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Language rights in postcolonial Africa

Robert Phillipson and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas

Introduction

Language policy is of vital importance for the political stability and legitimacy of the state. Most contemporary African states are experiencing acute economic, social and political problems. In education there are many symptoms of crisis (World Bank 1988). The capacity of African governments to meet the expectations of their citizens is increasingly in question, and the legitimacy of the state is in doubt from Algeria and Morocco to South Africa, from Liberia to Sudan. The majority of Africans are governed in a language that they do not understand, but few African states have given serious attention to language policy. As Ayo Bamgbose, the Nigerian scholar in his recent book on <u>Language and the nation: the language question in Sub-Saharan African</u> puts it:

There is a general feeling that language problems are not urgent and hence solutions to them can wait. ... Language policies in African countries are characterized by one or more of the following problems: avoidance, vagueness, arbitrariness, fluctuation and declaration without implementation. (1991: 6, 111)

A clear example of declaration without implementation at the continental level is the failure of African governments to act on the <u>Cultural Charter for Africa</u>, which OAU (Organization for African Unity) Heads of State and Government adopted in 1976. Article 6(2) of this states that member states should "promote teaching in national languages in order to accelerate their economic, political and cultural development", while Article 18 urges them "to prepare and implement reforms necessary for the introduction of African languages in education" (quoted in Bamgbose 1991: 132). The OAU Language Plan of Action for Africa, adopted in 1986, and which covers the promotion and encouragement of African languages as media of education and mass literacy, has likewise not yet led to any wider use of indigenous languages (Bamgbose 1991: 127--128; see also Mateene 1980 and Kalema 1985).

A principal explanation for this state of affairs is that one of the most durable legacies of colonialism has been language policies. The new leaders have retained the languages of the former colonial powers and even strengthened their position, whereas African languages have seldom been declared official languages of contemporary African states and are often not even acknowledged as "national" languages. The OAU Inter-African Bureau of Languages sombrely concludes that current policies are unlikely to change the marginal position of indigenous languages (OAU-BIL 1985: 7):

Years after the attainment of political independence, the majority of African independent states have continued to practise linguistic policies inherited at the time of independence, where, on the whole, foreign colonial languages are more favoured than the languages indigenous to the African continent.

(This OAU body was scrapped in 1986, ostensibly for financial reasons, and its director, Kahombo Mateene, transferred to other OAU work. No doubt it was also relevant that the Bureau was championing the cause of African languages, an explicit goal of the OAU, rather more vigorously than most African political leaders.)

The colonial inheritance

Although the imperial powers had slightly different education policies, and considerable autonomy was allowed to the many Christian missions who bore the brunt of teaching, the goals of the imperial powers were very similar.

The Dutch colonial government in Indonesia deliberately restricted the opportunities of Indonesians to learn Dutch (Alisjahbana 1990: 316). A similar view was also widespread in settler colonies in British Africa, but the Colonial Office was convinced that English was a vital medium for Western influence. From the mid 19th century a grammatical knowledge of the English language was regarded as "the most important agent for the coloured population of the colonies" (quoted in Ashby 1966: 150). The colonialist ideology is encapsulated in Earl Grey's remarks in 1899 (quoted in Hodson 1902: 158):

Probably everyone would agree that an Englishman would be right in considering his way of looking at the world and at life better than that of the Maori or Hottentot, and no-one will object in the abstract to England doing her best to impose

her better and higher view on these savages ... Can there be any doubt that the white man must, and will, impose his superior civilization on the coloured races.

The same refrain could be heard in the French empire, where the "civilizing mission", including the role of the European language, was energetically articulated. The goal was to make the overseas subjects "French in language, thought, and spirit" (Foncin 1910, quoted in Ashby 1966: 365). A statement by Rambaud, the Minister of Public Education, in 1897 displays a keen awareness of the role of language in ensuring ideological control in the phase succeeding physical violence. It is also perceptive in identifying the key sites for linguistic control (quoted in Colonna 1975: 40):

The first conquest of Algeria was accomplished militarily and was completed in 1871 when Kabylia was disarmed. The second conquest has consisted of making the natives accept our administrative and judicial systems. The third conquest will be by the School: this should ensure the predominance of our language over the various idioms, inculcate in the muslims our own idea of what France is and its role in the world, and replace ignorance and fanatical prejudices by the simple but precise notions of European science.

According to French government sources, when the French arrived to "civilize" Algeria, the literacy rate in urban Algeria was 40%, far higher than in France at the time. When the French left in 1962, after 130 years of colonization, the literacy rate among Algerians was, in an optimistic reckoning, 10--15% (Colonna 1975).
Indigenous languages were marginalized and stigmatized, branded as mere "dialects" "idioms", "vernaculars" or "patois", in the same way as the languages of the "periphery" in Britain and France. French and English on the other hand were glorified, French as the language of reason, logic and human rights, English as the language of modernity, parliamentary democracy, technological progress and national unity (Skutnabb-Kangas---Phillipson 1986b; Phillipson 1992, chapter 9). In racially hierarchical South Africa the Boers saw themselves as a "chosen race". As God had selected them, then Afrikaans was logically the language of God. A similar ideology exists in the Arab world, where the language of the Koran is regarded as God's language. This provides a foundation for a belief in the absolute superiority of Arabic to other languages (Calvet 1987: 38--). Independent states in North Africa have institutionalized this "classical" Arabic, which can only be learned through formal instruction, hence prejudicing and restricting the rights of speakers of Berber and demotic Arabic. Despite the crass ignorance betrayed by the assertion of an American headmaster to an immigrant pupil "If English was good enough for Jesus it's good enough for you", there is a tendency for the same type of rationalizations to be used to legitimate all dominant languages, whether by reference to "logic", "technological advance and modernity" or "God".
The structural and ideological entrenchment of the dominant language in colonial empires had predictable results. "English was the official vehicle and the magic formula to colonial elitedom." (Ngũgĩ 1985: 115) "Education to many people came to mean simply the ability to speak and write English (from a history of Ghana, 1963, quoted in Mazrui 1968: 186). The tiny "evolué, assimilé" African elite were in theory as good as French. Their successful "education" implied a rejection of African linguistic and cultural values.
Education fulfilled a similar structural role in each colonial empire. It reflected the pattern through which racism is affirmed, namely glorifying the dominant (group/language), stigmatizing the dominated (groups/languages), and rationalizing the relationship between the two, always to the advantage of the dominant (Preiswerk 1980). Colonial education is characterized in the list that follows: the first two points reflect the stigmatization of the language and traditions of the dominated, the next four the glorification of the language, culture and educational traditions of the dominant (for more detail see Phillipson 1992, chapter 5).

- Local languages had low status, whether they were used in education (for initial literacy, as in the British and Belgian empires, and in South Africa and pre-independence Namibia) or not (as in the French empire in Africa), such literacy in no way challenging the dominance of the colonial language in secondary and higher education, administration, etc;
- local traditions and educational practice were ignored, despised and decried (see for instance, Jomo Kenyatta's plea to European educators to familiarize themselves with indigenous traditions (Kenyatta 1979, chapter 5, first published 1938);
- the master language of empire was attributed civilizing properties;
- Western-oriented, bookish education was offered (aimed at producing a class of compliant clerks and a loyal elite);
- from the secondary level upwards, education attempted to copy what was on offer in Europe, and was monolingual;
- though a very small proportion of the population was in formal (Western) education, particularly after the initial phase, education was seen as playing a central role in "civilizing the natives" and giving them access to "scientific knowledge" instead of "superstition".
The active underdevelopment of African languages is directly parallel to the economic underdevelopment (Rodney 1973) of these societies. In both domains, metropolitan values and norms dominated. Thus in education, resources and time were primarily allocated to teacher training, textbook development and teaching in the dominant language and not the dominated ones (Phillipson 1992, chapter 5). Apartheid in the education system involved a grossly unequal hierarchy of resource allocation. While it is true that a great deal of missionary effort went into alphabetizing indigenous languages, and providing initial literacy and translations of the Bible and edifying tracts in them, and that

this provides a valuable resource for further development, the colonial education systems treated the learning of such indigenous languages as purely transitional, and a decisive shift was made to the dominant language after a few years in the primary school.

Linguistic human rights in contemporary Africa

A consequence of this linguicist favouring of the dominant languages is that "Africans have been psychologically conditioned to believe that only European languages are structured to aid development" (Kashoki, quoted in UNIN 1981: 41). Little has changed in educational policy in independent Africa: "the colonial legacy seems to determine current educational practices as it has proved virtually impossible in all but a few cases to break away from the inherited practices." (Bamgbose 1991: 8). According to Gilbert Ansre, the Ghanaian sociolinguist, a key factor is linguistic imperialism, which he describes as

... the phenomenon in which the minds and lives of the speakers of a language are dominated by another language to the point where they believe that they can and should use only that foreign language when it comes to transactions dealing with the more advanced aspects of life such as education, philosophy, literature, governments, the administration of justice, etc. ... Linguistic imperialism has a subtle way of warping the minds, attitudes and aspirations of even the most noble in a society and of preventing him from appreciating and realising the full potentialities of the indigenous languages (Ansre 1979: 12).

As a result of linguistic imperialism, the vast majority of languages in former colonies have not gone through the processes of development (wide use of the written form, expansion of discourse functions and vocabulary, etc) which many European languages have in recent centuries. Their growth and expansion have been kept in check by the presence and favouring of the former colonial languages, and the vested interests, national and international, associated with these.

After independence, one of the most important education goals was the achievement of Universal Primary Education (UPE) as soon as possible. This was seen as a way of implementing Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which essentially affirms everybody's right to free and compulsory education at the elementary level. During the early 1960s the goals for all the regions of the world where UPE was not a reality were formulated at UNESCO conferences. The African conference was held in Addis Abeba in 1961. The question of which language Africans should become literate in was not raised, meaning by implication it was assumed that the policies of the colonial period would continue.

The UPE ideal was intimately linked in planners' minds to two basic economic and political ideas (Skutnabb-Kangas 1990a: 24--26). "Education for development" within a modernization paradigm was to lead to economic growth, a panacea for underdeveloped countries. "Nation-building" was to be supported by developing via UPE an awareness of belonging to one nation and an instrument, a common language, for practising this national unity. "Both basic motivating principles behind UPE thus led away from local and regional mother tongues, because both education for development and nation building seemed to "require" common languages with more currency" (Skutnabb-Kangas 1990a: 25). The result was a linguicist concern with the learning of the official colonial language and neglect of the African mother tongues. A vast amount of the "aid" effort has gone into teacher education and curriculum development in and through the former colonial languages, and disproportionately little into other African languages. UNESCO's insistence on education through the medium of the mother tongue (UNESCO 1953) was countered by economic and political arguments (i.e. arguments which can be accommodated under the leaky umbrella of the modernization paradigm and nation building), and branded as naive, romantic and idealistic (e.g. Bull 1955) and quietly forgotten (see Skutnabb-Kangas 1990a, chapter Mother tongue literacy and UPE).

A survey of the place of African languages in former French sub-Saharan colonies concludes (Djite 1990: 97--98):

The myth of French as a neutral and precious unifying factor has faded and is today essentially an 'elite closure' indicator - a linguistic boundary which limits access to socioeconomic mobility and political power to those societal members who possess the requisite linguistic patterns of the elite and which especially results when the official language is used by the elite in circumstances where a more widely known indigenous language would suffice. ... The use of the language of the former colonizer as a national and official language, a case of language policy by default for reasons of efficiency and efficacy, is no longer tenable. How efficient can a nation be when 90 percent of its population, as we have just indicated, is illiterate in the official language?

The former French colonies in North Africa have a somewhat ambivalent language policy, with French retained as the legitimate language of "modernization", and Arabic promoted as the language of political and religious legitimacy. Thus post-independence Algeria has undergone a major process of decolonization and arabization, but the new modernized Koranic Arabic, used in official domains and the media and learned in school, has taken the place of not only French but also the Arabic and Berber mother tongues (Grandguillaume 1990). The situation is diglossic, with the state attempting

to impose its vision of society by monopolizing access to and use of official Arabic. Legislation in 1990, which was aimed at reducing the influence of French, attempted to impose the exclusive use of written Arabic in official functions. The effect was also to confirm the outlawing of the mother tongues of a significant section of the population, languages which most of the population have been prevented from becoming literate in during both the colonial and post-colonial periods. Speakers of demotic Arabic and Berber are effectively deprived of basic linguistic rights in relation to their mother tongues.

Ignoring the linguistic complexities of African countries also characterized the educational planning documents for individual former British colonies as each approached independence---scant attention is paid to language in the reports, and when the issue is raised, attention is mostly confined to the learning of the former colonial language (Cawson 1975, a Ford Foundation survey by a former senior British Council staff member). In the report which served as the basis for expanding higher education in independent Nigeria, prepared by Ashby, a British academic, the local languages are not referred to---there is no mention of Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba (Firth 1961: 15), let alone the other 400 languages native to Nigeria (Bamgbose 1991: 2).

Official policies, abetted by "aid" in the language and education field have impeded the elaboration of local solutions to meet local problems, just as aid in many other fields has been inappropriate (Hancock 1989). In Africa alone there are an estimated 80,000 foreign "experts", a larger number of expatriates than in the colonial period (Hancock 1989), and the degree of success is meagre. When the former colonial languages have been used as media of education in schooling, the gulf between the educated elites (estimated as 10--15% of the total population) and ordinary people has widened. This worry has been expressed in a succession of reports throughout this century (for references see Phillipson 1992), and is still a valid concern. One result is that the interest of the elites tends to be equated with the interest of the nation (Bamgbose 1991: 19).

Awareness of the complexities of the language in education issue is notably absent from recent World Bank reports on the educational crisis in East Africa. These focus mainly on inefficiencies of implementation and budgeting (Psacharopoulos 1990, summarizing the World Bank series on Comparative African experiences in implementing educational policies). A World Bank survey of the failure of African governments to achieve declared educational goals concludes (Craig 1990: 59) that

... our knowledge of issues bearing on the implementation of educational policies in Sub-Saharan Africa remains seriously deficient. Although many scholars have commented on such issues in passing, the subject has yet to receive the sustained and careful attention that it merits.

An analysis of research issues and perspectives in language in education in Africa draws a bleak conclusion on the contribution of research to this field. Despite "a vast array of urgent research questions, the research community is small, the research outcome disappointing, and even marginal" (Obura 1986: 415). There is however substantial evidence that many aid projects in this field were culturally and educationally flawed: (for a Ford Foundation analysis describing the failings of their projects, see Fox 1975; for an analysis of linguistic imperialism and the role of English Language Teaching and applied linguistics in the "Third World", see Phillipson 1992).

Tanzania is often held up as an example of a country with a successful African language policy. A large majority of the many mother tongues are structurally related to Swahili, meaning that Swahili, which is the medium of education in the primary school, is much easier for most Tanzanians to learn than English would be. Swahili is increasingly used in social and political life. At the local level, the mother tongues are used in places of worship, business, village administration and courts, and in a supporting role in schools (Rubagumya 1990: 11). However although there is a close fit between the use of Swahili in primary school and outside it, English is still favoured at the secondary school level and above, despite the fact that English is manifestly a foreign language in Tanzania, is used in very few domains and is unable to function effectively as a medium of education (Rubagumya 1990). The "improper" favouring of English in secondary and higher education is self-defeating, as it prevents the achievement of Tanzanian societal goals (Rubagumya 1990). Tanzanian educational language policy is therefore in conflict with social realities. Support for Swahili has been ambivalent and inadequate. The linguistic hierarchy remains, with English dominant vis-a-vis Swahili, and mother tongues below, confined to local and private functions.

In other East African countries, English is even more favoured. Thus in Zambia all children are officially taught through the medium of English from the first class, though in practice this is virtually impossible to implement (Chishimba 1981) and recent reforms have acknowledged that mother tongues are a useful support. Zambian languages are used in adult literacy programmes (Kashoki 1989), but the role of English as a supra-ethnic language of nation-building is secure though not unchallenged. Educationally and culturally, the language policy cannot be regarded as a success (Africa 1980).

Akinnaso's study of Nigeria (1991) distinguishes between exogenous languages (English, French, Arabic), indigenous languages (approximately 400), and the "neutral" pidgin English which has almost taken over the role of lingua franca in informal domains, and is increasingly resorted to in education. A status classification distinguishes between 3 "national" languages, 9 "regional" languages, and the remaining "local" languages. Although only the 12 major languages are known to be actively used as media of instruction in primary schools, it is estimated that nearly 50 different Nigerian languages have been developed and used for initial literacy in primary schools (Akinnaso 1991: 53). In the linguistic hierarchy English ranks highest because of its status as "official" language. However in Nigeria

"language loyalties override all other social and political ones. ... Nigerians are as loyal to their mother tongues as they are contemptuous of other languages" (Akinnaso 1991: 44--45). Language planning involves attempting to reconcile the competing claims of languages for different societal purposes, the conflicting claims of unity versus diversity, state versus local interests. "... the ideologies underpinning language policies in these countries and the orientations of the policies may be in perpetual conflict as are the models of education adopted to promote their implementation." (Akinnaso 1991: 57).

Many African scholars document the complexity of the linguistic scene in individual countries and plead for multilingual language planning (e.g. Africa 1980; Tadadjeu 1980; for a continent-wide survey of the alphabetization and standardization of African languages, and available literacy materials, see Mioni 1989; for a major survey of language planning issues in Sub-Saharan Africa, including the use made of indigenous languages in education, and the gap between academic research, policy-making and implementation, see Bamgbose 1991).

A general survey of language policy in Africa documents the need for change (Heine 1990). A policy paper by the OAU bureau referred to earlier regards the emphasis on learning a foreign language as being distinctly harmful as well as costly (OAU Inter-African Bureau of Languages 1985: 10): it is "delaying the popularisation, among the majority of the population, of basic scientific and technical knowledge, a prerequisite to the general overall development of Africa." Increasing use of African languages would promote better communication between rulers and ruled, harness the energies of the rural population to the development of their environment, and stimulate more scientific study of African languages (OAU Inter-African Bureau of Languages 1985). The Bureau makes specific proposals for creating linguistic unity at the national level, and recommends a small number of languages (Kiswahili, Hausa, Arabic, Lingala and Zulu) as languages for regional and continental contact and unification. They make a plea to African governments to turn their attention to language policy, promote African languages, and elaborate a "Linguistic Charter for Africa".

Such a Charter is proposed elsewhere in the same publication, which along with proposals similar to those of the OAU Bureau includes the following proposals (Dalby 1985: 29):

2. That the equal linguistic rights of every individual be recognised, together with the need to provide access to literacy in every living African language.
3. That as many languages as possible in each African state, depending on the number of speakers, be given the status of national languages, with an established place in the national education system and in the media.
4. That at least one African language in each state be given the status of official language, to replace or be used alongside any existing "foreign" official language.

Sadly, there is little sign of any change in language policy in African countries, while the economic, political and social problems accumulate. The relationship between language policies and such problems has not been explored in any great detail, but there is no doubt that present policies serve to educate an elite which is closely tied to Western interests and to marginalize the majority of the population.

Recent moves towards creating structures in which more democratic participation in African societies is permitted are likely to see an increasing demand for linguistic human rights. Current national constitutions and practice seldom guarantee such rights. Nor does the continental African Charter on Human and People's Rights, proposed in 1981, under UN auspices, and in force since 1986, having by then been ratified by a majority of African states. This Charter has a non-discrimination clause in Article 2 covering many criteria, including language. It specifies the right of every individual to education, but does not stipulate in what language this should be (article 17). Several articles aim at strengthening indigenous cultural values (e.g. articles 20 and 29) but the linguistic heritage of Africa is not referred to.

For Fanon, a major theorist of African liberation, the problem of language in the relations between the dominant and the dominated was of "capital importance" (Fanon 1952: 21). For Ngũgĩ, the brilliant Kenyan writer whose novels and political writings aim at "decolonizing" the African mind, language has always been at the heart of the struggle between imperialism and liberation from domination (Ngũgĩ 1985: 109). There is a genuine conflict of interest between a centralized, "modernizing" state with a restrictive official language policy and the huge cultural potential that the de facto ethnic and linguistic diversity of Africa represents. Hopefully greater democratization will lead to a greater enjoyment of linguistic human rights and to the solution of some of Africa's grave social, economic and political problems.

Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas

The Cambridge Handbook of Language Policy. Colonial and post-colonial language policies in Af The Cambridge Handbook of Language Policy. The Cambridge Handbook of Language Policy. Connell, Bruce 2015. Language Documentation and Endangerment in Africa. Vol. 17, Issue. , p. 107. CrossRef. Postcolonial Literature Characteristics. Appropriation of Colonial Languages. Postcolonial writers have this thing they like to do. They take the language of their colonizer (English or French, for example) and turn it on its head. A writer from the Caribbean, for example, may write a novel or play in English, but he or she may twist the English around, write in dialect, make the language sound spoken instead of written, pepper it with native phrases and terms. It's still English, but it's a different kind of English. Why do postcolonial writers do this? The impact of colonial and postcolonial Ghanaian language policies on vernacular use in schools in two northern Ghanaian communities. Comparative Education, 41(1), 71–85.CrossRefGoogle Scholar. Mlama, P. M. (1990). In: Language Policy and Economics: The Language Question in Africa. Palgrave Studies in Minority Languages and Communities.