

The Language of Development and the Development of Language in Contemporary Africa

The Challenge of African Development in the Context of Current Linguistic Realities and Dominant Knowledge in Applied Linguistics

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Introduction

Arguably, few issues so overwhelmingly preoccupy African governments and societies as the question of development. Many would agree that it is the single most articulated existential rationale of African governments. This is obviously because; it is the universally required and desired object of the masses of African citizenry. This has certainly been the case since the commencement of the era of African self-rule some fifty years ago. But ostensible desires and putative efforts have produced only limited and paltry results that meet the development challenges we face in Africa. The failure to match goals with achievements has, for years, haunted Africa minds. In equal measure, the lack of success in making headway in the development of African societies has kept interested parties close to the grindstone.

To many people the emblems of success in development are represented by brick and mortar monuments; high-rise buildings, roads, bridges etc. This imagery crowds the minds of too many of us and we end up not making out the wood from the trees. The infrastructural and physical part-representations of development are easily assumed to be the substance of development. The result is that our appreciation of the notion of development is often inadequate or misguided.

Over the past half-century, we have seen a train of fashionable theories come to pass; ranging from, the modernization and functionalist theories of the fifties and early sixties, the neo-Marxian approaches of the sixties and early seventies, the World Bank and IMF Structural Adjustment solutions of the seventies and eighties; sustainable development, and UN-inspired thinking around the notion of a Human Development index. The fleeting character and transient shelf-life of these theories point to inherent and fundamental weaknesses in their construction. None of these approaches have been able to create viable theoretical bases for African economic and social development. As researchers of the development *problematique* in Africa, arguably, we have too often acquiescently allowed ourselves and our minds to transit from one theoretical vogue to the next as if this is the most natural thing to do.

Most of these theories, especially the solutions of the Bretton Woods institutions have been constructed on over-weighted economic and technicist considerations. The seduction of figures and statistics and the near exclusion of ostensibly “softer” markers including cultural considerations have been allowed to go too far. The UNDP concept of human development implicitly attempts to address these anomalies. But arguably it does not go far enough.

The concept of human development works around the notion that human welfare depends on various real-life conditions, many of which are only poorly represented by bald and conventional measurements of economic income (Griffin and Knight 1990). The concept apportions particular attention to the use of measurements of health and education as welfare indicators in addition to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita. Education, good health and mature age are regarded as inherently valuable outputs. Out of these pointers is constructed a composite indicator, the human development index (HDI), which gives equal weight to three leading markers: real GDP per capita (measured at purchasing power parity in constant prices); life expectancy at birth; and educational attainment, measured by adult literacy (two-thirds weight) and combined primary, secondary and tertiary enrolment ratios (one third weight). These parameters may be useful measuring rods but they can hardly explain, in effect, what the enabling conditions for development are.¹

What for our purposes here needs emphasis is that, simply put, ultimately, development should mean the steady improvement and optimization of the quality of life for increasingly broader sections of the population; that the existential options and the ability for people to choose freely their life-routes and circumstances are steadily augmented. Brick and mortar investments are important, but only in as far as they enable expanded existential options.

What over the past few decades has become clear to many is the fact that culture in general and language and literacy in particular are crucial and central to the development endeavour. Development and education, in whose language? – Whose education for all?

Birgit Brock-Utne (2006 [2000]: 115-134) has asked; in our colonial languages or the languages of the masses? Can development ever proceed successfully in the second and third languages partially used by demographically narrow elites? The larger questions that emerge from these considerations are that, what are the relevant contextual linguistic realities of contemporary Africa? How do they affect the issues attendant on development? How do the dominant assumptions and epistemology in applied linguistics relate to the challenges we face in Africa today?

The Fulcrum of Language

In my contribution to the *UNDP Human Development Report for 2004*, I had argued that, as humans; much as we continuously make and generationally transmit culture, culture makes and defines us both as individuals and as members of groups. Cultures overlap and interpenetrate, but they also differ. Their assemblage of ideals, values and patterns of institutionalized behaviour, socialized symbols and shared meanings are built on language. The social character of language and its function as the key transactional instrument for the communication of human groups makes it both the supreme divider and, at the same time invisible instrument for uniting people. We need also to remember that as the global village assumes more integrated form the shared civilization of humanity will increasingly be based more on achieved social characteristics than ascribed criteria. In addition, how we manage diversity will determine whether we are successful in institutionalizing cultural pluralism in a democratic world or remain saddled with divisive conflict-ridden scenarios with mindless bloodletting as has been the case in recent years in the Eastern Congo and the Sudan (Prah 2004: 5-6). If cultural pluralism and multilingualism are to be advanced to support democracy, tolerance and the peaceful coexistence of different cultural groups then fuller linguistic and cultural empowerment of all groups in equality and even-handedness is required.

Observers who have paid attention to the phenomenon of multilingualism in Africa cannot fail to recognize a qualitative appreciation of multilingualism among particularly the urban lower classes. In their numbers they are changing the linguistic landscape in African countries. African language-based community radios have given voice to people who had previously been silent; there is much more socially varied participation in discussions about public affairs, and this is multilingual. Contemporary African multilingualism is allowing greater permeability of identities. It's enabling people to adopt and discard identities when necessity as perceived by the actors demand. Multilingualism is tempering ethnic rigidities and providing an escape from the cultural imprisonment of localism and ethnicism. This rich multilinguistic facility of Africans is however pre-eminently oral. The literacy bases of such linguistic usage hardly includes multilingualism as a literate quality available to people. Knowledge and narratives cannot be systematically compacted in detail, precisely stored in black and white or committed to data of infinite complexity. For these reasons, the foundations of African multilingualism are weak and can be said to suffer from the sort of shortcomings which orality has in

comparison to literacy. African languages need to transit from orality to literacy if greater and more beneficial use is to be made of them (Prah 2010: 173).

Over the past four to five decades, the contentions between advocates of the theories of “the great divide” and its critics have lingered. There can be little doubt that the consequences of alphabets and the writing technique have not only enhanced the resources of cognitive processes and methodologies of measurement but writ large, they have also enabled societies to transcend simpler socio-organizational forms. But there are problems with an acceptance of the thesis as variously conceptualized by Goody and Watt (1963), Havelock (1963) or Olson (1977). The “great divide” theories have been criticized for their inherent and conceptually reified binarism implying dichotomies and polarities like; civilization and barbarism; logical and pre-logical or non-logical societies, rational and irrational societies; mythopoeic and logico-empirical; literate and illiterate etc. There have been questions regarding the serious Eurocentric bias in regarding the Latin alphabet as technically superior to scripts like the Chinese or Japanese or for that matter any other (Finnegan 1973; Street 1984). The numerous challenges and clarifications that have been brought into the debate have tended to make hard and definitive positions almost non-existent. Additionally, one could argue that the rise and prevalence of the legacy of post-modernism in the social sciences and the humanities over the past few decades has further weakened any commitments towards certainty and conclusiveness on the issue. Be that as it may, it is possible to say in agreement with Street and Lefstein (2007) that, looking at the impact of Goody, the most prominent figure among the “great divide” theorists; his ideas are probably still closest in broad outline to current favoured and policy perceptions of the significance of literacy. This is indeed where most of us stand.

The advantages of literacy, as a societal quality, are today hardly in doubt. The power of the written word in both developed and developing countries becomes clear as we all move forward into a brave new world where technological innovations are no longer occasional or periodic occurrences but frequent and pressing manifestations of a burgeoning scientifically literate and technologically fecund minds (Prah 2010: 173). Graff and Duffy (2007: 47) write that; “The assumed link between literacy and economic success is one of the cornerstones of Western modernization theories On a collective scale, literacy is thought to be a necessary precondition of modernization, a cause and correlate of economic growth, productivity, industrialization, per capita wealth, gross national product, and technological advances, among other advances.” The science of language and education is heavily stacked on the side of the literacy; and today more than was the case yesterday, most educationists would agree that the literate-use of the mother-tongue or home language is the most effective way of processing education.

Noticeably, Africans today are overwhelmingly multilingual and the trend is that we are becoming even more so. Africans should be able to benefit from this growing multilingualism and use it to their advantage in education, science and technological

development. Without doubt, the ability for people to relate to each other in their languages makes for good social intercourse and can only be profitable to the society as a whole. Therefore, multilingualism should be recognized as an important tool for social integration. Multilingualism helps to check tendencies towards inter-group tensions and misunderstandings. Living and sharing each other's world provides scope for greater and easier inter-group understanding. It also provides reach for the greater sharing of literature. On economies of scale, multilingualism on a literate social base enhances the viability of production for large constituencies and readerships. These large readerships do not have to be and are not necessarily mother-tongue users of these languages. Indeed, as second, third, fourth or fifth language-users such large reading constituencies make for economic viability. It has already been pointed out that multilingualism helps to support relatively smaller languages with limited constituencies. When people know each other's language, the constituencies in these languages increase. The social base of users supporting a given language is then not only the mother-tongue users of the language, but also those who as second, third, fourth or fifth language-users share in the augmentation of the constituency (Prah 2009: 272-273). There are other advantages that can be brought to notice. In Africa, multilingualism clearly enhances informal trade and also helps create sentiments of inclusivity amongst citizens. If the literacy base of multilingualism is cultivated and fostered with resources multilingualism will enhance intellectual access to knowledge and information by citizens. The polyglot is a person who moves in many cultural worlds and this ability can only be an advantage on our increasingly incommensurable globe (Prah 2009: 272-273).

Africa is certainly one of the most diversified cultural areas in the whole world. While such extensive diversity is not unique to Africa, given the geographical size of the continent as the second largest continent in the world, the profusion of this cultural variegation sometimes gives the outwardly impression of unending differences. Closer anthropological examination however reveals extensive convergences and structural similarities between superficially distinct cultures. The traditional religious systems of Africa, in particular, display a great deal of formal and structural unity across the continent. The dynamics of clanship show very little variation over wide areas and often involve groups, which are considered to be distinct ethnicities and which are scattered across existing state borders (Prah 2004: 5-6). The point is that, much as there are important cultural differences among African societies as we move from one area to the next, the implications of such patterns of dissimilitude should not be exaggerated.

One of the most persistent myths in the study of African society is the idea that Africa is the prime example of the *Tower of Babel*; that linguistic heterogeneity is of such proportions that Africans cannot share or work in their own languages. There are some of us who have come to the conclusion that this idea has intentionally or unintentionally become a useful tool in the hands of those who want to see Africans work in perpetuity in the colonial languages; those who want to argue that because of the purportedly

uncountable number of languages in Africa, working in African languages is impractical and undesirable.

Classification and the Number's Game

What is not easily recognized by many observers is that most of what in the literature and classificatory schemes on African languages pass or are identified as separate languages in an overwhelming number of cases are actually dialectal variants of “core languages”, labelled as distinct languages. In other words, most African languages can be regarded as mutually intelligible variants within large clusters (core languages). Indeed, almost all African languages are trans-border languages, and the majority of them cross more than one state border. Arguably, the multiplicity and artificiality of African state borders today feed directly into the myth of the tower of babel because these borders create political and social realities of separateness and distinction for languages which are in fact organically and structurally contiguous or the same. Thus the Nguni cluster of mutually intelligible speech forms will include, Zulu, Xhosa, Swati, Kangwane, and Ndebele. Sotho-Tswana includes, Pedi, Sotho, Tswana, and Lozi. The two clusters, Nguni and Sotho-Tswana have speakers in five and six countries respectively in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) region. What the *Centre of Advanced Studies of African Society's* (CASAS) work has so far revealed is that as first, second or third language speakers (we need to remember that most Africans are multilingual), over 75% of Africans speak no more than 13 core languages, these being, *Nguni, Sotho-Tswana, Swahili, Amharic, Fulfulde* (Fula, Pulaar, Peul, Tuculor, Fulful, Fulbe, Fulani), *Mandenkan* (Susu, Bamanankan/Bambara, Dyula, Xasonke, Ligbi, Numu, Malinke, Mandinka, Yalunka, Kono), *Igbo, Hausa* (In Nigeria alone these include, Kananci, Zazzaganci, Bausanchi, Dauranchi, Gudduranchi, Hadejanchi, Sakkwatanchi, Katsinanchi, Arewanchi, Kurhwayanchi Arewa, Arawa and Zaria). *Yoruba, Ijaw* (The language Ijọ is anglicised as Ijaw; although mutual intelligibility diminishes across dialectal borders, the people regard themselves as one. The cluster includes; Obolo, Kalabari, Okirika, Bile, Ibani, Nkọrọ, Nembe, Akasa, Biseni, Okodia, Oruma and Izon (Izon is the largest in the cluster and it alone has the following dialectal variants; Arogbo, Kolokuma, Gbarain, Ekpetiama, Ikibiri, Tarakiri, Bumọ. Apoi, Bassan, Olodiana, Oporoma, Oyiakiri, Ogboin, Seimbiri, Operemọ, Kabu, Kumbọ, Ogbe-Ijoh, Iduwini, Ogulagha, Oporoza/Gbaranmatu, Arogbo, Egbema, Furuṣagha, Obotebe, Isaba, Tuomo, Mein, Tungbo, Kọu, etc.); *Luo* (Acholi, Lango, Dhopadhola, Dholuo); *Eastern Inter-lacustrine* (Luganda, Lumasaaba, Lusoga, Lulamogi, Lunyole, Lugishu) and *Western Interlacustrine/Runyakitara* (Runyoro, Rutoro, Runyankore, Rikiga, Ruhaya, Runyambo, Rukerewe, Ruhema, Ruhuma). 16 core languages will take us up to about 85% of the African population of the continent; the three additions being the Somali/Samburu/Rendille and Oromo/Borana/Gabra clusters, the Gur group (Gurene, Kabye, Koulango, Lokpa, Moore, nCam, Senufo, Tem). The addition of languages like, the Gbe cluster (Aja, Gun, Fon, Mina, Ewe), Kikongo, Luba, Akan, Mbundu, Lingala and Ovimbundu takes the percentage of Africans to about 90 percent. For a population of 700 million to 800 million people, these core languages cannot be described as small speech communities.

These ethno-linguistic or cultural realities of Africa provide Africans with senses of identity, which often transcend the identities, which emerged under colonialism (Prah 2004: 5-6). These realities are particularly interesting in view of the fact that urban mythology paraded as scientific fact makes-believe that Africa is a “tower of babel.”

In as far as African development is concerned, the upshot of these facts are that the harmonisation of African languages which show high levels of mutual intelligibility would greatly facilitate the economies of scale in the development of educational, media and cultural materials which could go a long way towards strengthening the basis of society for the cultural and social development of Africa. Furthermore, it is the only way of culturally empowering the masses of African society. It is the one way we can remove the cultural cleavage between the elite and mass society. It provides the key to the methodology of eradicating the stigma of inferiority, which the colonial experience has invested in African languages.

Some years ago, Heine identified four key objectives, which motivate the classification of African languages. These being, firstly; the need to bring some order to the multiplicity of African languages (*referential classification*); secondly, a search for origins of these languages (*genetic classification*); thirdly, the inter-linguistic influences between these languages (*areal classification*); and fourthly, the establishment of the structural convergences and divergences between African languages (*typological classification*). He argues that these different types of classification serve different goals and functions, and that indeed, “non-awareness of the different functions of these classifications may lead to scientifically untenable results.” (Heine 1993: 1). A good example of the pitfalls of this methodological mess is provided by Malcolm Guthrie who “confused two different types of classification by grafting and superimposing a genetic classification on a referential one - with the effect that his reconstruction of Bantu pre-history turned out to be at variance with the historical facts he had intended to describe.” (Heine 1993: 1). Today most researchers work on the basis of the assumption that there are five phyla of African languages, these being, Afro-Asiatic Nilo-Saharan, Niger-Congo A, Niger-Congo B (Bantu), Khoisan and Austronesian. This is a modest update of Greenberg’s work to include Malagasy and related dialectal variants (Greenberg 1963).

The ambiguities of African language identification and numbers recognize no authority. Lord Hailey (1938: 68) put a figure of 700 on them. In his *The Languages of Africa* (1963/1970 edition), Greenberg lists 730 languages in his index. The Chinese scholar Sun Xiaomeng writes that; “Due to differences in the standards of language classification and statistics, the debate over the total amount of African languages never stops.” (Xiaomeng.2010). In Mann and Dalby’s, *The Thesaurus of African Languages* the authors indicate in their introduction that, “the approach we have adopted is to treat as a ‘language’ each speech-form whose speakers claim a separate linguistic identity, reserving the term dialect for cases where speakers explicitly acknowledge both a wider and narrower linguistic identity. Linguistic identity is generally manifested in a common

name, so that crudely it may be said we have distinguished as many languages as there are names used by communities to refer to their language.” (1987: 1)

This is unfortunate. A great deal of self-identification in Africa as in many parts of the world is more political than linguistic/cultural in any serious sense. Many of these identities have been created by a convergence of colonial administrative and missionary activity (particularly with reference in the latter instance to bible translations). In a part of the world where till today localist sentiments, poor communications and transport, plus strong traditional modes of livelihood still prevail this sort of approach leads to the listing of numerous dialects, and names of localities and villages, as languages. Indeed, they admit that in some circumstances, according to the methodology they have adopted, “the only reference point is the village, and in the cases mentioned our language inventory perforce approximates to a list of villages.” (Mann and Dalby 1987: 1)

In their introduction to *African Languages – An Introduction*, Heine and Nurse (2000: 1) write that; “A recent authority [Grimes 1996] puts the number of African languages at 2,035: this number is not fixed, as some languages are still being ‘discovered’, while others with few speakers are being eliminated.” The notion of “discovery” of things African has tarried in the Western mind. Indeed, it lies at the heart of the problem of African language identification, development and usage in the contemporary world. There are certain institutions, mainly missionary, which in their inter-denominational rivalries and desire to translate the Bible in African languages, till today want to “discover” new African tribes and ethnicities which once “discovered” then deserve to have the Bible translated in their languages. These missionary crusades intermittently discover “new languages”. In fact, what they frequently end up doing is to fragment large languages into small groups with different labels which are then elevated to the status of languages and then on the basis of idiosyncratically constructed orthographies translate the Bible and other mostly religious literature into the newly “discovered” languages. In the early period of missionary labours in Africa, indeed, new languages were frequently “discovered”, today while all distinct speech forms are well within purview, the zeal to discover new tribes and languages persists. The leading missionary institution pursuing this approach is the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL). CASAS has in the past engaged this institution on this issue but not much headway and agreement has been reached. The upshot of all of this is that whilst institutions like CASAS are harmonizing African language orthographies on the basis of mutual intelligibility in order to make them more viable to be used as languages of development and economy, other institutions are working at cross purposes; in the opposite direction. This ambivalent dynamic of fractionalization and aggregation in the identification of African languages has been described as “splitters” and “lumpers” dispositions among linguists. “Splitters” supposedly treat varieties as distinct languages while “lumpers” view varieties as dialectal variants (Heine and Nurse 2000: 3).

Heine and Nurse warn the reader to be cautious about the figure of 2035, arguing that;

... in fact it is an estimate which should be treated with caution, because it depends crucially on where one draws the line between language and dialect. A language is often defined by some combination of: having national status; being written; being the standard form of a range of speech varieties; not being intelligible to speakers of other 'languages'; and have a relatively large number of native speakers. By contrast, dialects are said to be local, not written, not the standard form, be mutually intelligible, and to have fewer speakers.(2000: 2)

There are problems with this understanding. It is difficult to accept the idea of the attribution of status of "language" to "national status". There are a number of languages in Africa which are very large languages, in terms of number of speakers, but which are divided by so many borders that they are everywhere small minorities, without "national status" of importance or significance in any single country; Luo is a good example of this. It is also difficult to see how "being written" can be a serious determinant of whether a speech form is a language or a dialect; being written tells us nothing about dialectal variation. Another problem with this formulation is the attachment of "a relatively large number of native speakers". Between Icelandic (300.000 speakers) or Luxembourgish (390.000 speakers) spoken by a few hundred thousand people in each of these two instances and Mandarin Chinese spoken by over a billion people, it is difficult to see how the question of numbers make a difference to their status as languages.

Language, the Missing Link in African Development

For the past few decades, some of us who have argued that culture, more specifically, language is the missing link in the search for a route to African development. The argument is that without the use of African languages, the languages of mass society; there was no chance for African development. While language is not the only crucial factor in the development process, it is the matrix within which the process is socio-culturally negotiated. Furthermore, it was realized that the use of African languages for education and development would instil a sense of collective cultural confidence emerging out of the fact that the production and reproduction of knowledge can be transacted in the languages which everybody knows. This viewpoint was treated with a great deal of scepticism in some circles, but in others the penny dropped.

This argument has, over the years, steadily won acolytes, but this has remained mainly at the argumentational level with little attempt to translate these views into social practice. Most international and donor organizations are agreed, together with African authorities, that language of instruction (LoI) policies in education should respect and use African languages in the early years of education. In a report put out on behalf of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) Working Group on Educational Research and Policy Analysis (WGER&PA), in collaboration with the ADEA Secretariat, which was commissioned after African Ministers of Education expressed a need for an exploration of languages of instruction in the African context,

particularly the use of mother-tongues and national languages for instruction and learning, the coordinator and editor of the report Kabiru Kiyanjui pointed out that,

On the question of pedagogical effectiveness, research shows that language of instruction (LoI) policies that favour mother tongues in the early years of basic education result in improved and faster acquisition of knowledge by pupils. Furthermore, mother-tongue LoI is effective in promoting the acquisition of second-language competencies. On the issue of cultural development and the promotion of individual and collective identities, research (though limited) shows that LoI policies favouring the use of African *lingua francas* result in students; developing integrative attitudes across ethnic groups (Kenya). It should be noted that these findings are contrary to the previously held assumption that the use of African *lingua francas* as LoIs or as official languages would prove to be ethnically divisive. (1997: xiv)

All African governments theoretically agree with this view but hardly any are able or willing to devote the requisite resources for the realisation of such objectives. Mother-tongue education does not feature anywhere near the top of their priorities. They are frequently more concerned about how to fast-track education in French, English or Portuguese from as early an age as possible. It is thus the practices of African elites which are practically bringing increasingly larger numbers of African languages into the zone of endangered languages; languages faced with the prospect of extinction if current policies go unchecked.

The argument we are making here, however, goes beyond the use of African languages, or mother-tongue education for the first two to four years. The point is that like the policy adopted by all developmentally successful countries, African languages should be used throughout the different stages of the educational system. The argument goes further to suggest that African languages should be used in all areas and dimensions of social life. This is not to suggest that English, French and Portuguese (the colonial languages of Africa) should not be taught at schools. Rather they should be taught as second, third or fourth languages in educational systems, which allow the acquisition and learning of foreign languages at the late primary and secondary levels. This is the approach used in most European and Asian countries. Olson and Torrance have observed that,

...because literacy and schooling were seen as the causes or engines of social change, then the obvious means to producing psychological and social change was through imposing literacy and schooling on the ignorant and illiterate. The personal and social aspirations, interests, competencies and traditions of the learners could be ignored and overwritten by imposing literate standards and literate practices on them. More importantly, developing non-literate cultures could be advanced by imposing on them the literate practices and literate

institutions of the developed West, originally in the form of colonization. ... these inferences are no longer seen as warranted; indeed such practices are now widely recognized as oppressive. (2001:4)

It is not the introduction or imposition of literate institutions and practices on preliterate peoples which are deleterious, it is the imposition of non-indigenous colonial languages, foreign institutions and practices which undermine in whole the foundational viability of native cultures which is detrimental. What needs emphasis is that literacy and orality must not and cannot be understood in purely abstract and sociologically disembodied terms. Again Brock-Utne (2009: 36) poignantly asks; “Literacy in whose language.” Literacy and orality are always in specific languages.

The wisdom undergirding the argument that African languages should be the languages of development in Africa rhymes with the experience of the rest of the world. In post-colonial Asia; societies which in the last few decades of post-colonialism have developed phenomenally; local languages have become the main instruments for the development of Asian societies. Bahasa in the Indonesian-Malaysian archipelago and Vietnamese are most illustrative about how colonial languages can profitably be put behind us in post-colonial societies as we move forward towards modernity and industrialization in our own languages. In Europe, in spite of the wide knowledge and usage of English, practically each European country uses its own language or languages for education and wider social intercourse. This piece of wisdom of language policy, which is common to most of the world, remains uncommon to Africa. Africa is ruled by elites which based on the evidence of their practice prefer colonial languages to their own languages, as languages of development.

Where people are convinced about the value of African languages in education and development, they remain overwhelmed by the false assumption that there are too many different African languages; that there is no existing scientific literature of serious and cultivated proportions; that there is widespread illiteracy; that the economic costs of a movement into African languages is overwhelming, or that there is “lack of political will” at the decision-making levels of African societies. The “lack of political will” has become an enigmatic mantra for the unwillingness of African neo-colonial elites to break loose from their colonial cultural legacy. The response that the *Kijanjui Report* makes to these questions is that;

Research indicates that ignoring these two key determinants results in problematic implementation: for instance, unclear objectives lead to loose interpretations of the LoI policy during the implementation phase; failing to take people’s attitudes toward language into account results in their rejecting the LoI. The most commonly identified technical problems arising from inadequate language planning include the inappropriateness of technical terms in the LoI, the complexity of syntactic patterns in textbooks, the poor quality and irrelevance of

textbooks, and out-dated teaching methodologies. Recent research indicates that the long-term benefits of producing learning materials in a mother-tongue outweigh their high initial publishing costs. Progress in computer technology has considerably reduced the cost of offset printing. Desktop publishing, for instance, is resulting in the growth of national publishing industries, which will ultimately reduce African countries' dependency on foreign publishers. (Kiyanjui 1997: xv)

Of these perceived constraints, standing in the way of the use of African languages as languages of instruction and education, the most formidable, it is assumed, is the argument that Africa is a Tower of Babel and therefore even where there is the will and means to use African languages in education and social life, the requirements of a unitary state will not allow the use of a profusion of African languages within any existing state. Of course this argument does not address the fact that even in those countries where 80 – 100 percent of the people speak one African language; the use of an African language in education is still openly or quietly resisted. Examples of these latter include Swaziland, Botswana, Lesotho, Rwanda, Burundi and Somalia. In much of East Africa (Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, the Congo, DRC, northern Mozambique) Kiswahili serves as *lingua franca*. In the Central African Republic, Sango is a *lingua franca* understood by the overwhelming majority of the people. The reality of the rejection of these languages as languages of education and advancement suggests that the problem is not simply a question of the profusion of languages within existing African states. Otherwise we would not have resistance in even those near-monolingual instances mentioned above. It is a question of the wilful inertia or hesitation of the governmental authorities and dominant elites to accede to the use of African languages. Indeed, an important part of the instrumental qualities for elite status, power and influence, is precisely the command of the erstwhile colonial languages. For these elites, the acquisition of metropolitan European accents are regarded as the *summum bonum* of education and *bildung*. There are also some observers, like Naomi Mitchison, in whose view a language like Setswana is “essentially good for poetry, singing and some kinds of conversation.” (2000: 31). For her Chinese ideographics where notions, ideas and concepts are represented in pictograms is bad for the study of science. She (2000: 31) wrote that; “Perhaps African languages will be modified ... or perhaps they will be kept for speech, poetry, fiction and drama, while English or French is used as a useful written language of non-poetic communication.” Such unvarnished Eurocentrism is not uncommon. It is fairly conventional and prevalently shared among many members of the African elites.

The search for the solution to African underdevelopment and socio-cultural backwardness through the use of colonial languages has a destination, which is, in its own right, disconcerting and troubling. If we are waiting for the day when all Africans will learn, read and write in colonial languages, that day will take forever to arrive, and even when or if that day arrived we would find that Africans have ceased to be Africans, and become “Europeans.”

The Rationality of Harmonization and Standardization

As argued here, if we want to be able to use African languages as the bases for African education and development we have to introduce order into the disorder of “a thousand and one” languages. We must go beyond the various formal linguistic schemes of classification that have been so far offered by researchers. We must reach African languages from inside, and classify them on the basis of the purely empirical criterium of mutual intelligibility so that the result of our work transcends purely speculative academic concerns and rather produces results which translate immediately into practical solutions for African linguistic, social and economic development.

Greenberg’s epoch-making work on the genetic classification of African languages, with some modifications here and there, remains the most favoured classificatory system for African languages. Its methodological approach of “mass comparison” (later described as “multilateral comparison”) has been over the years scrutinized and criticized by various researchers including Campbell (1986: 488) and Ringe (1993: 91-109). His functionalist methodology has had enormous elucidatory merit and served as a pioneering modern insight into the genetic affiliation among African languages. But we want to argue that, its merits are limited in comparison to the advantages of a genetic classification on the basis of extended mutual intelligibility.

The concerns of CASAS have arisen directly out of the need in the first instance to solve practical problems of African societies; problems of education, science, technology and economy; in short developmental problems. The harmonization of African language orthographies is crucial to any attempt to develop African languages, because such harmonization enables wider and larger audiences/readerships to read across each other’s languages; so that, we can produce literature accessible to large constituencies. A key element of harmonization is simplicity and economy; orthographies should be as simple as possible to make it easy for users; primarily mother-tongue or home language users. CASAS’ general guidelines to harmonization can be stated as follows:

(a) Accuracy and Economy: Accuracy and economy require that an orthography represents all and only the significant or main sounds (phonemes) of a given language. There are nevertheless, exceptions in some cases where two or more symbols (diagraphs) may be used in order to render the orthography easy for purposes of typing.

(b) Consistency: This principle relates to the use of only one symbol for each significant sound (phoneme) of a language or languages. Thus wherever possible a single sound must be represented by a single letter or symbol.

(c) Simplicity: Simplicity requires that an orthography must in as much as possible be user-friendly; particularly for the mother-tongue or home-language user. In this regard CASAS prefers in its orthography harmonization work letters rather than phonetic

symbols and diacritics in writing. Diacritics should be used sparingly, employed only where they are definitively necessary. If they are too generously used they detract from the easy flow of reading and writing. For mother-tongue or home-language speakers of a language oftentimes some diacritics may be superfluous and unnecessary since meaning can be reached contextually.

An orthography of a language is supposed to be the correct and consistent writing of words and sentences in the language. A standardized orthography means all languages that are variants of the same original language must write the same things the same way. This ensures linguistic rapprochement and mutual reinforcement, especially in a world in which many African languages are existentially threatened. The harmonization and standardization of orthographies does not mean the end of individual variants, they remain but they are made to look similar in writing to facilitate inter-dialectal communication.

A point which needs to be emphasized is that orthographic harmonization reveals immediately the deep genetic affinities of African languages and helps as to identify more precisely the directions of dialectal variation. In the reconstruction of African history the evolutionary patterns of these affinities will help piece together the chronology and directions of cultural and population movements.

Concluding Remarks

The grand delusion of the African elites is that it is possible to move forward to equality and modernity in a globalizing world on the basis of languages, which are totally foreign to the overwhelming majorities in Africa. This extravagant fallacy assumes that modernity, understood mainly as technological and scientific advancement are tied to the usage of the received colonial languages. There are those who would argue that, indeed this position is hardly a misconception, and that rather, it is the understandable response of current elites to the conditions of the present in which their social and material interests are inextricably bound up with the maintenance of the status quo.

There is no greater mark of superiority and inferiority in the contemporary African scene than the inability or ability to speak a colonial language. The implications of this ability or disability is best exemplified in those places in Africa where membership of parliament is acceptable or not acceptable depending on whether the person is able to speak in the elite colonial language. For as long as Africa remains trapped and bound in the consequences of colonial language usage there is little chance of advancement either at the scientific and technological levels or the socio-cultural level. Another consequence of colonial language usage is that the culture of democracy can hardly be indigenized and owned by the masses of Africa. The persistence of colonial language usage in Africa will in effect mean that the aura of inferiority will continue to linger around Africa and Africans.

The Scandinavian experience is particularly useful for Africa because it demonstrates especially in the cases of Finland and Iceland how local languages can be developed in replacement of settler or “colonially” imposed languages (Vikor 2001; Kristiansen 2002; Haugen 1976). The Icelandic example is even more forcefully useful because it demonstrates that for a population the size of Iceland (300 000 people) with diligence and consistency it is possible to maintain and develop the status of a language as a language of science and technology. These lessons have not been lost on the CASAS Project. Years ago I drew attention to the fact that;

Increasingly African scholars are arguing for the return to African languages and cultural usages less removed from the history and culture of the rural masses. French, English and Portuguese can hardly reach rural Africa in such form or intensity to become sufficiently internalised to serve as a viably creative media for the transformation of rural society. If African languages are developed, to carry modern science and technology, transformation of the African earth would be rapidly advanced. The usage of European languages in Africa is a class phenomenon and underscores the condition of dependence and neo-colonialism. (Prah 1991:61)

The transition from oral to literate African language-based cultures in Africa is crucial for the scientific and technological renaissance of Africa.

CASAS has made a start of the harmonization and the standardization of African languages as a prerequisite towards the refinement and development of African languages for use in all levels of education and general social intercourse. Of the 15 to 17 “core languages” which have been identified by CASAS as languages spoken as first, second or third languages by about 85% of the African population on the continent, most have been successfully harmonized. This represents an important step in the right direction. It is expected that within the next two years all of the 15 - 17 large core languages will be successfully harmonized. CASAS has harmonized 27 language clusters so far. CASAS has also proceeded to produce texts on the basis of the harmonized orthographies. Several monolingual dictionaries have been produced.

Notes

¹ Concept and Measurement of Human Development. *Human Development Report 1990*: “The Human Development Report (HDR) was first launched in 1990 with the single goal of putting people back at the center of the development process in terms of economic debate, policy and advocacy. The goal was both massive and simple, with far-ranging implications — going beyond income to assess the level of people’s long-term well-being. Bringing about development of the people, by the people, and for the people, and emphasizing that the goals of development are choices and freedoms. The Report addresses, as its main issue, the question of how economic growth translates - or fails to translate - into human development. The focus is on people and on how development enlarges their choices. The Report discusses the meaning and measurement of human

development, proposing a new composite index. But its overall orientation is practical and pragmatic.”

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