



OPTIMAL INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE USE AS STRATEGY FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Language occupies an important position in any meaningful dialogue in African development as it is pivotal to our understanding of development conceptions of economics, politics and governance, human right etc. Away from the dominance and use of ex-colonial languages by most African countries in communicating national development policies, there is the need to improve the visibility and usage of Africa's multilingual heritage in matters of national development, in order to facilitate development processes especially in rural communities. The under-utilization of the indigenous languages in national affairs, as seen in their exclusion in national participation and discuss, has led to slow transformation of some African communities. Apparently, it is because of the adoption of an exoglossic language policy that placed the ex-colonial language as official language and in some cases also serves as national language. Seen as development asset, this paper, argues for the utilization of Africa multilingualism through optimal indigenous language use approach. Also, a review of the language policies to promote the use of the major and minor indigenous languages is central to this indigenous language use. It concludes that indigenous languages of Africa can be vehicle of national development if put to proper use.

Keywords: Language, Multilingualism, Development, Africa, Indigenous Language

INTRODUCTION:

African indigenous languages are not just only cultural phenomena and vital mediums for identity building, cultural transmission and value creation. Like other languages elsewhere in the world, they play important roles in a wide range of areas. Majorly, indigenous languages have the potential to aid the communities that speak them in development process. For instance, they can be used in conflict resolution, peace and confidence building, internal trade, health campaigns, early formal education and adult literacy as well as mass media. Importantly, indigenous languages are vital sources of information and knowledge which are pivotal to any meaningful and successful communication of development policies to especially native communities. Overly, indigenous languages are an

important resource and potential assets to national development and African development in general.

In 1951, some group of experts from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) held a meeting with indigenous languages as the subject of focus which its report appeared after seven years in a collection of seminal papers titled *The Sociology of Language* edited by J.A Fishman. The experts conclusively came out with the following observations:

- i) The mother tongue is a person's natural means of self-expression, and one of his first needs is to develop his power of self-expression;
- ii) Every pupil should begin his formal education in his mother tongue; and

iii) There is nothing in the structure of any language that precludes it from becoming a vehicle of modern civilization. (UNESCO, 1951; Fishman, 1968)

Similarly, in an important conference on African language and literature in 2002 (in Asmara, Eritrea) with various African scholars and writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o of Kenya and Nawal el Saadawi of Egypt in attendance, there was a resolution that urged for the development and use of Africa's indigenous languages. Also in 2006, the African Union executive Council met in Sudan with focus on indigenous languages, acknowledging the importance of African languages in building and integrating Africa, (Wa Mberia, 2015). Capturing these historic events in this paper is not a mere formality. Rather, it is an attempt to set some important questions in motion with regards to the importance of indigenous languages, especially to development in African nations. These questions call to mind:

i) Why do indigenous languages stir the interest of international bodies such as the United Nations Organization and the African Union?

ii) Why does indigenous African languages attract the attention of Africa's best minds to an international gathering; is there something in them?

This paper, therefore, advocates for the reconsideration and identification of indigenous languages as having potentials to aid national development, thus their optimal use as vital strategy for national development. In addition, it opines for their promotion and management through a better and clearer language policy approach.

Policies of Language use among African Countries

After independence, most of the African countries were faced with many challenges in

an attempt to shape their nationhood and stimulate national development, with the focus to becoming modern states. Furthermore, they had to satisfy what Fishman (1971) referred to as unification, authenticity and modernity. Broadly, these countries needed unity among the many and diverse ethnic groups which made up semi-autonomous ethno-linguistic entities as well as identity of their sovereignty as states and development in an attempt to become like the modern world both socio-economically and technologically. Majorly, how to come to grips with the prevailing multilingual and multiethnic peculiarity was the most challenging issue facing these African countries; thus, the need to adopt language policies.

A Choice between an Endoglossic and Exoglossic Policy

One of the many tasks that the newly independent countries of Africa faced in the early 1960s was the choice of an official language that would not only facilitate communication and therefore support the various developmental efforts, but one that would also provide much needed unity among the many ethnic groups, numbering, in some cases, over one hundred. Expectedly, the sought after official language was to assist in establishing national identity as well as self-determination for the countries. These countries were therefore faced with choosing either of the two language policies; the endoglossic or exoglossic policy. An endoglossic policy involves the promotion of one or several indigenous languages as official or national languages, whilst the exoglossic policy refers to the adoption of the ex-colonial language, external to the country, as an official or national language. In relation to this, most of the African countries took a short-cut by adopting an exoglossic language policy, in which the ex-colonial language was adopted as official language and, in some cases, served

also as national language. Only few countries adopted an endoglossic policy by promoting one or several of the major indigenous languages to play certain national roles. The languages were to be used within the domain in which languages functions, which is the primary and secondary domain of language function. The primary domain includes usage in activities involving intra-ethnic, family and village communication, while the secondary domain involves usage in inter-ethnic communication, central and local administration as well as other various public interactions. In addition, two layers can be identified within the secondary domain, the upper and lower secondary domain. While the lower secondary domain includes all non-technical public communication within a nation; the upper secondary includes technical communication with the outside world, for instance diplomacy, international communication, science, technology and tertiary education, (Batibo, 2006).

According to Batibo (2005), four categories of countries have come into sight in relation to choice and implementation of an official language. The first category consists of those countries in which all official and national functions are performed by an indigenous language, with the ex-colonial language becoming a mere foreign language in the country. The only countries in this category are the North Africa Arab countries of Egypt and Libya which gained their independence many decades ago. The second category comprises those countries in which an indigenous lingua franca has been promoted to serve as both official and national language. In such countries, the indigenous language is used in both primary and secondary domains. Nevertheless, in this case, the ex-colonial language may continue to be the language in some upper secondary domains. In this second category also, the dominant indigenous language assumes most public roles such as in government business,

local administration, primary and secondary education, judiciary, the legislature, social services, trade, and media. Actually, such an endoglossic policy is possible only in those countries where historical legacies or political developments have created a favourable linguistic environment. Outside North Africa, the only countries in this category are Ethiopia (using the indigenous Amharic language), Somalia (using the indigenous Somali) and Tanzania (using the indigenous Kiswahili). These three countries had a favourable linguistic ecosystem in that the socialist governments of the time introduced scrupulous programmes aimed at the development and effective use of their indigenous languages to mobilize the masses in national affairs and to promote feelings of nationalism, (Batibo, 1997:203). The ex-colonial languages are seen playing a minimal role mainly as second official languages. Away from this, it is important to note that some Arab countries like Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria, Sudan, and Tunisia use Arabic as the major national or official language while retaining the use of ex-colonial languages for some secondary domain use.

The fourth category are of those countries who opted for the exoglossic policy of language by choosing to make the ex-colonial language both their official and national language, apparently as a result of the density of their linguistic environment or in consideration to their colonial legacies. Examples of such countries include Togo, Gabon, Angola, Benin, Eritrea, Zambia, and Nigeria. In most of these countries, there is no particular dominant language that can assume a lingua franca role apparently due to the complexity of their linguistic ecosystem. In others, none of these indigenous languages was given opportunity to play same role arguably as a result of the colonial assimilationist method of administration adopted mainly by the Portuguese and

French. The former colonial languages now became alternative uses to national or official language and within secondary language use domain including national media and other technical areas, reason being that these foreign languages were already highly developed and used internationally. Similarly, due to the peculiarity of the linguistic ecosystem, they were considered to be neutral and capable of not arousing the resentment of any ethnic group. This reason has been the argument of indigenous language use optimization critics. Nevertheless, with a well defined national language policy, this can be managed. The countries which have adopted an ex-colonial language as official or national language include Angola, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea Bissau and Equatorial Guinea. Exceptionally, some countries, such as Eritrea, the Comoro Islands and Chad, in addition adopted Arabic as one of the official languages, (Igboanusi & Wolf, 2004). Remarkably, South Africa's case in relation to choice and implementation of language policy has been distinctive in that it does not fit into any of these four mentioned categories. In the country's case, it has a new language policy that declared eleven indigenous languages to be official. Nevertheless English and Afrikaans (being the indigenous language during the apartheid period) have remained the only functional official languages with the remaining nine being mostly symbolic, (Batibo, 2006).

Suffice it to say that the significance of this analysis is to show that most African countries (81.2%) have adopted more of an exoglossic policy, relying heavily on an ex-colonial language for national or official communication, while according only just minimal secondary function to the indigenous languages. Just a few numbers of African countries completely or exclusively use an indigenous language in

their national activities. These countries are exemplary models in the use of local languages in official domains.

Monolingual or Multilingual Policy Choice

The African countries that adopted more of endoglossic language policy had to choose either a monolingual or a multilingual policy option. In monolingual policy, one language which is normally from the majority is adopted as the national language. Debatably, the implication is that the minority languages are excluded. This is also not in line with the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Right. The Universal Declaration of Linguistic Right promotes international commitment in respecting the rights of linguistic groups, especially those of historicity, and also individuals who do not reside within their native communities, (Skutnabb-Kangas, Phillipson & Rannut, 1995). However; the monolingual policy was used successfully in Europe where dominant languages were adopted in different countries to the detriment of the minority languages. For instance, dominant languages such as English, French and Spanish were adopted in their various countries against the minority languages like Breton, Catalan, Cornish, Irish Gaelic, Lorrainian, Scottish Gaelic, and Welsh. In contrast, multilingual policy advocates the promotion and use of each language and culture in the country. According to Batibo (2006), this approach allows the codification and elaboration of each of the languages to be used amongst its own cultural and social-political confines. The significance is that the size, vitality and level of development of each indigenous language determine the extent to which the language will be used in the public domain.

The monolingual and multilingual language policies have advantages. The advantage of monolingual policy is that it encourages one national medium of communication for the whole country and allows for one cultural identity and a sense of common belonging. On

the other hand, monolingual policy attempts to marginalize the speakers of the other minority languages who are then forced to operate in a language in which they have no or limited competence. For multilingual, its advantage is that it encourages the development and use of the various languages within the country. Although this policy has cost and logistic problem, significantly, it gives an equal opportunity to all citizens to get involved in national discourse thereby contributing to national development, (Bamgbose, 1991).

Optimal Indigenous Language use as Strategy for National Development

Owing to lack of proper language planning and policy implementation, many countries in Africa haven't recognized the potentials that their languages have to contribute to their national development. As Bamgbose (1991:111) opines most of their policy and decisions on national language are made up of either 'avoidance, vagueness, arbitrariness, fluctuation and declaration without implementation.' Oftentimes, the existence of these indigenous languages is seen as stumbling block to national unity, identity and development.

Language is a development asset of society, particularly if its potential is fully recognized and exploited. It can be a key contributing force towards nationhood and national development if properly managed, (Bamgbose, 2000:30). The indigenous languages of Africa can therefore be vehicles of national development if put to proper use. Such languages need to be looked at not as stumbling blocks, but as potential national development resources. As with all other resources, they need to be allocated in areas where they can be of optimal utility. For this reason the choice of languages and their domains of use need to be made on strictly economic grounds in much the same way as for any other resource in the nation's

economy, (Fishman 1971, 1974; Jernudd & De Gupta, 1971). It is important that each country looks for optimization of the use of the national linguistic resource at the least possible cost with the aim to drive development. Conversely, recognizing that language is a resource with a social rather than an economic value, allowance is usually made for social and cultural factors which may affect its use. A nation's languages should be developed and used with the aim of fully involving their speakers, cognitively in the advancement of the nation as a whole.

Indigenous Languages as Vital key to Participation in National Matters through Mass Media

Passing information to citizens especially those in rural communities with indigenous language get more informed about policies that gears towards development. In some African countries, there are television and radio broadcasts as well as newspapers in African languages, and this is a good step in right direction. By disseminating important information to the citizens, the media make the people more informed on important national issues. It also helps the citizens to engage in national discourses by responding to policies through the editors, meaningfully participating in local seminars organized in their native languages, and raising issues in local meetings.

Similarly, film is one form of mass media that has not been fully exploited in Africa. Although the art form is thriving in countries such as Nigeria and Ghana, it is yet to be embraced in many African countries. Issues that can be addressed using films include women empowerment, child mortality, literacy and development, governance and economic growth, peace and development. By enabling the citizens to participate in an informed way in political processes and governance issues, local languages become tools for development.

Indigenous Languages as link to Trade for Economic Development

Effective trade or business is one of the drivers of economic development. Indigenous languages can be used optimally for trade especially in rural communities. Daily, across Africa, for instance, fishermen sell their fish; herdsman exchange animals for money; bus conductors demand and get fare from their passengers; shopkeepers buy and sell new products like cooking oil, salt and garri; also are construction workers who work in building sights. Virtually all these activities, which contribute immensely to the continent's economic development, are conducted in African languages. Optimal use of indigenous language in trade and commerce can assist to foster national economic development.

Optimal use of Indigenous Languages as key to Conflict Prevention, Resolution and Peace Building

Indigenous African languages can be seen as double-edged sword in relation to conflict. They can trigger off conflicts and have also been significantly used for conflict prevention and conflict resolution. Down to the rural communities, there is mediation sessions that either pre-empt potential disputes or resolve existing conflicts using wisdom extracted from a local language or languages. Similar, national conflicts have been resolved using indigenous languages as the medium. A typical example is the disputed 2007 General Election in Kenya that led the country to degenerate into chaos. In an attempt to proffering solution to resolving the conflict, the method of using indigenous languages to persuade the speakers of the respective languages to refrain from violence was employed. The logic underlying this approach is that people take pride in the languages, and indigenous languages enjoy an emotive dimension with their speakers that other languages do not have, (Wa Mberia,

2004).

Conclusion

The handling of the indigenous languages since the African countries gained their independence in the late 1950s and early 1960s is one of the areas where Africa has had a start in the wrong direction. The fact that most African countries adopted an exoglossic language policy or an endoglossic monolingual approach has meant that many indigenous languages are under-developed and under-utilized whilst their speakers are marginalized or excluded from participating in national affairs. This paper has demonstrated that indigenous languages can and should be used as vehicles of African development. Apart from being an important part of the definition of who Africans are culturally, they are also important economically. They can be used as development assets especially in using them as media of instruction as well as contribute greatly to the achievement of African developmental goals. They should be seen as important resource for African development rather than stumbling blocks to it.

Notably, no developed country has developed on the basis of using a foreign language in that development involves the participation of all citizens in nation-building. It is noteworthy that the Fast-developing countries of Asia, such as China, Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia and Thailand, base their development strategies on their indigenous languages as this creates room for collective involvement of citizenry in the development effort. Africa should adopt such model. Consequently, there is need to harness them well just as we manage other resources. Such management should aim to preserve, promote and modernize the languages as well as to assign them new roles in society alongside the traditional roles for development.

Recommendation

First, this paper recommends for a total review and proactive implementation of the nations' language policies. It should not be a mere declaration of policies but one backed with action. The language policy should also be made based on the nation's own peculiarity and inclusion of the native speakers in the policy formation process. Similarly, a major debate against the promotion and optimal use of indigenous languages is that of limited resources, the best option is to rank them in a hierarchy of national importance. This will help to assign well defined national roles to all languages where they perform certain public or national roles. Drawing current from Botibo (2006), this optimal use hierarchy will lead to the following implications among others:

a. The ex-colonial or global language, being a foreign language, would be used only in international relations, allowing the indigenous national lingua franca to play all

the other national roles.

b. The national language would have full charge of all national affairs, including most official and technical communication, ensuring the transfer and acculturation of technology into the national medium. The promotion of national languages is possible in most African countries, as over 64% of the countries have at least one nationally dominant language or the other.

c. The various indigenous languages in the country would be optimally utilized as in each case the relevant domains would be appropriately and effectively serviced. In addition, the very small languages would be confined to village and family use.

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