

LANGUAGE POLICY IN AFRICA: AFRICAN CULTURAL VALUES AND LINGUISTIC HUMAN RIGHTS

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ABSTRACT

The paper discussed the importance of language in human existence. It asserted that the basic need of human interaction at both individual and collective levels was satisfied through language. Culture, although a familiar word, was often misunderstood and misused. The paper, consequently, delved into what culture was all about. The close relationship between language and culture was highlighted. The profusion of languages in the African continent was seen by the paper as problematic. African colonial experience and the current globalization process militated against evolving effective language policy and language planning in Africa. The paper contented that the militating factors notwithstanding, Africa was in dire need of a virile language policy. Languages being carriers of culture, the policy should appreciate the need for the protection and promotion of African cultural values through the indigenous languages. Linguistic human rights which included the practical ability of an individual to use his own language in all human interactions should be fully appreciated as a foundational element for democratization processes. In conclusion, the paper warned against the lopsided development in favour of science and technology in African countries. A commensurate attention should be given to the development of the language resources in the continent.

KEYWORDS: Language Policy, Indigenous African Languages, Cultural Values, Communication, Linguistic Human Rights, Globalization, Marginalization

INTRODUCTION

Language has always been a sensitive issue in any human society. Matters relating to language are handled with utmost priority and importance by most people and governments throughout the globe. Most nations of the world have evolved language policies which are jealously guarded and implemented.

This serious attention given to language stems from the key roles it plays in every human society. Communication is the major function of language. The ability of individuals and groups of people to communicate with each other is undoubtedly the most fundamental aspect of any society. The diverse nature of human society underscores this deep-seated need for communication. The role language plays in the creative ability of people is invaluable. Emphasizing this special role of language, Vuolab (2000), points out that

Our imagination would not produce such an endless capacity for creating new ideas if we human beings had no language.... Without it a human being would not be able to explain or teach any idea or technique to the next generation. Without a human language no technical wonders would exist.

Vuolab's observation, as highlighted above, not only stresses the creative role of language but its pedagogical importance as well.

The overall contributions of languages to the development of human beings are not quantifiable. As Adekunle (1995) rightly observes, the fact that language has far-reaching implications for national cohesion, cultural identity and economic development makes governments all over the world try to decide on ways of treating or managing language resources within their territories. In short, measures initiated to enhance the standard and use of language in any country should be held sacrosanct.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

A very close relationship exists between language and culture. A definition of the word 'culture' is pertinent here. Generally, the meaning ascribed to the word is too narrow. Many people simply see culture as a term that relates to people's way of dressing their dances and festivals. Ngugi (1972) accuses some African intellectuals, artists and politicians of having a narrow view of culture by thinking of culture only in terms of dances, jungle drums and the folklore.

Culture is an inclusive term. It broadly refers to a people's way of life. It is the total way of life of a people expressed in their technological, economic, social and political institutions and structures, as well as their values and norms. Ngugi (1972) sees culture, in its broadest sense, as a way of life fashioned by a people in their collective endeavour to live and come to terms with their total environment. Reflecting on the same word Ashcroft (2001) regards culture as

A description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour. The analysis of culture, from such a definition, is the clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life.

Culture, indeed, embraces all the aspects of a man's life, including everything which contributes to his survival and this comprises not only physical factors but also sociological factors. Accordingly, the two aspects of culture include the material and non-material culture.

Culture determines how people view the world. A people's world view, on the other hand, is the function of the language they use. This fact explains the close relationship between language and culture. It is in consideration of this fact that Ochs and Schieffelin (1984) have emphasized that language is acquired in a social world and that many aspects of the social world are absorbed by the child during the process of language acquisition.

Worthy of note also is the fact that children's language is constructed in socially appropriate and cultural meaningful ways. The vocabulary of a language faithfully reflects the culture of the society that uses the language. The mere content of language is intimately related to culture. The process of acquiring language must therefore, be understood as the process of integrating the knowledge of the language code with socio-cultural knowledge. In other words, socio-cultural knowledge is acquired hand-in-hand with the code properties of a language. The two social phenomena, namely language and culture, are inseparable.

THE STATE OF THE INDIGENOUS AFRICAN LANGUAGES

The state of the indigenous African languages is, without any iota of doubt, an unhappy one. In terms of the use and development of these languages, they are lagging far behind their counterparts in the other continents. The development stage and the circulation of the languages are such that little or nothing is known about them outside the small communities where they are spoken. The majority of the indigenous African languages are yet to be developed into the reading and written forms. Moreover, they are not accorded the official status where they are used. There are many factors which are hampering the effective use and development of the African languages.

Profusion of languages in the African content is actually problematic. Africa's linguistic complexity characterized by multilingualism and geographic proximity of language communities poses very serious challenges in the area of language planning. The large number of African languages, the immense range in the numbers of their speakers and the fact that there is little correlation between language communities and state boundaries render language planning a ponderous endeavour. This factor has really proved intractable to language planners and policy makers in the continent.

Unfavourable language policy towards African languages by the national governments in Africa is one other serious factor that has contributed towards the unhappy state of affairs as regards the African languages. Various governments in the continent adopt a purely functional approach to language planning. These governments pursue a policy of virtual monolingualism which, in their opinion, is necessary in encouraging mass participation in political and economic activities. To achieve this end, there is concentration on one or two languages.

Such languages are proclaimed the official or national languages. Speakers of other languages are forced to assimilate the so called official or national languages or forfeit active participation in government activities.

While such a policy can succeed in rendering the political and economic activities accessible to a large segment of society, it fails to take into account the linguistic human rights of the speakers of other languages. Moreover, the policy makes the knowledge of the official or national languages a determining factor for the nature and the extent of an individual's participation in politics and economy. This is a clear neglect of language diversity and a blatant violation of an individual's linguistic human rights.

The policy is also undemocratic since it denies the majority of people the right to participate actively in government. It brings about a conflict between an individual's or group's right to use a language of their choice as a result of the government's interest. As Gutberlet (2005) rightly observes, linguistic human rights violations occur any time a language or its speakers are marginalized for any reason regardless of the agent of that marginalization. The current language policy of various national governments in Africa amounts to the marginalization of African languages and their speakers.

The African colonial experience and the current globalization processes are among the factors that have contributed to the unhappy state of the African languages. Most African countries were colonized by Europe from the 15th century to the second half of the 20th century. Within this prolonged period, most Africans were made to cherish and imbibe the culture of their colonial masters to the detriment of their indigenous culture.

The adoption of the western culture by Africans featured in many aspects of the national life including language. As a result of the colonial experience, the significance of European languages in African linguistic environments to the detriment of the indigenous African languages continues to be upheld to this day.

Globalization refers to the processes leading to the growing interdependence of nation-states across geographic, political, economic and social boundaries. This interrelationship is characterized by massive global commercial transactions and the increasing reliance on communications technology. Globalization processes are a source of potential threat to linguistic human rights; the processes promote monolingualism and militate against the development of the mother tongues.

Globalization results in local practices, including the use of the local languages, being forced to conform to the demands of the world dominant societies. Thus, with globalization, the focus is on such cosmopolitan languages as English, French, German, etc, to the disadvantage of the languages of the underdeveloped world.

THE NEED FOR A FAVOURABLE CHANGE OF ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE INDIGENOUS AFRICAN LANGUAGES

Judging from the state of the indigenous African languages, as highlighted above, there is a dire need for a favourable virile language policy to protect the indigenous languages. First and foremost, the African national governments should embrace the need to respect the linguistic human rights. These rights entail the practical ability and the right of individuals and groups to use their own languages in all human interactions. Mere toleration of languages within a state's territory is insufficient. Rather, states should initiative administrative measures which must allow for the proactive use of language by individuals and communities.

The stand of most African governments on language diversity should be revisited. Permitting language diversity is seen by these governments as a threat to the political unity and territorial integrity of the state. It is believed that encouraging language diversity may lead to different groups striving to achieve the ideal of statehood for themselves which, in turn, will lead to political and social conflict and the disintegration of the state. On the contrary, it is typically the denial of human rights, including linguistic human rights, to minority groups that compel them to assert their collective right of self-determination with its attendant social and political conflict.

The need to protect and sustain African cultural values also underscores the importance of protecting the indigenous African languages. As demonstrated earlier in this article, language and culture are interwoven. Language is an integral component of culture and in fact, represents one of the ways through which culture is maintained and expressed. Ensuring an effective development and use of the indigenous African languages is instrumental in sustaining a diversity of African cultural traditions and, in particular, the African traditional ecological knowledge. In fact, preserving the world's linguistic diversity should be an integral component of language policy and planning. African languages should not be allowed to fall into disuse and die away. It should be born in mind that as languages disappear, humanity loses knowledge about the world it lives in.

CONCLUSIONS

As has been highlighted in this paper, the use of language is of utmost importance in all the vital aspects of human life, be it social, political, economical and so on. Language occupies a central role in the core of personal development and forms a significant identity marker both for an individual and a social group. The indigenous African languages have a huge role to play in the process of political, economic and cultural decolonization of the continent.

Following the declaration of Swahili, an indigenous African language, as the national and official language of Tanzania, the President of the country. Julius Nyerere, delivered his Republic Day speech in Swahili in 1962 for the first time in history. The comment of Abedi on this symbolic gesture by Nyerere, as quoted in Abdulaziz (1972), dramatizes the importance of communicating in an indigenous language as follows:

...Today we have been given the freedom to talk in our own language. We shall now enter the field of discussion with confidence, with no doubt as to the real meaning of what we are saying, nor whether we are correctly understood by others.

This comment underscores the immense benefits inherent in the use of an indigenous language. As of now, there is a disproportionate concentration of efforts on the development of science and technology and languages in Africa in favour of science and technology. Paying equal attention to the two areas should be the ideal policy since science and technology cannot thrive in a country unless they are taught in a language in which students feel at home.

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