



LEADERSHIP AND THE MISSING LINK IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES

BY

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Abstract

Most African countries contain different linguistic and cultural groups. Unfortunately, few of our leaders welcome these languages and cultures, attempting to promote one or two languages deemed important for unity and economic growth. Others have their minds closed to the prospect of any African indigenous language cutting many children off from their culture and enforcing them to spend their time in school struggling to understand instead of building new knowledge. As language is the channel through which people's cultures are transmitted, development on the other hand is based on communication through language. This paper discusses trends in the African continent and the objective is to explore the potential of African languages and literature as tools for socio-cultural and economic development, emphasizing the need for empowerment through linguistic recognition while addressing challenges rooted in colonial educational legacies. The essay does this by discussing the practicalities (factors that may be promoting or threatening) of African language and argues that the current efforts being made fall short of achieving the ultimate aim due to their inherent paradoxical nature. It posits that only by ensuring its use and development at all levels can the tragedy of the disappearance of African language, which ultimately means the impoverishment of humanity be prevented.

Key words: Africa, African languages, Missing Link, Development

Introduction

Development is based on communication through language. With more than 2,000 languages being used in Africa, language becomes a highly relevant factor in all sectors of political, social, cultural and economic life. This important sociolinguistics dimension hitherto remains under-rated in the mainstream development studies. This paper discusses the resourcefulness of language in view of the ongoing transformation of African society as much as for economic development. "The rejection of the linguistic legitimacy of a language—any language used by any linguistic community—in short, amounts to little more than an example of the tyranny of the majority. Such a rejection reinforces the long tradition and history of linguistic imperialism in our society. Linguistic imperialism can be caused by different factors, including trade, immigration and colonialism. Most of the language imposition happened during the colonial period. Many of the countries on which a new language was imposed had diverse linguistic groups.

Historically our challenge with language in Africa as it relates to diversity is that it has often been used as a tool of oppression for the purpose of establishing and perpetuating systems of dominance and hierarchies between and among groups. As a result, language has in many instances throughout our society history, served to advance the status of certain groups while relegating other groups to a status of inferiority.

The most striking issue among the missing links in the development of African Languages is lack of determination from most African leaders as well some elites who continuously perpetuate the



supremacy of the neo-colonial languages like English, French and Portuguese and buttress their power in most cases over the African languages.

As a point of departure, the indigenous African languages studied actually play second fiddle to foreign languages. Applied to the language question in the sub Saharan Africa, one can conclude that indigenous African languages are given secondary roles in the African countries by the African leaders. Let me emphatically say that African linguists, language practitioners and researchers, and like-minded progressive forces should condemn the situations in which indigenous African languages play secondary roles in Africa and that the situation should be resisted by all and redressed without further delay by our leaders.

Literature Review

African languages here will be defined as those languages indigenous to the continent south of the Sahara and for which there is not a primary cultural center in another region. Africa is the most linguistically diverse continent in the world, according to the UN's Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2025) which alone is home to a third of the world's languages and before the colonial era, through the strong oral tradition of our indigenous languages we proudly perpetuated our cultural practices, our history and our sense of the world. Our self-identity and character were intact, we had a strong sense of direction because our culture served as our reference point to the past and to the future.

Language policies and the African elites

The most painful thing that is most striking was that African leaders in most of the countries have deliberately perpetuated the supremacy of foreign languages over indigenous languages. There is clear evidence that language and power are closely related and in this case the foreign language that was used to subjugate the local people and their languages is the most preferred language by the government establishments. The socio-political environment created by the leaders and political elites has had a negative perception of the status of local languages against foreign language. In other words, the power that is exercised by the leaders is entrenched in the foreign language of the colonial master.

The rejection of the linguistic legitimacy of a language—*any* language used by *any* linguistic community—in short, amounts to little more than an example of the tyranny of the majority. Such a rejection reinforces the long tradition and history of linguistic imperialism in our society. The harm, though, is done not only to those whose languages were rejected, but in fact to all of us in Africa, as we are made poorer by an unnecessary narrowing of our cultural and linguistic universe. The Practice as a deliberate attempt, consists of a range of approaches to understanding the expansion of capitalism into new areas, the unequal development of different countries, and economic systems that may lead to the dominance of some countries over others.

Many African leaders have imposed their obedience and servitude of the colonial language on the local people of their nations and their languages as the most preferred language by the government establishments. The socio-political environment created by the leaders and political elites has had a negative perception of the status of local languages against foreign language. In other words, the power that is exercised by the leaders is entrenched in the foreign language of the colonial master.

One is at this point made to inquire whether the winning of political independence led to a linguistic liberation of African countries, and if not, why not? Are the former colonial languages a useful bond with the international community and necessary for state formation and national unity internally? Or are they a bridgehead for Western interests, permitting the continuation of a colonial



system of marginalization and exploitation? What is the relationship between linguistic dependence (continued use of a European language in a former non-European colony)?

It is saddening to observe that almost all African countries seem to enjoy doing business in foreign languages despite attainment of political power. Their present predicament however is not out of their own volition. Their status emanates from a long history of colonial subjugation. This history induced perpetual marginalization of African languages such that African states view their languages as unfit to transmit business ideas and higher knowledge. Respectability of African languages as conveyors of important high status knowledge was compromised.

To a great extent, colonial language policies disempowered and eroded African languages to the background. In view of this backdrop, this paper observes an anomaly whereby a majority of the African languages are sidelined from socio-economic and politico-environmental mainstream development of the continent. With this background, the paper interrogates the positioning of African languages in the global village and recommends that cultural diversity can instead be strengthened through globalisation by providing the means and wherewithal to support cultural groups attempting to make a difference in society while still maintaining their distinctive set of beliefs, practices and values.

African Languages in a Global World

Globalisation poses the temptation of maintaining global languages to keep pace with global developments. Africa still needs to gain a significant place in the global economy, politics and other development initiatives so the temptation for colonial languages is great. On the one hand, globalisation increases the visibility of African languages beyond the African continent yet on the other, it exposes them to stiff competition against established global languages such as English and French.

For African languages to claim significant space in the global village, the languages must be able to transmit high status knowledge and technological information that is in demand globally. Languages that are able to convey such information are languages of hegemony and power. In the Information Age, such languages are easily accessible on the information highway. Currently African languages are highly challenged as majority are struggling to gain space in education not even as media of instruction but as subjects of study.

Globalisation exposes African languages on the international language market as: - Subjects of study, Media of educational instruction and Communication tools in modern society. Today's workplace is characterised by a search for knowledge and information. This demands that workers should be able to communicate, handle information and adopt to new developments either orally, numerically or literally.

Currently, a majority of African languages are more restricted to communication between co-workers in the workplace (Mutasa 2004: WaL 2002). It should be emphasised that where workers are limited by language proficiency certain information is omitted as workers struggle to get the correct vocabulary to express themselves. African governments need to consider a cost-benefit-analysis of the language use. Coulmas (1992:124-5) contends that: Language training for industry and commerce can be a considerable burden for a company but those who hesitate to make the necessary financial outlays have to ask themselves which is costlier language training or losses and foregone gains brought about by lack of language proficiency.

As an instrument in the socialisation of people, language is important in establishing norms and values required for rapid transformation and effectiveness. Webb (2002:218) asserts that language instills a sense of institutional loyalty and security, which are essential ingredients of good



governance and good business. Once this is established the role of language then becomes that of creating an enabling social environment hinged on sustainable development.

Language has an important role in the development of vocational skills as an instrument of education and training (Webb, 2002:219). Uju (2003:2) remarks that, an individual with lots of potential should be able to speak out so that society could give him or her listening ears. Since a majority of Africans are not quite conversant with foreign languages, indigenous languages could help in fostering commitments.

Tanzania for instance has achieved a considerably high degree of democratisation through deliberate language choice and language policy. English was replaced with Kiswahili as the sole language of parliamentary, business, both written and oral that enabled Tanzanian people to participate in political and legislative issues. This move opened floodgates to the common people who could now compete with members of the educated elite for parliamentary seats as they could use their Kiswahili oratorical skills attentively to influence legislative decisions.

Other than empowering its people the move had an effect of elaborating the language bringing in new technical terms for legislative register. The participation of more citizens in the parliament has enriched and empowered Tanzanians to the effect that they realise that their language has capacity for intellectual and scientific thought, (Bamgbose, 1991). To date Kiswahili could be claimed to be the language of the African continent because it is the most widely used in the continent and accessible on the information highway.

The African linguistic map can only be changed through aggression. Mutasa (2006:83) asserts that aggression is a paramount ingredient in development without which the development and promotion of African languages is tantamount to being lip service. Sustainability depends on effective communication and policy implementation for efficient management of resources for the benefit of present and future generations. Latin (1992) argues that the economic misfortunes of Africa are a result of Africa's dependence on European Languages. He contends that the use of African languages is likely to make it difficult to seek western expertise and to reduce western penetration of Africa, by learning western without westernisation, Africa is likely to improve her chances of economic and political development.

Similarly, the use of African languages would assist the continent retain its most valued human resources which left their countries for better opportunities in the diaspora. Linguistic dissociation with the West would help separate the technical from the western making it more probable to induce challenges whilst policies of linguistic association might induce "catch up", (Laitin, 1983:38). Challenge might lead to innovativeness based on local resources and indigenous ideas. Innovations born of and nurtured through African languages are likely to be exported in African languages on the global map as languages capable of increasing connectivity and interdependence of the world's markets and businesses.

Linguistic dissociation might induce challenge for indigenous speakers to come up with home grown ideas relevant to their environment as solutions to economic development as opposed to linguistic association that might induce "catch up". Linguistic dissociation is likely to leave the Africans more proactive in solving development issues hence it is more empowering. African languages can be elaborated to handle modern technological and scientific knowledge. Africa needs to urgently consider the gains of language planning in favour of the indigenous languages or risk to remain trailing behind global development.

The present state of development is a result of a historical situation hence to change the situation requires some kind of social transformation of structures including the language situation. It is argued that for as long as African languages are not used in formal economic activity, global



sustainable development will remain a dream. Paradoxically, Africans need to possess a reasonable amount of wealth for their language. African governments often do not optimise African languages as resources to be valued economically. Africans are often unconsciously caught in a colonial mentality. African languages are often undervalued by society since society is not fully appreciative of the real cost of exclusion of African languages. In as much as governments might have political commitments to the language issue, the biggest hurdle that remains is changing people's attitudes. Triandis (1997) cited in Okombo (1999:591) declares that: We have the technical knowledge to change the world, but we do not have the attitude to bring the change. The view complements the position of this paper which, further observes that there is bound to be resistance to the empowerment of indigenous languages.

The worst enemy of development is resistance to change and yet change is a ubiquitous phenomenon. To both industry and government, the use of indigenous languages might have financial implications. As far as the modern employment based domains of power are concerned, English is seen by many as the key to power and access to information. Crystal (1997) in Mutasa (2006) contends that English is fast becoming a global language because of its competence. Groddal (1997) in Gill (2002) as cited by Mutasa maintains that 'the strength of English lies in the complex mix of the political and cultural factors. To claim space in the global village, African languages should be propelled to levels of transmitting complex knowledge and technology so that people from across the world would envy to gain knowledge and skills through them.

In the absence of economic power for the indigenous people, the salvation of African languages is vested in the education sector. Education as a process is capable of unlocking and instilling positive attitudes towards accepting African languages as global languages. However, this change of attitude is easier achieved where policies are supported by financial injection from indigenous Africans themselves. There is no doubt that a foreign language cannot unite a people, for there will always be aspects of it that cannot be converted perfectly.

Language and Cultural Imperialism on the African Nation

Language imperialism is a term used to describe the imposition of western language (English, French, Portuguese etc.) on the culture of people in developing countries. Language imperialism often refers to Britain's language influence on other world languages, for better or worse. A man's right lies in his confidence and personality which is greatly nurtured by his language. Man is essentially the product of his language. It builds and moulds a person into a particular shape. Language makes one think, speak, dance and behave in a particular manner. Its language that makes one Nigerian, Kenyan, Arabian or African etc.

Africa as a continent has its given language which is unique in its own respect. This language may not be absolutely the same among all countries and even within a country, a lot of languages exist but there are features that differentiate Africans from other people of the world. The issue here is that any person with passion for the African language today will believe that, the very material, spiritual and aesthetic fabric of African people had been destroyed by western civilisation.

Findings of the Study

Our Continent which is made up of rich and diverse languages has been losing most of its language and cultural ideals especially through the adoption of foreign languages showcased through the mass media. Nowadays, it is observed that our young men and women have abandoned our cultures and languages for foreign ones. It is common to see young Africans walking across the streets half nude putting on micro-mini skirts, handless top, trousers and other outfits that are not part of our cultural identity.

Indeed, we have our traditional attires, but how many Africans proudly wear such traditional attires today? A visit to our banks today will give you a perfect example. In fact, it is mandatory in the



banks that you wear a suit except on Fridays that you are allowed to wear native attire. The question we must answer is whether wearing of suit is part of African or Western culture? Must we copy everything western? Can't we promote our rich culture, language and traditional outfit so that our local industries can boom? The dress code aspect is of importance in our present situation especially inward looking in exploring and exploiting the potential inherent in Africa.

It is disheartening that most Africans no longer patronise their native languages. They often tagged them as "local". This will not help our continent grow because, when we do not patronise our own native languages, even our economic fortunes would continue to dwindle. We must take pride in our home languages rather than rush for foreign.

Our languages are gradually going into extinction due to preference for foreign languages. The younger generations can hardly communicate in their native dialects. White men colonised Africa; which Africans consciously and unconsciously imbibed. In the process of accepting the new cultures and languages, they forgot to sift carefully and select the important and discard the less important ones. They forget the existence of their true culture and language. The colonial masters provided Africans with their own language and painted array of benefits that would accrue them (the Africans) once they mastered the white man's language and culture.

Today, many people are even ashamed to speak their local dialect in the public. They prefer to speak English because they believe that it is the best language to speak. We often see couples who hail from the same village in Nigeria for instance, whose children cannot speak their native language instead, they speak English and even in most cases, they do not speak simple and correct English but pidgin. What an aberration!

Our cultural heritages have been watered down by western civilisation. Gone were days where life was treasured and values were welcome and held with high level of respect. As of then, parents hide their faces in shame when their daughters are found out to be non-virgin by their husbands during wedlock. The notions of chastity and virginity have been rendered absurd. The moral excellence of African society has overnight transformed into moral decay. Elders are no longer respected; our rich cultural festivals and ceremonies are now seen as old school.

The mass media are the core influence of cultural imperialism on society today. Africans, especially the youth now imitate values like gangsterism, bribery, drug addiction, rape, semi-nudity, etc. These values have dangerous effects on the youths, who ignorantly mimic them as a way of life. The mass media in this case is seen as media imperialism which is described as the over-concentration of the mass media from larger nations as a significant variable in negatively affecting smaller nations, in which the national identity of smaller nations is lessened or lost due to media homogeneity from the imperialist countries.

One of the negative roles the mass media plays in our today's society is the dominance and propagation of violence through the use of colonial English particularly on television and video industry. A lot of the foreign films content on television are mainly scenes of violence. The actors who engage in murder and other violent acts are portrayed as heroes. Home video, which is very popular now with local films, also carries the same theme. Research has shown that children who watch violence are most prone to violent behavior in adulthood.

Recommendation

Since Africa has inherited enough from her foreign colonisers, it is time for us to start appreciating these things and blending them into traditional African society in order to bear a trade mark of our own and language in particular. Gone were the days where our native African language were



cherished. Now we tend to enjoy using foreign language, products and life style to the detriment of our traditional way of life.

We should be on the revival of traditional morality which our continent Africa was known for. The government headed by the African leaders, the elites, the wealthy, the common and the parents should come together and play the major role each it is supposed to play in ensuring a shift from the use of alien language to our African home languages. This in the long run will surely raise our cultural values in high esteem.

In sub-Saharan Africa, people and culture are inseparable since there is no denial of the fact that what makes any society is its Language. In this same vein, going by the theory of environmental determinism, the language of any society is largely dictated by its geography. Arguments have risen from several schools of thought to the problems causing these trends. The complex nature of language is that no two different languages that have diverse interest can exist side by side without clashes.

To ensure fulfillment of the above, one would, first and foremost recommend that, on the level of individuals, everyone is attached to a language and should therefore, be culturally conscious and alert to his or her identity and its uniqueness. In other words, language is inseparable from people and should therefore be cherished and relished.

Further, the social institutions such as the family which shoulders the responsibility of procreation and orientation of new ones should not be lose in its function of socialisation, the agents of which should be closely monitored. Rather, they should be made to internalise the values and virtues, which are in tandem with the family's language dictates so as to ensure behavioural sameness and ideological similarity.

On the part of the government, political power should be utilised to encourage cultural people, regardless of their tribal divergence, to develop interest in promoting and marketing their language uniqueness and potency, which could be of economic advantage. This is to bring maxim that "there is unity in diversity".

African language is currently the missing link in our lives, in our education system and in our society. Language is the vehicle which carries culture from one generation to the next. And culture is expressed through language. So language and culture are intertwined one cannot exist without the other. As Africans we should ensure the reengagement of our children with the indigenous languages which will lead to the recovery of our position in the development of our continent.

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