture also incited me to clarify the meaning of field sites in this research project. Moving away from the idea of field sites as “container-like” (Carter, 2011, p. 63) cultural recipients matching finite geographic surfaces (Ahlin & Li, 2019; Marcus, 1995; Massey, 2005), I adapted my methodological tools to the transnational and multimodal realities of the contemporary SfD and international development sectors, thus adopting a multimodal approach to ethnographic fieldwork. Therefore, I conducted face-to-face fieldwork in the UK, in Côte d’Ivoire, and in Senegal, while also conducting remote fieldwork during my involvement with Tackle as an M&E consultant in West Africa.

The above methodological overview indicates that I had a role in the design of the M&E policy whose implementation (the M&E practices) was my ontological object. I traced a conceptual line between my role as an M&E consultant and my role of ethnographer. My work as an M&E consultant (including reports and novel M&E tools) are not the focus of my research project. Rather, my focus was the M&E practices to which I had access through my immersive role as an M&E consultant. The nature of my work with Tackle had important implications for my research project, as it framed the contexts in which ethnographic data could be generated. Of course, this conceptual separation was much more impermeable in practice, and I adopt a critical reflexive position to situate myself and my role, when relevant, in the ethnographic restitution of this project’s findings.

I have conducted this ethnographic research about an SfD programme in francophone West African countries (former French colonies) being a French, white, male researcher based in a British university. The colonial legacies of the (past and present) French/European presence in these locations, of academic research (especially ethnography), and of the international development sector, inevitably mean that the findings emerging from this research project are embedded in colonial relationships and expectations. Moreover, the thematic focus on languages which is at the core of this article must be contextualised by my positionality. I grew up in a highly monolingual context in South-Eastern France, where Western Vivaro-Alpine[[1]](#footnote-1)-French bilingualism went from being usual to virtually extinct over the last 100 years. I grew up with a strong interest in foreign languages, encouraged by some of my figures of authorities. As a young adult, I became fluent in English and Spanish. During this ethnographic research project, my life was (and remains) multilingual. This multilingualism is reflected in my daily and family life. I write this article (and wrote my PhD thesis) in English, my second language. Therefore, during fieldwork, my life history made my analytical focus all the more sensitive to the epistemological implications of sociolinguistic issues, which were explicitly raised in the fieldwork. The choice to focus on languages to explore the epistemic implications of M&E is the result of ethnographic fieldwork for which the impact of my life-history on my interpretative sensitivity should not be under-estimated.

As part of my ethnographic fieldwork at Tackle, I used several methodological tools. As with most ethnographies, participant observation was the main data-generating tool, which I recorded through Emerson and colleagues’ model of jottings, fieldnotes, and memos (Emerson et al., 2011). Participant observation also included unstructured ethnographic interviews and remote participant observation. I also conducted six audio-recorded semi-structured interviews inductively, to further explore practices and ideas observed in the field. Finally, I also analysed documents that relate to Tackle’s work in West Africa. Analysed documents included normative policy documents, M&E data generation documents, primary M&E data, and interpretative documents. Documentary analysis was performed deductively to confront them with the insight emerging from my observation of M&E practices.

This research project was reviewed by the University of Brighton’s Tier 2 College Research Ethics Committee for the College of Life, Health and Physical Sciences[[2]](#footnote-2). All individuals who took part in this research project provided informed written and verbal consent. The names of all participants cited in this article have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

## Monolingual M&E and the status of languages

During my involvement at Tackle, the most common M&E technique, implemented across all programmes, was the pen-and-paper survey. All programme participants (young people aged 10-17) were administered questionnaires investigating their Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behaviour (KAB) in relation to the SRHR thematic area(s) explored in the programme in which they were participating. Programme participants were administered the same questionnaire several times throughout their involvement with Tackle, before and after each block of activity (normally 3 to 4 months). Tackle produced quantitative data out of these surveys, which they attempted to design in relation to existing internationally-recognised indicators (as reviewed in the above section). The administration of these questionnaires was time-consuming for Tackle, but also a requirement to securing funding for their operations. In parallel, Tackle monitored various aspects of their programmes (e.g. number and demographics of players, number of SRHR services and items distributed). They also used other M&E techniques (e.g. storytelling and case studies) but in a much less recurring manner than the pen-and-paper surveys. The ethnographic vignette below summarises my first realisation of the epistemic implications of sociolinguistic issues that this approach to M&E entails.

Wilfried and I are spending this hot December afternoon at School A, in a coastal town about an hour’s drive from Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire’s biggest city. Today, we aim to deliver the endline questionnaires to three groups of players who have been involved in Tackle’s programming for several months now. Wilfried is Tackle’s head coach in this coastal town, and therefore in charge of collecting baseline and endline survey data together with the country manager. As we approach a classroom, Wilfried tells me we will start with Keita’s group, a long time Tackle coach and the school principal. Throughout survey administration, I wrote down the words at least five children said they did not understand (although in many cases more than half of them could not understand): “adolescent”, “reduce”, “contract”, “community”, “locality”, “sexual partners”, “procure”, “contraceptives”, “name”, “cause”. Keita, who entered the classroom towards the end of the survey, turns to me and says, with a mix of satisfaction and reproach in her voice: “You see? They don’t understand because these questions are written in *gros français*!”. Faced with the stark reality I am witnessing, I can only show her my agreement with a concerned nodding. […] Half an hour later, Wilfried and I administer the survey to the group of Florence, another Tackle coach and teacher at School A. While Florence orders a girl to get us a bottle of *bissap*, I notice an intriguing set of rules below the blackboard. I am primarily surprised that students who do not follow these rules face a financial penalty of 50 to 200 Francs CFA. I am even more surprised to see that, among other rules I would have expected (e.g. “insulting a classmate”, “being violent”, “disobey the teacher), a rule stipulates that students face a 50 Francs CFA penalty if they “speak their mother tongue”. Discreetly, I ask Florence about this rule. She seems uneasy and defensively explains: “We have to do it or else they speak among children of their own ethnicity and even us teachers we can’t understand them”. While Wilfried initiates the questionnaire guidelines, a lot of thoughts run in my mind. Aside from the questionable ethical and pedagogical merits of this rule, the very fact that it exists, and that Florence justifies it so eloquently is evidence of Côte d’Ivoire’s linguistic diversity and the Ivorian school system’s rigidity towards this diversity. Yet, the questionnaire Wilfried and I are administering today is only in French, with identical wordings across Francophone countries. It was designed by me (a French national) and two other non-West African French speakers, as if we were all living in *Francophonia*, a linguistically homogenous French-speaking territory.

In the above vignette, the financial penalty in Florence’s classroom showed that proficiency in French is not a given in Côte d’Ivoire, even though school education is only taught in French. This realisation encouraged me to explore the potential impact that the Ivorian sociolinguistic context might have on the results generated through the administration of the pen & paper survey at Tackle, thus prompting me to investigate the role and status of the French language in Côte d’Ivoire.

To understand the status and role of French in contemporary Côte d’Ivoire, we must look into the linguistic policy in Afrique Occidentale Française (AOF) between the late 19th century and the Ivorian political independence in 1960. Within French colonial administration, a large consensus considered that primary education in French colonies should be taught for free and exclusively in French to all colonial subjects (Barthélémy et al., 2020; Spaëth, 2001). This was primarily framed as part of France’s civilising mission, as can be seen through the words of William Merleau-Ponty, former governor of AOF:

Even if we admit that the child who returns to his family after an elementary school education rapidly loses the French language, he will not be able to erase the memory of the uplifting notions which, through the intermediary of this language, we will have caused to penetrate. The words may disappear, but the ideas will remain, and the ideas, which are our own and whose use endows us with our moral, social and economic superiority, will little by little transform these barbarians of yesterday into disciples and auxiliaries. (cited in Conklin, 1997, p. 87)

French elites broadly considered that acquiring the French language constituted, for the ‘Indigenous’, a spiritual, social, economic, and moral advancement. It is through this perspective that the French authorities framed the diffusion of the French language among all of the colonial population as a moral and ethical imperative. Granting access to free primary education in French was also framed as a political strategy that, as Spaëth puts it, followed the principle of persuading and taming populations in the colonies (2001, p. 83). Persuading, because schools could be a site where educators introduced and defended the colonial project[[3]](#footnote-3). Taming, because French was taught through a pedagogical approach that limited the acquisition of French to a certain degree. Only rudimentary French was taught, just enough for pupils to describe their world. Abstract, critical, and aesthetic ideas were purposedly excluded from pedagogical materials and practice in order to avoid providing tools that may question colonial rule. Hardy, teaching inspector who had an important impact on France’s colonial linguistic policy, argued that French language teachers should teach a common language, a French language as simple as can be, limited to the expression of common acts and the designation of usual objects, without syntactic sophistication or pretention of elegance (Hardy, 1917, cited in Spaëth, 2011, p. 84).

The French colonial empire’s approach to teaching French in AOF also differed among colonial subjects. With a view to strengthen colonial governance, colonial authorities allowed comprehensive teaching of French and access to higher education as a retribution to a collaborating elite, which guaranteed them important roles in the colonial administration while education was restricted for the rest of the population to keep social hierarchies unchanged. Therefore, across AOF, a small elite received a longer and better education in French, allowing them to reach full linguistic proficiency (Goheneix, 2012).

However, it is important to note the difference between these intentions and their practical implementation into the French colonial empire. Indeed, the intention of mass education in French for colonial subjects was never obtained: before political independences in 1960, less than 10% of an age group in AOF could read and write in French (Barthélémy, 2010, p. 14; Goheneix, 2012, p. 98). Similarly, prominent examples[[4]](#footnote-4) showed that granting access to higher education to a small portion of the local elite could go against its intended goal and participate in contesting and overthrowing colonial rule. Yet, the French colonial approach to diffusing the French language in AOF reviewed in the paragraphs above shapes the position of and the discourses around the French language in the newly independent West African countries by 1960. The intended diffusion of French in primary schools affected the status of indigenous languages. Because of what French administrators such as Merleau-Ponty considered the as “the moral, economic, and social superiority” (cited in Conklin, 1997, p. 87) conveyed by the French language, French was the only language allowed to be used in AOF schools and speaking other languages was strictly prohibited for students and teachers[[5]](#footnote-5). Later French colonial administrators also justified this rule by the need to share a common language in linguistically diverse territories like the AOF (Goheneix, 2012). In the above ethnographic vignette, Florence raised a similar argument of social cohesion when asked about the financial penalty children face for speaking their mother tongue: “we have to do it or else they speak among children of their own ethnicity and even us teachers we can’t understand them”. Indeed, this argument, dating from colonial administration, was used as an important discursive tool by the Ivorian elite at the turn of the political decolonisation in 1960. Côte d’Ivoire is a very diverse country, linguistically speaking, with over 60 languages and as many so-called ethnic groups (Dérive & Dérive, 1986; Lafage, 1991). Since Ivorian independence, French has been the only *lingua franca* among the people that compose its territory. Therefore, at the turn of the political independence in 1960, having experienced French colonialism and the imposition of the French language was one of the few historical elements shared by all the groups that composed the newly independent Côte d’Ivoire (Newell, 2009: 167). In that regard, French was declared the only official language of Côte d’Ivoire in 1960, a decision framed as an effort to avoid a division of the country on ethnical lines. Yet, it was also in the interest of the Ivorian elite to maintain the *status quo* by which French was the only official language. Their mastery of the French language, dating from colonial administration, guaranteed them to maintain a higher socioeconomic position within the Ivorian society (Dérive & Dérive, 1986, pp. 45–46; Newell, 2009; Thompson, 1991, p. 6).

In postcolonial Côte d’Ivoire, national identity was built around the idea of Ivorian modernity and civilisation (compared to supposedly less modern and civilised neighbouring countries) (Newell, 2009). A core element of this Ivorian modernity/civilisation is proficiency in French, as Newell notes “an explicit association between speaking French and the degree of ‘civilisation’” (Newell, 2009, p. 169). Thus, proficiency in French suggest modernity and civilisation. In other words, it constitutes a strong socio-economic marker as well as an element of social reproduction and social selection. Therefore, French in Côte d’Ivoire is mastered to different extents, mirroring different socio-economic positions. The closer people speak what is perceived as legitimate (standard, academic, Parisian-sounding) French, the more dominant their socio-economic position tends to be (Newell, 2009).

The ethnographic vignette with which I started this paper showed my realisation of the Ivorian school system’s restrictive approach to the country’s linguistic diversity. I made this observation while administering pen and paper surveys with Wilfried. Therefore, if surveys used by Tackle (and more broadly in international SfD practice) are designed in reference to what is perceived as standard French, and if “the differing degrees of acquisition of the official language correspond to a hierarchical system in Ivorian society” (Lafage, 1979, p. 57), then the results emerging from these surveys are underpinned by a linguistic bias. The data generated through these surveys indicate children’s socioeconomic status (through their skills in the French language as taught in schools) as much as they are an indication of their knowledge of the sexual health issues addressed by Tackle.

The design and implementation of M&E by Tackle has been undertaken as if Côte d’Ivoire was part of *Francophonia,* a linguistically-homogenous entity covering all countries where French is an official language (i.e. former colonies in almost all cases). This tendency to assimilate a political entity (e.g. the Ivorian nation-state) with a single language is at the basis of European nation building (Blommaert & Verschueren, 1992; Cerquiglini, 2006; Lacorne, 2009). Throughout the 19th century, European nation-states were created with the dominant assumption that a linguistically-homogenous nation constitutes the ideal form of a sovereign political entity (Blommaert & Verschueren, 1992). This led nation-states to be created based on linguistic communities or, like reviewed above with the Ferry laws in the French case, through forced linguistic homogenisation (Lacorne, 2009). This is not to say that all European nation-states are monolingual. For example, Spain and Belgium are plurilingual states. Yet, languages in these states remain framed upon the idea that equates a political entity to a geographical territory, to a nation, and to a language (i.e. Catalonia is the territory of Catalans; Catalans speak Catalonian) (Lacorne, 2009). Political struggle for the recognition of minority languages has led to recent development and adaptation to these models, but all of these changes took place after the construction of nation-states based on the Eurocentric model of monolingual nation-building.

The critical analysis of Tackle’s M&E through the administration of pen and paper questionnaires in French in their Côte d’Ivoire programme reflects a structural issue of Eurocentric monolingualism across the SfD sector. The ignorance of multilingual contexts when producing knowledge about SfD through M&E or academic research is common practice. This results in organisations producing biased data that cannot be mitigated because sociolinguistic complexities and multilingual realities (outside of the Eurocentric monolingual model reviewed above) are not taken into account in the design and implementation of M&E materials or in the analysis and interpretation of M&E data. This also participates in the reinforcement of SfD as a space of monolanguaging, a Eurocentric and idealised philosophy of language (Tamtomo, 2019; Veronelli, 2015). The following section will explore the (im)possibilities of conducting M&E beyond the above-reviewed Eurocentric monolingual approach.

## “Wow! It’s going to be a very heavy job”: practical difficulties in conducting M&E differently

In the last months of 2020, Tackle delivered a short intervention in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, involving homeless children in situations of social exclusion. Bertrand, Country Manager for Tackle in Burkina Faso, was in charge of administering the pen and paper KAB questionnaire to the youth participating in this programme. Bertrand grew up in Ouagadougou, where the predominant language is Mooré (Ouedraogo, 2020), although French is the language used in public education. Considering the sociological profile of the participants of this short programme, Bertrand rapidly identified that “it would be difficult to give them the written questionnaire because very few of them have been through primary school. They don’t have a good knowledge of the French language, so automatically we had to assist them with the questionnaire”. Bertrand refers to orally administering the questionnaire instead of leaving the participants to complete the questionnaire in writing. “But now: how do we assist them? There’s also the language variable…”: a native speaker of Mooré, Bertrand decides to translate to questionnaire from French to Mooré after discussing it with his line manager. In a recorded semi-structured interview that I conducted with him (in French), Bertrand explains the processes of translation:

“I was helped by a coach who had worked with these children in the past. So, I did the translation and presented it to him. I asked him: ‘is there no mistake? Do you feel comfortable with translating this word that way?’ Because the problem is, there are different variants of the Mooré language. These are territorial variants. For example, the Mossi from Koudougou they have a specific Mooré, with certain words that the Mossi from Ouagadougou may not understand. But the variants are not very divergent, only that sometimes some words are not said in the same way, and other words are impossible to translate. For example, “condom” is almost impossible to translate into Mooré. I had to use the word “*capote*”; I don’t know if you know that word. That’s the word we use to talk about condoms in Mooré”

Bertrand’s difficulty with translating “condom” into Mooré speaks to the multilingual context in which *Ouagalais* people live. While day-to-day interactions are predominantly in Mooré, most people have been to – at least – primary school in French, are confronted to media, administration, and publicity in French. French and other languages such as Dioula are also commonly used in social interactions in the city. Therefore, words such as “condom” are expressed in Mooré by using the informal French *“capote”* (as opposed to the formal “*préservatif*”). Later in the interview, Bertrand further explains some of the limitations he has perceived in the translating process:

**Bertrand** Also, there was this question in the survey: “when a girl has condoms with her, does it mean she’s an easy girl[[6]](#footnote-6)”? Now, with this question, I felt the translation had a limitation. With the question we wanted to know if respondents thought that this girl, who holds a condom or has a condom in her pocket or bag, if they thought this means we can easily have sex with her. This was the intended meaning of the question. Now, the translation we did in Mooré was, literally, “is she easy?”. So, we translated the word “easy”, but actually it can be understood in different ways: it can be either understood as: she’s easy to have sex with, or she is calm, easy-going. The word “easy” in Mooré can refer to someone that is easily manageable, easy-to-live, you see.

**A** Right… That’s interesting.

**B** Yes, absolutely. So on that level, I felt that the translation was not perfect.

**A** And did you think of another way you could have formulated the question to avoid this confusion?

**B** Yes, so, another way would have been to say something like: “can we say of a girl who has condoms on her that it is easy to have sex with her?”.

**A** Ok, and you can translate that in Mooré in a clear way with to potential issues of interpretation?

**B** Yes, exactly. So it was not the literal translation we needed but a translation focused on meaning.

With this question, relating to socially-situated gender stereotypes, an ‘objective’ literal translation was impossible to produce. As Bertrand explains, he needed to add a degree of interpretation and explanation to transmit what he considers to be the intended meaning of the question. During the rest of the interview, Bertrand further explains the difficulties he faced in orally administering this survey in Mooré, while insisting on the fact that the use of pen and paper KAB surveys in French would have made no sense in this context. Towards the end of the interview, when I asked him about the possibility to expand his approach to survey administration, Bertrand’s first reaction was to anticipate the amount of work this would imply for him:

**Arthur** Ok… And… Would you be open to do what you did with this programme’s surveys, but with all other Tackle’s programmes in Ouagadougou? I mean, preparing a questionnaire in Mooré that you administer orally. Do you think it’s a good or a bad idea?

**Bertrand** Wow! Thinking about feasibility, it’s going to be a very heavy job. That’s 1. Otherwise, it can be positive, in terms of results, in terms of quality. However, we need to make sure that everyone taking part in this process are at the same level of comprehension and apprehension of each question. That we don’t go beyond what we’re supposed to do in terms of interpretation and explanation. Apart from that, it’s feasible, it’s just going to be a lot, a lot of work for us.

Bertrand raises the many difficulties he has encountered in his initiative to conduct the surveys in a way that is more adapted to the youth Tackle was working with in Ouagadougou. His reaction (“Wow!”) when asked to consider generalising his approach to other programmes speaks to the material limitations that he anticipates in doing that. Even the most elementary initiatives to adapt the content of the M&E material to the linguistic realities of the Global South locations where SfD programmes operate meet major practical limitations. Going beyond the use of the same questionnaire everywhere French is an official language is entirely dependent on practitioners’ personal initiative and induces spending more time collecting evaluation data to the detriment of other tasks. In this case, it is Bertrand’s knowledge of the use of Mooré and the lack of proficiency in written French for certain children in Ouagadougou that motivated him to convince his Country Manager to let him dedicate time to translate and orally administer the survey in Mooré. However, the difficulties faced by Bertrand went beyond their material aspect. Indeed, Bertrand realised that any translating process necessitates tough decisions that will inevitably affect the interpretation respondents make of the questions. For instance, the word “*préservatif*” could only be translated into the informal French “*capote*”, even in Mooré, to ensure comprehension. Similarly, the expression “easy girl”/“*fille facile*” required more than a literal translation to confer the intended meaning in the questionnaire originally designed in French to test whether respondents believe that women who possess condoms intrinsically engage in sexual intercourse more easily than those who do not. Beyond the relevancy of such a question to evaluate a sexual health education SfD programme, the translation process showed the struggles faced by Bertrand in producing a questionnaire in Mooré, starting from French, a morphologically and grammatically very different language. In Ouagadougou, where different languages interact in different areas of social life (Ouedraogo, 2020), Bertrand found it challenging to transfer the ideas and intended meaning of certain questions from a working language (French) to another (Mooré).

This example shows how the Eurocentric monolingual bias that permeates SfD constitutes a structural obstacle to insightful production of knowledge through programme evaluation in multilingual contexts. Administering questionnaires in Mooré was an individual initiative from Bertrand, approved by his line manager. Relying on individual initiatives in a sector where practitioners in decision-making positions are often from monolingual, Global North contexts, further complexifies the situation.

The structures of SfD value M&E conducted in line with ‘indicator culture’, driven by a quest for comparison through the production of data in relation to indicators perceived as ‘internationally recognised’. Such indicators are created and used by organisations seen as authoritative. The UN’s Secretariat’s working languages are English and French. UN communication materials are published in the UN languages: English, French, Russian, Spanish, Chinese, and Arabic. Translation into other languages is always based on these original versions produced in UN languages. Similarly, when the Democratic Health Surveys (DHS), which are a reference for many SfD programmes addressing health issues, conduct a study in Africa, they use the former colonial language to design questionnaires and to write the final report (e.g. ANSD [Senegal], 2012, p. 354). Only then are the questionnaires translated from the colonial language into several local languages. Thus, the idea of producing knowledge through international indicators relies on monolingual principles. When small SfD organisations are required to produce data autonomously, they do not have the capacity to proceed to strict translation and back translation techniques, which are presented by the WHO as “a common procedure used to assess the understandability of a source text and trace any inaccuracies or ambiguities in the source text that would need to be addressed to improve or otherwise be taken into account when finalising the source text” (WHO, 2010, p. 1).

The whole M&E project of producing comparable data in SfD has Eurocentric monolingual nation assumptions as a pre-requisite. The quest for universal comparison can only be fulfilled if considering each place of implementation of SfD programmes as pertaining to a political entity, itself the land of one people who speak one language. Taking into account multilingual realities in producing M&E data would imply designing multiple data-generating materials in with each cohort of participants in SfD programmes. The impossibility to address an infinity of linguistic nuances, whether they are political, social, or psychological, would invalidate the project of quantifying the social change supposedly enabled by SfD interventions.

## Conclusion/implications

I started this article by identifying sociolinguistic considerations as a blind spot in academic and sectorial discussions about the production of knowledge about the use of sport in international development settings – the SfD sector, except for a few seminal works on the issue. Building on ethnographic fieldwork conducted as an M&E consultant within Tackle’s programmes in francophone West African locations, this article contributes to addressing this gap by exploring the implications of the choice of languages in evaluating SfD programmes. Ethnographic data and a brief historical contextualisation of the status of languages in Côte d’Ivoire showed that applying monolingual considerations to M&E design and implementation leads to the production of biased data – thus failing to deliver on the promises of the M&E project to record how SfD enable social change. I also showed that practitioners who wish to take into consideration multilingual contexts in the design and implementation of M&E encounter structural barriers that discourage small organisations from adopting multilingual frameworks to produce insightful data about their programmes.

The findings presented in this article showed the centrality of engaging with sociolinguistic considerations for ongoing academic research about the production of knowledge in SfD. Similarly, for SfD policy, these findings show the necessity for NGOs and funders to engage with linguistic considerations in their assessment of M&E strategies, as it has been initiated in international development (Chouinard, 2016; Davies & Elderfield, 2022). In the short term, this must come with appropriate resources given to SfD interventions in locations where the European model of monolingualism does not apply. In the longer term, the findings show the necessity to reconsider the M&E project in SfD in light of the multilingual contexts in which many SfD interventions are implemented.

The analysis of the multilingual realities found, for example, in Côte d’Ivoire and Burkina Faso, where several languages coexist and play different roles, point to the epistemic implications at stake. As English is the dominant language in SfD academic research; as former colonial languages are systemically used as languages to produce data and report on it; as non-European languages are overlooked or simply treated as languages to speak with, then what is the role of the SfD sector and its project of knowledge production in processes of epistemic coloniality? Decolonial thought and its articulation of the concept of the coloniality of knowledge, specifically through cultural objects like languages, constitutes a particularly productive terrain to address these questions (Cuestas-Caza, 2018; Joubert, 2022; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Veronelli, 2015, 2016, 2019).

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1. Western Vivaro-Alpine is a variety of Occitan spoken across parts of today’s French departments of Ardèche, Drôme, Isère, Loire, and Haute-Loire. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Reference: 2019-2331 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Although there are multiple exceptions of teachers voicing their opposition to the colonial project (Goheneix, 2012, p. 97). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. These examples include Martinican psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon, Martinican poet Aimé Césaire, Vietnamese statesman Hô Chí Minh, and Senegalese poet and statesman Léopold Sédar Senghor. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Although it is highly likely that some teachers, especially those who were proficient in their students’ native language, broke that rule. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Original in French: “*Lorsque une fille a des préservatifs sur elle, est ce que ça veut dire que c’est une fille facile ?*” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)