

MULTILINGUAL
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NEW LANGUAGE BEARINGS IN AFRICA

A Fresh Quest

Edited by Margaret Jepkirui Muthwii and
Angelina Nduku Kioko



New Language Bearings in Africa

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Editorial

A Fresh Quest for New Language Bearings in Africa

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As a backdrop to the papers in this special volume we discuss five major issues that are essential to an understanding of present-day developments in the use of languages in Africa. They are: (1) the effects of the language policies adopted since independence, (2) language attitudes, (3) literacy dilemmas, (4) challenges in the language classroom, and (5) the relationship between language and economic development, and the continent's response to globalisation. These are factors that shape not only the language practice in each nation in Africa, in one way or another, but also the nature of the complex multilingual situation that they help to create. As one looks at the individual papers in this volume, the significance of these factors can clearly be appreciated.

The volume's major asset lies in the diversity of topics, the range of languages and the African geographical areas covered. Not only do the contributors come from different nations in Africa, but many of them are also established scholars who interact on a daily basis with the unique situations in their own nations. Their perceptions and re-examination of the issues shed fresh light on old terrain and also show what the 'new' experiments are achieving. While the situation in a particular nation may have significantly influenced a scholar's perspectives in determining the options proposed for language in his or her country, together the papers in this volume demonstrate and identify the spirit that presently stirs and motivates language debates and practices in the continent.

To use Joshua Fishman's words, the papers in this volume are all about:

the development of therapeutic understandings and approaches that can be adjusted so as to tackle essentially the same illness in patient after patient. However, just as the illnesses that have infected so many of the world's languages constitute a very recognisable syndrome that yet varies in kind and in degree from one infected language to another, so the diagnoses and cures that are required, fundamentally related though they may be, must also vary, depending on the facts of each case (Fishman, 2001: 1).

The reader is invited to see and feel the struggles of the languages of Africa, and to share in the insightful suggestions proposed for the challenges facing them. The volume looks in detail at many of the major languages of the continent, including Kiswahili, Zulu, Khosa, Setswana, Shona and Yoruba, and

voices the concerns of many other African languages that individual communities cherish and use daily. The English language is not left out. Reading the papers gives one a glimpse of the future of language in Africa, a future that clearly includes an English language that has 'grown' in the continent. But as Sonaiya points out, it will have to be a variety that is 'freely chosen' and one which does not appear threatening to its users. (Undated references refer to articles in this volume.)

Policies

Increasingly more scholars and governments in Africa see language policies adopted at the end of colonial rule as the genesis of the good or bad practices observed today. Many nations had to begin by addressing situations of high linguistic diversity and complex socio-cultural identities. During the colonial period different policies were adopted by different colonial powers. Usually the kind of education offered to Africans was one to prepare them for blue-collar jobs, and thus the local indigenous languages were used as media of instruction. This created a yearning for the language of the master, the language that gave access to white-collar jobs, European thought and other privileges. The dawn of independence thus saw a rapid expansion of education and the adoption of the languages of the former colonial masters as official languages, and thus also as media of instruction in the schools.

Many of the language policies articulated soon after independence aimed at achieving national unity. Their objective was to provide trained manpower to take over the positions vacated by the departed colonial powers, getting access to the wider world, and working with the resources available at the time. Thus, even though nationalist movements were prominent in the 1960s and arguments in favour of adopting African indigenous languages as the media of instruction were widespread, many African countries still adopted the former colonial languages as languages of instruction in the schools. The foreign languages were favoured for a number of reasons. They already had standardized orthographies and could be used right away, instead of awaiting the development of the orthographies of the indigenous languages. They had adequate literacy materials for use in the schools. In addition, they offered a unifying force in the multilingual and multicultural setting of most African countries, and they paved the way for African countries to be part of the international world.

On the basis of the language policies adopted, African countries fall into three groups. First, there are those like Kenya, which have adopted a bilingual policy, with the mother tongue used as the language of instruction in the first 3 years of education and an official (usually foreign) language used for the higher levels of education. Secondly, there are those like the Republic of South Africa, which have adopted a multilingual policy by designating 11 languages, nine of which are African indigenous languages, as its official languages and therefore languages that can be used for instruction in the school system. Thirdly, there are countries (or parts of a country) that use a foreign language as the language of instruction throughout the school system.

The policies stated above, while 'neat' on paper actually hide the difficulties inherent in the issue of language in the kind of multilingualism found in

Africa. We note that situations surrounding national language policies, in general and in particular as they apply to education in most African countries, have significantly changed from those which prevailed at the time when the policies were set. Today, there are new realities and struggles to grapple with, brought about by changes that the continent has experienced in recent years. In some cases, language policies have had to be redefined to suit the new realities. In others, the old policies were retained and instead the new realities had to operate within them.

Attitudes

Attitudes to languages, indigenous and foreign, have been widely studied in African linguistics. Among the important determinants of attitudes are aspirations to acquire international languages and to achieve ownership of languages associated with socio-economic power. In virtually no place in Africa do you not find a foreign language that has interacted with and dueled with the indigenous languages. This has produced an array of attitudinal dispositions in the users of those languages, and partly explains why attitudes have been shown to vary so much from group to group, and to change so rapidly over time. The variations and changes also depict the struggles of a people in trying to come to terms with linguistic situations that are often riddled with paradoxes.

For example, in many nations there is a contradiction between the policy of encouraging a child's mother tongue as the language of instruction in lower primary school and the reality, as the child progresses through the education system, or the complete domination of English or French over indigenous languages. Mother tongue is virtually excluded from the syllabus or relegated to a less important role after lower primary school. Many come to believe sincerely that their native languages do not have the capacity to deal with 'complex situations'. In some instances where pupils are punished if they use their mother tongue at school, the aspiration to acquire English is almost fanatical.

Moreover, the dominant use of English in all school-books produces a people who say they cannot conceive of education in any other medium. In most cases, therefore, the children do not see the language of education at lower school operating in any other sector of life except in the home. Even in cases where efforts exist to implement the stated language policy, teachers in most communities find themselves unable to do so because they are hampered by a serious lack of instructional materials written in the mother tongue. As a result, the complementary relationship that should exist between the language of education and that of the pupils' wider socioeconomic context is lacking. Also the commonly shown negative attitude towards the adoption of African indigenous languages as the languages of instruction in schools is not surprising in such circumstances.

Recent research has shown that language use practices in monolingual and multilingual communities are radically different even in the same nation (Muthwii, 2002). Where this is the case, individual communities lose the ability to understand the issues and to appreciate the struggles of neighbouring communities. They cannot use unity as strength. In nations like Kenya and

Uganda, for example, a number of schools are able to abrogate the stated language policy and implement their dream for English as the language of instruction throughout the curriculum. Often, the ability to make such a move also means they have the resources to support their decision and to get fairly good learning results. Such schools are in the minority. The other schools, often without such 'muscle', have very limited resources. They appear to languish in the confusions brought about by the paradoxes inherent in the school system.

This research has also shown that such confusions result in massive translation and code switching in the learning/teaching process. Consequently, pupils from such 'disadvantaged schools' end up not performing as well in national examinations as those from their more aggressive counterparts. The genesis of the problem according to this East African study (Muthwii, 2002) is that the policies make a number of general assumptions and take their correctness for granted. They tend to assume that English is 'natural' to all children in a multilingual setting, which is not the case, especially to children who come from a predominantly African language or mother tongue-oriented background. They assume that fair play and equality of educational opportunity will prevail, and that the situations on the ground are conducive for the implementation of their 'English only' language policy. Language policies should not be so dependent on assumptions, but should be built on existing attitudes and practices in the countries and communities that they are dealing with.

With regard to a learner's fundamental right to feel secure and confident while learning and using a given language in education and in the public domain, norms such as those propagated in the teaching, learning and use of native English appear to leave most second language learners feeling unsure of themselves. They are not confident enough to participate in the world of English. When peoples' attitudes are at variance with the norms that a given education system expects of the learners, trouble occurs. No wonder a trait associated with many children in African schools is passiveness and silence in class. It is possible that many such learners find the norms beyond their reach. They either do not have the liberty or the ability to express themselves, or are uncomfortable with the expectations of using an English that has little resemblance to the variety they are acquainted with, namely, that of the models around them. Attitudes and views significantly contribute to the socio-psychological processes that ultimately determine whether people accept a language and strive to possess it, or whether on the other hand, it just 'puts them off'. Since there is still a significant place for English in Africa today, prudence suggests that varieties of English whose usage embarrass or threaten a speaker may not be the appropriate English to propagate not only in education but also in the whole spectrum of the public domain (Kembo-Sure, Kioko & Muthwii). (Undated references are to articles appearing in this volume.)

Literacy

Another consequence of bad language policies, attitudes and practices in the continent is the unsatisfactory levels of literacy in many nations. Recently

in parts of Africa, there have been large-scale research projects undertaken to determine the magnitude of the literacy problem and to help put in place appropriate intervention measures. One such study, based on criterion-referenced tests, was carried out by the ministries responsible for primary education in Kenya and Zimbabwe in collaboration with the Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) (IIEP and Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Kenya, 2001). (SACMEQ, initiated by IIEP in 1991 and housed in the UNESCO sub-regional office in Harare, is an international NGO dedicated to policy analysis and development with regard to issues of educational quality. SACMEQ has 14 member countries: Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.) This report, popularly referred to as SACMEQ, was designed to measure the level of mastery of English reading in the 1998 Standard 6 pupils, and it considered two levels of mastery, *minimum* and *desirable*. The minimum level was deemed to be the mastery necessary for recognition of basic linguistic building stones, for example the alphabet and simple words; the desirable level was deemed to be the mastery necessary for successful learning in Standard 7. A similar study carried out in Uganda in 1999 focused on the mastery of reading and writing by Primary 6 pupils. It measured the *adequate* and *advanced* levels, these two terms sharing more or less the same definitions as those of *minimum* and *desirable*, respectively.

The results of the performance tests reveal a bleak pattern of achievements in English in the three countries studied. Discussing the results of the SACMEQ report and the Ugandan results, Makau (2001) concludes that:

Over three quarters and about two thirds of grade 6 pupils in Kenya and Zimbabwe respectively fail to achieve the mastery necessary for successfully using the language as the medium of learning in grade 7. At P6 in Uganda 98% of pupils fail to achieve the *advanced grade*, presumably mastery that would enable them to comfortably pursue further education. Respectively, in Uganda, Zimbabwe and Kenya 35%, 54% and 87% fail to achieve the minimum acceptable level of competency, as indication that these pupils are virtually illiterate in English. In all three countries, the data shows that pupils in urban schools (Nairobi, Harare and the urban sub-sample in Uganda) have a distinct advantage over their peers in rural schools. Equally important, ...mastery is characterized by large disparities among rural provinces (Makau, 2001: 12).

If performance tests are anything to go by, then the findings of the SACMEQ report shows the gravity of the challenges in literacy in at least the three nations where the study was carried out. It is indeed a bleak situation. It also calls into question what is happening to literacy in English, the language that most people claim to be literate in, especially in Anglophone Africa.

The issue of school dropout is closely associated with that of language of instruction. In most countries in the continent the rate of drop-out is reported to be worryingly high, especially where the language of instruction is not the mother tongue, and also where pupils are expected to pay school levies. According to the SACMEQ report referred to above, over 50% of pupils who

enrol in primary Grade One never complete the primary cycle. Out of those who complete the primary cycle, less than 50% enter into secondary education. Hence, where an international language is the preferred language of instruction, as is the case in Kenya, Uganda and Zimbabwe, it is not necessarily the case that using it is successful in enabling school children to achieve useful levels of literacy.

What does this say for many communities in Africa, given the dominance of the English language? It seems that it is not far-fetched to argue that many drop-outs can neither read meaningfully in an international language nor in their mother tongue. And also that literacy in minority or regional languages is declining even more rapidly than literacy in English in most cases, given the poor treatment it receives in the school system. This is why issues of literacy in indigenous African languages occupy an important place in the debates of many scholars in Africa today. In this volume alone, four papers address the issue of literacy and communication, albeit, from different perspectives, and Musau carefully articulates the challenges and prospects of implementing linguistic rights in all of Africa, arguing for the need for individual countries to develop strategic plans that will guarantee linguistic justice.

Unlike most of the African nations, the Republic of South Africa now accords its nine standard African languages national status. They enjoy the same status as the former colonisers' languages, namely, English and Afrikaans. The paper by Finlayson and Slabbert, therefore, provides the unique opportunity to see these 'languages that people speak everyday' participate in the creation of literature. No doubt, the many indigenous African languages in use in the continent would look at the opportunity accorded to Xhosa and Zulu with envy. How they would all wish for an extension of domain of usage in order to 'turn their speakers on'!

Adegbite evaluates the reasons for the negative attitudes that African people have towards literacy in their indigenous languages. While negative attitudes will persist in some quarters in Nigeria, in spite of enlightenment efforts, many other reports indicate a shift to more favourable dispositions towards indigenous languages. According to him this is attributable to the collective participation of the people of Nigeria: scholars, government agencies, ethnic cultural groups, communities and individuals. If language groups are given a chance to develop literacy and knowledge in their own tongues this will not only expose them to different world views and make them a more informed and tolerant population but would also enable them to participate more meaningfully in development issues in their nations. Not only will learners gain more cognitively and linguistically, if instructed through their mother tongue, but their literacy in these languages will create a new tradition of writing in them.

Language Teaching

Whether an African country adopts a monolingual, bilingual or multilingual language policy, the question of which variety will be taken as the standard in the education system is an important one. In the case of African indigenous languages the issue of standards translates to the choice of the variety to be used, since several dialects of the same language often exist. Finlayson and Slabbert describe a pilot literary competition aimed at encouraging urban

learners to use the languages they speak everyday in the creation of literature and to facilitate the recognition of these urban varieties for use in the curricula of both schools and universities. These are efforts to create standards that are acceptable to the users. It is expected that such efforts will result in an increase in the interest of learners in studying and using more relevant forms of the African languages in their day-to-day activities in the urban economic sector.

A further challenge in the use of African languages is the absence of standardised orthography and literacy material for use in the language classroom. Where orthographies are present, many of them relate only in a remote way to the spoken language because they ignore significant prosodic features such as tone, vowel length and, at times, vowel quality. This makes the written material in these languages a challenge to read even for those who are literate in the languages (Kioko, 2002). Thus, even when the decision to use African languages for education is made, there is need to prepare the African languages to meet the challenges of being languages of instruction in schools.

The key issue in standards and language teaching in Africa is, however, linked to the adoption of foreign languages as official languages in many African states. It is a challenge because aspirations are too far removed from realities. When African countries attained independence, many of the European teachers left. Although there was also expansion in teacher training colleges, the presence of the native-speaker model receded to the background with the departure of the native speakers. The learners thus began to approximate the model of their non-native teachers, a model significantly different from the native variety. These models are characterised by innovations drawn from the sociocultural environments within which the languages are used. In the majority of the African countries, however, local varieties of these international languages have not been formally recognised and thus the norms continue to be those of the native speakers. Many of the innovations, be they phonological, morphological, syntactic or semantic, have for a long time been viewed as errors, and research has dealt principally with deviations from native-speaker norms. Thus the textbooks and examinations target external norms to which teachers and pupils have limited access. Kyeyune describes the challenges faced in teaching English in a multilingual classroom in Uganda and proposes the use of a bilingually based communicative approach to language instruction instead of one based on teacher domination of classroom talk and an emphasis on subject content.

This brings us to another kind of reality. In the study of English in Africa, the era of error analysis has come to an end. Research on English standards is beginning to acknowledge the African varieties that are emerging. In addition, it has been found that some varieties are preferred to others, depending for example on whether or not they indicate the ethnic group membership of the speaker (Kioko & Muthwii, 2001). Kembo-Sure aptly uses excerpts from contemporary Kenyan discourse to argue for the identification and codification of a local standard English 'anchored on the performance of 'educated and articulate Kenyans and not on the native-speaker model'. He proposes the adoption of a strong bilingual education that is informed by the social-cultural and psycholinguistic realities. Muthwii and Kioko show the

attitudinal dynamics of the varieties of English in Kenya and the variety identified by the community as suitable for use in the public domain.

We see, therefore, that communities have evolved the ability to tell apart the varieties of the languages within their repertoire and to use them to communicate particular wants using particular varieties. Designating English or French as the language of work or education still leaves the members of the language community to decide on which variety, which is just as crucial in the context of social interaction. The choice of language used in a situation depends on what language or its variety makes speakers feel comfortable or uncomfortable, secure, confident or threatened, able or not able to follow and participate in conversations and interactions. (See also Sonaiya's discussion in this issue.)

Globalisation and Economic Development

A final issue in this discussion is the relationship between forces of globalisation and economic development in Africa. As seen in recent studies on language of instruction in Kenya and Uganda, for example, there is an enormous pressure exerted by social and economic indicators for youngsters to learn an international language (cf. Muthwii, 2002). The clamour in favour of international languages is seen from the highest levels from where language policies are set and where it is determined which language or languages will be considered national languages, down to the case of a district primary school where students are routinely beaten if they are overheard speaking their own languages. Parents overwhelmingly do not favour instruction of their children in indigenous African languages, even in the lower primary classes. They have their reasons. But all of it boils down to negative attitudes toward the African languages and the fact that instructional materials are not readily available in the African languages in most nations in Africa, especially south of the Sahara. These attitudes are almost always reinforced by government language policy.

While parents and policy-makers clamour for English the statistics on the success of such an approach are not encouraging. For example, according to Simire about 33% of the total population of Nigeria are literate in English (the official language) but only 15% of these can really use English effectively in professional and administrative activities. From this, you could say 85% of Nigerians have no meaningful knowledge of the official language, a situation very similar to that indicated earlier for Kenya and Uganda. Education in foreign languages has thus become education for a minority, and the majority is excluded from national development programmes. If the development of such countries were to hinge on communication using English, then we must accept that it will involve a very small minority of the population. Naturally, this becomes a hindrance to economic, political and socio-cultural development because institutions and other corporate organisations cannot perform their developmental roles accurately unless they can understand and be understood in their immediate environments.

With such language situations how can these nations respect the language rights of the minority groups? What happens to the need for community-based initiatives and organisation for development? As Musau argues, the absence of the recognition of language rights means that the local languages will inevitably not be developed and empowered. In turn, their speakers will

not have access to government services, programmes, knowledge and information. They often do not understand the policies, the objectives and the procedures of development and therefore cannot meaningfully participate. Kishe drawing from much experience working with communities in the East African great lakes region makes a very strong case for Kiswahili instead of the often-favoured English language. With this language, members of the communities will no longer remain powerless. They will no longer be isolated and marginalised by global languages.

Conclusion

In spite of the many problems there are also breakthroughs. African leaders, for example in South Africa and parts of Nigeria, are beginning actively to encourage the use of local languages, which enable many to participate meaningfully in the development of their communities and countries. Scholars are researching and writing more directly on what they perceive as solutions that address the realities of today. Tangible efforts to develop African languages can be cited in nation after nation, the most conspicuous are those of the nine South African languages and Kiswahili in East Africa. These moves in the long run will bridge the gap between the highly educated minority and the semi-educated majority and empower whole populations for economic development. However, communities will have to embrace more and more a practice of true bilingual education where the rights of the child to use his/her indigenous language is acknowledged and supported at the same time as English is learnt and used in preparation for full participation in the wider international community.

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