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# Towards a practical approach to the challenges of multilingualism in Africa

**Abstract**. This paper reviews the issue of multilingualism in Africa, and the language planning responses of Governments. The paper argues that the general objective of empowering African languages and ensuring their equality has failed so far. Indeed, African multilingual contexts are today characterized by the increasing dominance of international languages at the expense of African languages, and the increasing dominance of major African languages at the expense of smaller ones. It appears that practical sociolinguistic realities are overwhelming most language policy objectives. A sentiment-free approach to language policy which emphasizes the functionality of languages is therefore suggested.

Key Words: *Language Planning*; *Language Management*; *Multilingualism*; *International Languages*; *Minority Languages*

## Introduction

As the world becomes more and more connected by modern technology, new features are emerging in the relationships between languages at international and national levels. Because of the crucial role that language plays in human society, it is important to be aware of emerging issues with a view to enhancing the appropriate administrative response from a language planning perspective. In addition, general scholarly perception of what the presence of many languages does to a society has been changing. Since these perceptions often provide the

intellectual framework for language policy, it is equally important to study trends in general perspectives on multilingualism. Some contemporary ideas require serious clarifications, even if these clarifications can be done by digging up some older ideas, or by reiterating ideas that are being highlighted by other scholars. An overview in this regard is therefore done in this paper.

The objective of this paper is to achieve a practical perspective that can govern appropriate administrative responses in the continuing quest for sustainable development in Africa. This is particularly relevant, as the continent, with its relatively high concentration of languages is faced with serious challenges in managing their co-existence.

There is a need at this time to reflect on some issues that have emerged in recent times, and some ideas about multilingualism that have also emerged in this post modernist era. One must point out that even if some of the suggestions of this paper are deemed inconclusive, they still highlight the fact that the key question of what to do with minority languages remains a formidable challenge to African scholars in the relevant disciplines. There is yet no basis to assume that our studies and discussions of language planning over the years across the continent have provided workable solutions.

**General Trends in Managing Multilingualism in Africa**

There is a credible school of thought which holds that there is no monolingual country in the world (Crystal, 1997). Indeed, it will be hard to find any society today that is not multilingual to a certain extent. It is quite unlikely that that there are still nations that are merely bilingual. More and More people are today becoming multilingual. The movement of peoples across the face of the globe is fast changing the sociolinguistic picture of nations.

In Africa, multilingualism has always been a feature of life in most communities (Chimhundu, 2002; Lohdi, 1993). Although the actual number of languages on the continent

remains difficult to determine precisely, it is common knowledge that Africa has quite a large number. The Harare conference of 1997 concluded that there are between 1,250 and 2,100 languages in Africa (Chimhundu, 2002), while Ndhlovu (2008) claims that there are about 2,500. The multilingual nature of the societies inevitably leads to a situation in which very many Africans individuals are multilingual.

In this regard, multilingualism has been described as the pragmatic response of Africans to the existence of many languages in contact (Trudell, 2009). Individual multilingualism in Africa has always been and still is the practical solution to commercial and social problems that would have marred society on account of the existence of mutually unintelligible languages in close geographical proximity.

The mix has been further complicated by the colonial hangover of having to use the former colonial languages in administration, education, and even in day to day interactions. Although levels of fluency in different languages varies, it is not uncommon to find many people switching languages as they move from one situation to another. There is also the interesting phenomenon of multilingual homes and multilingual extended families, described so well in Trudell (2009).

The language situation in Africa has undoubtedly created issues which newer nation states have had to grapple with. The dominance, for example, of ex colonial languages in administration and education has been a source of serious concern. It is obvious that the use, in administration, of languages that majority of people either do not speak or are unable to speak fluently, naturally creates a situation of linguistic exclusion. Even today, fluency in international languages is minimal in Africa. In Kenya for example, research has shown that only about 15% of the people can communicate fluently in English (Muthwii, 2004 cited in Trudell, 2009). Yet,

Kenya is thought to be one of the most clearly Anglophone nations in Africa .In Boukina Faso, a country considered to be prominently Francophone, only about 10% of the population is able to speak fluent French (Chimhundu, 2002).

Closely related to this issue of linguistic exclusion is the strong factor of cultural identity. People have always been irked by the very fact of having to subject governance to the dominion of languages of ex colonial masters because such a situation hardly agrees with the idea of independence.

In the sphere of education, the use of the ex colonial languages has been problematic. Research has shown clearly that the use of these languages deprives learners of the opportunity to maximally benefit from the learning environment. Massive positive differences have been empirically observed in experimental situations among pupils taught in their mother tongue (MT) (Bamgbose, 1994; Trudell, 2009). Several attempts have therefore been made to incorporate MT education into the learning system. They have, however, largely failed, as is the case in Nigeria (Bamgbose, 1994; Christopher, 2008) and in Ghana where an official reversal of MT education was made in 2002 (Owu-Ewie, 2006). This has happened partly due to factors of poor governance, societal indifference as well as the complicated linguistic profiles of most urban areas where it is not possible to ascertain a predominant MT or identify a language of the immediate environment. For example, one of the reasons given by a Ghanaian Minister or Education for the scrapping of MT education was the discovery that it was no longer possible to find situations where up to 40% of pupils in classes spoke the same language. (Owu-Ewie, 2006).

Many other language policy decisions have surfaced at different times in different parts of the continent. They are broadly and briefly considered in the following section.

**Language Policy Initiatives in Africa**

Language policy is the philosophical or conceptual frame work around which language planning activities are carried out. As stated earlier, these have been numerous on the continent. They are the inevitable consequences of attempt to deal with the linguistic mosaic in Africa, with particular emphasis on managing the relationship between ex colonial languages and the numerous indigenous languages, as well as finding roles for indigenous languages in such a way that inter ethnic rivalries and suspicions are managed properly.

In Chimhundu (2002) a categorization of language policy types in Africa, worked out at the Harare conference of 1997 is presented. There are in three broad categories:

- Policies that involve the promotion of a single language. These can be exoglossic (as is the case with francophone countries, with the exception of DR Congo). They may also be endoglossic, as in Tanzania, where Kiswahili is promoted, or in Ethiopia, where Amharic is the official language.
- There are policies that are exoglossic but involve the ultimate development of an endoglossic objective. This is the case in countries such as Kenya, Uganda, and Nigeria.
- Some policies are basically exoglossic, but involve the use of local languages to perform specific functions. Nations in this category include Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Sierra Leone.

The exoglossic feature characterizes most of the continent, even where it is not explicitly stated or where contrary policies are officially stated. This is due principally to the reluctance of the various Governments to take the political risk of appearing to favor one indigenous language over the other. Obviously, the problem of what to do with local languages, especially the smaller ones, remains.

Many conferences and seminars have been conducted to discuss this matter at the continental level. These include the Conakry conference of 1981, which was to discuss how to promote the use of African languages in education, the OAU meeting of 1986, which came up with the OAU language plan of action, the International Conference on the Promotion of African Languages in Addis Ababa in 1994, the Pan African conference on the Problems and Prospects of the use of African Languages in Education held in Accra, Ghana, in 1996, and the Intergovernmental Conference on language Policies held in Harare in 1997.

The frequency of these conferences is an indication of continuing efforts to resolve the problem of how to properly empower African languages. These conferences have all progressively expressed and reinforced the need to promote African languages.

However, in spite of all the hype over the years about equality of languages, there continues to be a "trend towards homogenization in the world" (Conell, 1997). This has obviously favored majority languages at the expense of minority ones. Advancements in information and telecommunication technology (ICT) have induced a phenomenal increase in the influence and dominance of the international languages (especially English) and an attendant challenge to attempts to empower African languages. In some cases, there are threats to the very survival of some languages. Questions have to be consequently raised about the effectiveness or viability of approaches to language planning in Africa, which are now heavily influenced by the doctrine of rights of languages and right to language. There are however many aspect of this doctrine that require deep reflections and clarification in order to avoid potential problems.

The need to make such clarification is one of the objectives for this paper. To put this in proper perspective, it may be necessary to explore the evolution of views of multilingualism in Africa, since these views have (as stated previously) shaped policy positions.

**The Evolution of Perspectives on Multilingualism**

Ndlhovu (2008) points out that: "two diametrically opposed perspectives have emerged in relation to the presence of many languages in Africa" (p.137). The first view is negative. It emphasizes the inimical effects of having too many languages in a society. Such expected problems are ethnic conflicts, political tension, communication gaps, and ultimately underdevelopment and poverty. This view is, however, no longer widespread. It has now been overtaken by a second perspective which considers societal multilingualism from the positive perspective. This view sees multilingualism as an asset that creates room for cultural diversity and enables people to become culturally more adaptable and tolerant.

This second perspective is currently being viewed within the framework of post modernist perspectives on democracy and human rights. Ndlhovu (2008) explains that the current human rights based perspective is hinged on the notion that all languages are equal and deserve to be accorded equal opportunity in the society regardless of number of speakers. This position emphasizes the concepts of **right of language** and **right to language**. The former relates to the right of language to enjoy equal governmental attention, while the latter concept refers to the right of the individual to use whatever language s/he is competent in, and the rights of access to whatever language the individual chooses to use for the purposes of economic empowerment.

The essential point to note is that the first view discourages the existence of many languages and generates policies that promote monolingualism in one form or another. Perhaps the most notorious attempt to effect this ideology occurred in Ethiopia when the Amharic-only language policy of Emperor Tewodros II came to force in 1885 (Anteneh & Ado, 2006). This ideology continued to influence policy (though it was variously toned down to accommodate

other languages) for a long time. Of course, it was vehemently resisted by speakers of other languages until the current government gave equal rights to all languages. Since then, some of Ethiopia's federal units, especially the Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR) government have instituted fundamental reforms (Anteneh & Ado, 2006).

The post modernist language rights view on the other hand promotes multilingualism. This school of thought is perhaps another dimension of the view of a scholar like Ayo Bamgbose who has been an advocate of linguistic inclusion with a view to favoring African languages. Today, this view is probably the most dominant. The conclusions and recommendations of most language policy initiatives that have emerged from the different continental meetings on language matters appear to be based on this perspective. For example, the Harare conference of 1997 agreed that "democratic change, good governance, cultural pluralism and human rights are today the parameters which have to be taken to account in order to guide all developmental policies, particularly policy relating to Africa languages…" (p.12). This is the tone of all the previous major conferences especially the 1981 Conakry conference and the 1996 Accra conference.

At this point it is necessary to clearly identify issues that have emerged or come more to the fore relatively recently. The first matter to be raised here is something that has clearly emerged from the above discussions regarding multilingualism and language planning trends in Africa. This is the increasing call for the equality of languages, especially within the framework of the emerging views of democracy and human rights.

Of particular significance are the concepts of rights of language and right to language. This perspective appears to have stronger appeal in nations with experiences of linguistic oppression. Notable instances are Ethiopia, where attempts were made in the pre-Mengistu era to

stifle other languages while promoting Amharic, and South Africa, where the apartheid system also constituted a threat to African languages (Beukes, 2004). The constitutions of these nations now have explicit provision for the equality of languages (Anteneh & Ado, 2006; Beukes, 2004). In Ethiopia for example, the current policy is to promote all languages at all levels, leaving local authorities with the discretion of choosing the language to use at provincial levels. Anteneh & Ado (2006) observe that these changes took place when a new constitution was put in place in1994 by the government of Meles Zenawi.

As the post modernist perspective continues to gain ground, it requires serious scholarly attention.

**A Critique of the Post Modernist View of Multilingualism**

There is indeed the need to solve the problem of linguistic exclusion and the attendant social and political marginalization by creating concrete roles for African languages. And it is simply morally repugnant to pursue policies that ignore people's attachment to their own languages, albeit for sentimental reasons. An atmosphere of oppression is inevitably created by a 'forced conversion' to another language, as some governments tried to do in Ethiopia before the Mengistu era, and as the Arab elite in North Africa are still doing as they continue to relentlessly repress Amazigh, the language of the indigenous Berbers (Al-Aly, 2001; Aym, nd). These are valid bases for the emergence of a human rights perspective to language matters.

Having said this, there are some facts that must be realistically understood because the kind of language that is often used by exponents of the human rights approach can engender needless agitation. They are itemized below and subsequently explained.

- All languages can not receive equal official treatment from government in situations of very many languages. Sustainable development presupposes that

efforts must be made to pursue realistic and economically viable objectives. Only realistic language development objectives must therefore be pursed.

- Members of some small language groups will have to be encouraged to use major languages or the international languages. It is not realistic in all nations to encourage people to 'fight' for their own languages.
- The existence of a language depends on how functional it is for the speakers, especially in relation to how it meets their communication needs. When this need wanes, the language inevitably contracts.
- No matter how much we campaign against the dominion of international languages, it is important to understand that the benefits of encouraging people to master them is as important as the benefits of enhancing the status of our own languages.

The current Ethiopian constitution inadvertently illustrates the reality that languages can never be on equal pedestals of societal significance. Article 5 of this constitution reads:

> 1. *All Ethiopian languages shall enjoy equal state of recognition.*
> 2. *Amharic shall be the working language of the Federal Government.*
>
> (Anteneh & Ado, 2006)

The first provision attempts to place all Ethiopian languages on the same pedestal. However, there is a sense in which the second provision contradicts the first. This is the reality. All languages in a typical African setting will NEVER enjoy equal status. Whether from an endoglossic or exoglossic perspective, some languages will always be exalted above others. Even in South Africa – a country believed to have the most progressive language policy in Africa − only 11 out of the 25 languages in that country are recognized as official languages, because the eleven are spoken by 99% of the population. Indeed, the practical reality is that while great

progress has been made to destroy the legacies of apartheid in the language arena, it has not been possible for government to pay equal attention to all the languages in administration and education. The agitations are continuing toward realizing Mandela's dreams in this regard (Beukes, 2004).

Secondly, the inevitability of language contraction must be faced squarely. The dynamic of human society changes the roles of languages in such a way that some efforts at maintenance may have only sentimental value with no practical gain attached. Traditionally and historically, languages have emerged and survived to serve the primary role conveying the thoughts, ideas, concepts and world view of peoples in such away that internal connections are guaranteed. Today however it appears as if closer contacts between peoples have engendered a situation in which the communicative value of a language is becoming more and more a function of how the language is able to help people to connect to a wider world. Globalization involves reaching out, and only languages that reach out may survive. Those that cannot reach out will contract, become moribund, and eventually become history.

Finally, the continuing dominance of international languages is no longer worth campaigning against. The reach-out feature which characterizes language use in this age favors languages that already have wide reach. The quest for more knowledge, more commerce, and more relevance means that national linguistic pride must now be swallowed. Writing about the quest to learn English all over the world, Crystal (1997) points out that the language is the main carrier of new technology and that "those from abroad who wished to learn about such technology "… would have to learn English and learn it well if they wished to benefit" (p.72). This situation affects nations of the world that do not use any of the international languages as their official language. It is therefore not surprising that people in nations that use ex colonial

languages as official language show clear preference for the ex colonial language, even in situations where indigenous languages are actively promoted, as exemplified in a study like Are (1998), which investigated choices of language of literacy. Lawal (1995) observes this trend in a research situation among secondary school pupils. He attributes it to government policy which has made the ex colonial language the language of the "powerful and influential" while making indigenous languages the languages of the "powerless and dispossessed".

With or without government policy, the preference for international languages − especially English − is a practical response to the sociolinguistic realities of today's world. There appears to be little anyone can do about it. Even those who refer to the situation as linguistic genocide are not able to offer credible ways out. Any serious perspective of multilingualism and language planning must reckon with these realities.

**Recommendations**

Some practical steps are hereby prescribed in view of the problems identified above.

1. Collection/Provision of Accurate Linguistic Profile Statistics

No meaningful response to the challenges posed by multilingualism can be made when precise scientific knowledge about the linguistic profiles of nations is not available. The kind of detailed record of speakers of languages and the way they use their languages which are available in South Africa and presented in Beukes (2004) are not available in most sub-Saharan countries. A major step towards solving the existing problems would be the collection of accurate statistics about language use in communities. Many of the complications in language policy and planning are sometimes linked to inadequate awareness on the part of planners of local peculiarities.

2. Establishment of Language Units under Local Administrations

Some of the required statistics may be dynamic, such that responses must be immediate and relevant. Language units must be established at local levels to handle these situations. South African language policy already makes room for this, in addition to such bodies at national and provincial levels (Beukes, 2004). These units can play vital roles in the collection of relevant statistics.

3. Allocation of Roles to Minor Languages ONLY *where Linguistic Exclusion Exists*

Although many sentiments are legitimate and must not be ignored in human interactions, they can also bog down societies if given undue weight. The management of multilingualism by African governments has been affected by sentiments. A time must come when realistic and sincere objectives must be pursued boldly without undue interference from sentimentalists. As previously stated, equality of languages must not be interpreted to mean that all languages will be accorded the same status. This will never happen. Therefore in determining which minor languages should be accorded concrete roles, especially in administration and education, decisions likewise should not just be based on agitation. The mere fact that a language may not currently enjoy such roles should not be the central issue. It must be ascertained that the people concerned are not competent in any of the major languages that may be in wider use for administration, education or information dissemination. If they are competent in any language currently available as languages in administration and education, agitations from such groups must be emphatically ignored, especially where there are few speakers. The demands of sustainable development require this economically expedient approach. Moreover, members of tiny linguistic groups are actually most likely to have appreciable fluency in a major language around their vicinity. This is an observed pattern in Africa, exemplified in a study of the tiny

language groups around the Nigeria Cameroun borderland. In this case the use of neighboring majority languages like Fulfulde and Hausa is so extensive that these tiny languages are contracting, becoming moribund, or dying out entirely (Conell, 1997).

4. A Selective Approach Must Be Adopted in Language Material Development

As part of efforts to promote the use of African languages in education, it is always necessary to embark on efforts to develop language material. Calls for such development are often made for all languages. In nations with large number of languages, this could be a daunting task. Perhaps, the seeming lack of enthusiasm on the part of governments may be connected to this. A better approach is suggested here whereby a scientific selection process (especially with regard to smaller languages) can be used to determine those languages that will receive attention. Governments may work out criteria for this, but it is suggested here that languages that are already moribund or dying out may be left alone to avoid waste of resources. This may be especially important in cases where there are not more than 1000 known speakers. This view may appear harsh and insensitive, and the sentiments of members of small threatened languages may be offended. The reality of the evolution of languages, however, suggests the need to be practical. Sociolinguistic dynamics which are too numerous to discuss here will eventually swamp many of these languages. The report presented in Conell (1997) detailing reasons for the moribund state of some African languages attests to this.

5. Fluency Levels in International Languages Must Improve

As uncomfortable as this may sound, one must stress the need for governments to prioritize the improvement of the teaching and learning of the international languages. As has been pointed out in this paper, fluency levels are lower than people may assume they are. Evidence points to a decline in the performance of pupils in the international languages (Christopher, 2008; Owu-

Ewie, 2006). Yet, these are the languages that are most relevant (for now) if we must avoid being left behind in this information age (Osunfisan, 2001; Kikame, 2008).

**Conclusions**

Discussions of issues involved with multilingualism in Africa and the attendant policy responses are continuing in view of the fact that many of the existing problems remain essentially intractable because of governmental failures arising from societal indifference, political difficulties, and inadequate resources. It is also significant to note that language matters are very sensitive and the sentiments attached to them are particularly strong, leading to constant agitation and squabbles that scare governments off of language policy programs. The dominant post modernist perspective on multilingualism and language policy and planning, which clamors for equality among languages, can lead to misinterpretations that could further encourage sentiment and agitation. While it is true that attempts should never be made to foist linguistic choices upon a people and give them the impression that their languages are inferior, it is equally problematic to ignore the reality that not all languages can receive developmental attention in situations with a high concentration of languages. Any language management program must be preceded by the collection of up-to-date statistics about all language communities in the affected countries. Some practical, albeit uncomfortable, choices will, however, have to be made based on scientific assessments of the future viability of languages, especially those that have limited demographic and functional relevance. Efforts to improve competence in the international languages must also be pursued in view of the reality of globalization.

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