African Languages Today:
The Challenge of and Prospects for
Empowerment under Globalization

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1. Preliminary Remarks

It has fallen to my lot once again to look at the African linguistic scene on the occasion of another historic landmark. I recall that on the 25th Anniversary of the Annual Conference of African Linguistics (ACAL) in 1994, I had the privilege of addressing the Conference on the topic, "Three Decades of African Linguistic Research" (Bamgbose 1995). Today, on the occasion of the 40th Anniversary of ACAL, my first inclination was to focus on our responsibility as African linguists in light of the pervasive underdevelopment that characterizes most communities on the African continent. While we continue to produce elegant language descriptions published in scholarly monographs, the people among whom we work remain largely illiterate, their children poorly educated, and their languages marginalized. However, because I understand that this Lecture is a Campus-wide one, I have shifted the focus somewhat to the empowerment of our languages. Of course, the theme of social concern is still present even in this topic.

In most African countries today, a constant concern expressed by several stakeholders, particularly language specialists and educationists, is the low status of African languages and their use in restricted domains. Efforts made to empower the languages by enhancing their status and extending their use to wider domains have yielded poor or unimpressive results. On the other hand, the imported official languages have maintained their dominance not only in terms of their high status but also in terms of the prestigious domains in which they are used. Why is the situation the way it is and why have efforts made to empower African languages not been generally successful? In finding an answer to both questions, the starting point is to consider a series of factors responsible for this situation which are in part historical, linguistic, economic and sociopolitical.

2. Why African languages have low status and restricted roles

The major factors responsible for the low status and restricted roles for African languages are: the colonial legacy, negative perception of multilingualism, language development status, national integration, modernization and economic development, globalization, negative language attitudes, and defective language planning.

2.1. Colonial Legacy

It is well known that colonial powers imposed their language in each territory they governed as the language of administration, commerce and education. Objectives differ from one colonial power to another, ranging from assimilation to the culture of the occupying power to selective cultivation of an elite that can relate to the masses in their own culture. In spite of the superficial differences, the outcome is the same as far as language is concerned: the language of the colonial power was dominant and African languages took a secondary position in status and domains of use.

The elites that emerged from the colonial educational system came to be enamored of the imported languages even to the detriment of their indigenous languages. Although they were a minority, they wielded a lot of power based on the monopoly of the control of the language of colonial occupation. Even after independence, such languages remained official languages in most countries and any proposal to empower the majority of the population by raising the status of African languages and extending the domains in which they are used failed largely because of two factors: "elite closure" (Scotton 1990:27), i.e. monopoly of the language of power by the elites and resistance on their part to extend this jealously guarded power to other groups, and "inheritance situation" (Gellar 1973:385), i.e. how the policies and practices from the colonial period continue to determine post-colonial policies and practices.

The net effect of the colonial legacy is that the dominance of imported languages which began in the colonial period has persisted till today. Proof of this is to be found in the statistics of official languages in Africa. Of 53 countries, indigenous African languages are recognized as official languages in only 10 countries, Arabic in 9, and all the remaining 46 countries have imported languages as official languages as follows: French in 21 countries, English in 19, Portuguese in 5 and Spanish in 1. (cf. Bamgbose 1991: 30-31). Additional evidence of the continued dominance of imported languages is the medium of education which remains substantially in these languages, particularly at secondary and tertiary levels.

Another aspect of the colonial legacy is the separation of some of them into arbitrary geographical divisions arising from the artificial borders created as a result of the partition of Africa at the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885. Hitherto identical or related languages came to be divided and this has led to the incidence of cross-border languages of which Africa has a large number. The severity of the partition in some cases can be illustrated by the example of Cameroon, which shares as many as 70 cross-border languages with the neighboring countries, one of which is Nigeria, with which it shares as many as 45 languages (Chumbow and Tamanji 2000). The effect of the partition was to diminish the numerical strength of each cross-border language in the territories concerned, thereby reducing its claim to enhanced status and correspondingly enhancing the dominance of the imported official language. A cross-border language which should have been the instrument of integration thus becomes an instrument of division, since it is dominated by a different imported language in each territory.

2.2. Negative Perception of Multilingualism.

The African continent is reputed for its multiplicity of languages. Of the roughly 6,700 languages found in the world, just over 2000 or almost 30% are found in Africa. The fact that there are many languages is often used negatively to suggest that this is a distinct disadvantage especially from the point of view of communication and cost. Compared with a single language which is widely spoken, a multiplicity of languages is assumed to be problematic, since it is possible that there may be no shared language. This argument, however, ignores the fact that there are languages spoken by millions of speakers and that there are many people in Africa who speak two or more languages. Hence, bilingualism or multilingualism will indeed aid cross-linguistic communication. Besides, when people talk of a common language that will facilitate communication, they almost always refer to an official imported language, which, as is well known, is only truly common to perhaps 10 - 20% of the population. The argument about cost is that operating in a single language is more economical than operating in several. Further, the existence of such a language avoids the problems of translation, interpretation, and production of documents in several languages. While this may be true, the real cost is a comparison between denying a citizen the right to be heard in his or her language as opposed to the so-called economy of operating in a language in which one is not competent. In the African context, such a language is invariably an imported official language (e.g., English, French, Portuguese, Spanish).

The negative perception of multilingualism serves to diminish the status of African languages, presenting them as a problem rather than an asset. A typology of African languages shows that there are three types of languages: major, minority and endangered. The major languages such as Swahili, Hausa, Yoruba, Zulu, etc. are spoken by large numbers of speakers and are almost invariably associated with higher status and perhaps political and economic power. Producing materials in them

is certainly economical. However, whatever status may be ascribed to major languages, they still rank lower than imported official languages. For example, notwithstanding its numerical superiority, IsiZulu in South Africa, which has more speakers than either English or Afrikaans (Webb 1996: 143-144) still ranks lower than English, because it is subjected to English dominance in several domains.

The so-called minority languages lack the advantage of numbers as well as status and power. Their lower status arises from perceived problems such as that it is uneconomical to cater for them, since using them requires huge investment in language development and that, since speakers of minority languages tend to learn another language, not much harm is done if their language is ignored. Yet, it is a mistake to ignore minority languages as doing so means exclusion and denial of the rights of speakers to use them in crucial domains such as education in general and literacy in particular. The negative connotation attached to minority languages is nothing more than prejudice, particularly on the part of speakers of major languages.

One of the consequences of the negative perception towards multilingualism is language endangerment, a phenomenon that has become a prominent issue in sociolinguistic studies. The recognition and general acceptance that language is the major vehicle of a people's culture and that a people deprived of its language is also deprived of its culture have led to renewed emphasis in the world at large on preservation of endangered languages. There are six major characteristics of an endangered language:

- Very few speakers remaining, most of them old
- No longer used for any meaningful purpose in the community
- Not being transmitted to the younger generation
- No orthography or written materials in it
- Language shift has taken place such that the language has been or is being replaced by another language
- On the verge of extinction

Statistics compiled by Matthias Brenzinger, Bernd Heine and Gabriele Sommer (1991) indicate that as of 1991, there were 54 Extinct, 67 Near-Extinct and 49 Dying languages in Africa. When languages are endangered and there is no attempt to take principled action to preserve them, it is logical to conclude that such languages are held in low esteem.

2.3. Language Development Status

Low status accorded to African languages is often based on the requirement that they need to be developed to cope with domains in which they are hitherto not used. For example, there may be a need to reduce the language to writing or to reform and harmonize an existing orthography as well as produce materials in the language for use in schools. In the case of languages that already have a written tradition, it may be necessary to expand their vocabulary by creating terminology to serve adequately in wider domains. While it is true that use of language in newer domains requires language development efforts, the commonly held view that certain languages cannot be used to express concepts adequately in certain domains is false. The trite linguistic truism that *there is no concept that cannot be expressed in any language provided the need to do so arises* holds good today as before. Recently, a highly placed international public servant expressed the view that he could not imagine how difficult it would be for him to express scientific concepts and findings in his African language. Unknown to him, other scientists have been able to do this in their own African languages. Hence, the question about using African languages in domains in which they have not been used before is not whether it is possible to do so, but how to carry out the necessary language development activities to facilitate such use.

A related question is whether one has to wait until all the necessary language development work is completed before starting to use a language in unaccustomed domains. The answer to this is that use in newer domains should occur simultaneously with language development. For example, experience has shown that while expanding vocabulary by creating terminology, competing terms emerge through

actual use of a language by different stakeholders, such as teachers, writers, and media practitioners. The terms that finally emerge are sometimes drawn from a pool of competing terms.

2.4. National Integration

As far as language is concerned, the concept of national integration is linked to multilingualism and the myth of divisiveness, which is that *one language unites and many languages divide*. Given this myth, it is understandable why African languages are given low status in comparison with imported official languages, which are believed to unite different ethnic groups from the point of view of communication and government. As mentioned earlier, such alleged unifying function is superficial, since it only involves a minority who are competent in the official language.

The challenge of integration is met with language policies intended to foster nationalism. This response has come to be seen in terms of three approaches: the status quo, the gradualist and the radical approaches (Bamgbose 1991:31-33). The *status quo* approach is the favorite one in that it does not disturb existing practice. Practically all African countries immediately after independence have adopted this approach, which involves retention of the imported colonial language as an official language. The radical approach on the other hand is predicated on an instant departure from the colonial language policy through the adoption of an indigenous language as an official language. A variant of this is the adoption of an indigenous national language as a symbol of nationhood, which may or may not be actively used as an official language. When such a national language is not actively used, the approach only differs from a status quo approach in name, but not in substance. The gradualist approach is a halfway house between the two other approaches in that it avoids the static retention of an imported official language, while at the same time avoiding the abrupt change to a language for which adequate preparations have not been made. If coupled with a planned progression to a new language policy, it may well be a viable option; but if used as a cover for continuing the status quo, it may turn out to be merely a deception.

2.5. Modernization and Economic Development

Modernization is the quest for rapid technological and industrial development with a view to not being left behind in the modern world. Post-independence African leaders were so much concerned with the idea of modernization that they were willing to sacrifice the roles formerly occupied by their languages. Hence, modernization was a strong factor in diminishing the status and roles of African languages. The general belief was that modernization was best achieved in an imported official language. The reason for this is that such a language is already widely used in science and technology and hence the experience gained in the use of the language can be copied, particularly through transfer of technology. What is often ignored in this argument is that only a small part of the populace can be involved in a development strategy based on the use of an imported official language. Besides, it is a fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose of development to equate it narrowly with physical and economic development. The basic premise should be that *development is about people*. The comment made by the former President of Tanzania, Dr. Julius Nyerere, in a talk given at the International Conference on Adult Education, Dar-es-Salaam, on 21 June 1976, is most appropriate in this regard:

> "In the Third World we talk a great deal about economic development - about expanding the number of goods and services, and the capacity to produce them. But the goods are needed to serve men; services are required to make the lives of men more easeful as well as more fruitful. Political, social, and economic organization is needed to enlarge the freedom and dignity of men. Always we come back to Man - to Liberated Man - as the purpose of activity, the purpose of development. So development is for man, by Man and of Man" (Bataille 1976).

In most non-industrialized countries, the tendency has always been to conceive of development in a very narrow sense, equating it with socio-economic development alone. In a broad conception of development, we have to look beyond mere economic indices and put emphasis on human development, i.e. the full realization of the human potential and a maximum use of the nation's resources for the benefit of all.

2.6. Globalization

Globalization, no matter how defined, involves increased contact between countries and regions of the world in terms of communication, trade, technology, information, travel, culture, etc. There are arguments as to whether globalization is beneficial to Africa or not, particularly in terms of access to expanding markets and technological innovations as against resulting economic inequalities and cultural invasion (Bediako n.d., Kwame 2006, Levinsohn 2004, Negash 2005, Kabamba 2008), but that is not our major concern here. As far as language choice is concerned, the assumption seems to be that the language of globalization has to be a language of wider communication such as English, since it is only such a language that can facilitate maximum access and participation in the global village. In fact, this assumption is the basis of the study by Levinsohn (2004) who equates South Africa's reintegration into the global economy in 1994 with corresponding movement towards English. His study shows that the returns accruing to those speaking English increased overall, particularly in terms of employment and wages, but primarily for Whites and not for Blacks. Because of the presumption that the language of globalization should be a language such as English, the effect on African languages is that their roles are further circumscribed[1].

2.7. Negative Language Attitudes

While most of the factors discussed earlier may be regarded as beyond the control of speakers of a language, the question of attitudes is squarely within the power of those who own the language. One would have expected speakers of an African language to be proud of their language, but quite often one encounters negative attitudes. The most common of such attitudes is that of the elites who prefer education in the imported language for their children. Taking their cue from the elites, it is not surprising that parents belonging to lower social groups also want similar education for their children. For example, in some countries such as Nigeria, it is amazing to find the large number of English-medium private nursery and primary schools offering education to young children. Patronage of such schools comes not only from well-to-do parents but also from many lowly paid blue-collar workers, who believe that they are making a great sacrifice for their children's future.

Another type of negative attitude is that exhibited by speakers of minority languages. While linguists readily object to the marginalization of such languages and advocate roles for them in certain domains, it is not unusual to find speakers of minority languages denigrating their own languages and preferring to them some major language of the country or an imported official language. Pretty much the same attitude exists for endangered languages. The point must be made that unless speakers of minority and endangered languages take pride in their own languages and show a definite desire to preserve them, no amount of external engineering can ensure any status and viable roles for them.

2.8. Defective Language Planning

Ideally, proper language planning should ensure that all languages have a definite status and specified roles in a multilingual setting. The situation in most African countries, however, is that language planning processes are defective. Commonly encountered situations include policy deficit (usually referred to as absence of policy), propaganda policy, non-implementation, and lack of political will. It is often believed that when a policy is not declared, there is absence of policy. For example, if a

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[1] This claim, however, appears to be based on two fallacious assumptions: (1) that knowledge or proficiency of the so-called global language automatically leads to employment in the globalized market in the target nation; and (2) that not to use such a language as the official language excludes the population of such a state from employment in the said market. The correlation established between the global language and employability is not demonstrable by these kinds of studies. What are conveniently overlooked are cases where nations adopt an indigenous or several such languages as official languages, and use a global language for trade and international communication. South Korea and Japan come to mind, as well as several Scandinavian countries.

language is not prescribed as the medium of instruction, does it mean that no teaching will take place? On the contrary, absence of a policy is indeed a policy, for whenever there is no declared policy in any domain, what happens is a continuation of the *status quo*.

Propaganda policy is a policy which policy-makers have no intention of implementing but is only declared for propaganda purposes. Sometimes, by the vagueness of the policy or its lack of feasibility, one can tell that the policy should not be taken seriously. For example, a policy of teaching French in elementary schools in a country in which the imported official language is English and where there is a scarcity of teachers of French even in high schools and colleges can only be a propaganda ploy. Sometimes, the policy is encumbered with escape clauses, i.e. pre-conditions which virtually ensure non-implementation.

Even when there is a genuine policy in favor of an indigenous language, failure to indicate implementation steps and procedures as well as adequate provision of funds may stultify the policy. In fact, it may rightly be stated that non-implementation is the bane of language planning in Africa. The effect of defective language planning is to vitiate all attempts to enhance the status and roles of African languages.

One major cause for failure to implement language policy is lack of political will. Unlike physical projects which immediately attract attention and yield political dividends, funding of implementation of language policy is not visible nor does it give political kudos. It takes deliberate action and sometimes political risk to prioritize language policy matters. This is the kind of political will and commitment which many African policy-makers are not willing to demonstrate. And unless they do, African languages will continue to have a lower status compared with the dominant imported official languages.

3. The Imperative of Empowerment of African Languages

There are several different motives for advocating enhanced roles for African languages. These may be ideological, nationalistic, political, economic, linguistic, educational, etc. In this paper, the focus is on the need to ensure participation of all and to reduce the incidence of exclusion. For this reason, and for illustrative purposes, three broad areas are examined: education, national life, and national development.

3.1. Education

In most African countries, the medium of instruction from about the fourth year of elementary school to tertiary level is an imported official language. It is significant that while the principle of a child being introduced to formal education in his or her first language is generally accepted even in countries with small populations in Europe, educationists and linguists in Africa are forced to engage in endless debates about whether African languages should be used as medium of instruction from elementary school and beyond. The red herring that is often drawn is that children need to be exposed to the imported official language as soon as possible since it is the language that they will need not only for education at higher levels but also for effective functioning in virtually all official domains. There are two things wrong with this argument. First, starting early to learn through an official language in which one is not competent may produce poor results. Second, it is possible, and indeed expected, that in a mother tongue-based multilingual education there will be a mix of language as subject and language as medium of instruction.

The most common model is the "early exit model" in which an African language is used as a medium for the first three years of elementary education and then replaced from the fourth year onwards by an imported official language, which, all the while, has been taught as a subject. This has the distinct disadvantage of forcing children to make an arbitrary transition before they are ready for it. It also conveys the negative impression that African languages cannot be used for learning and teaching beyond lower elementary level. Variations include dual medium in which certain subjects are taught in an African language and others in the imported official language. When this happens, the subjects taught in an African language are generally "soft" subjects like social studies and religion,

while "core" subjects like mathematics and elementary science are taught in the imported official language. Again, this practice presents a negative perception of African languages. Ideally, a properly planned mother tongue based multilingual education should make provision for the first language to be used as a medium of instruction at least for the entire duration of basic education, while the imported official language is taught as a subject. The advantage of this model is that children will develop enough confidence in their own languages before they make any transition into another language. They will not lose mastery of their language in trying to transit into another language, rather they will add to what they already have. Hence, they end up having "additive" rather than "subtractive" bilingualism. Besides, from the point of view of cost, it has been shown convincingly that mother tongue based bilingualism is less expensive than English-based medium of instruction (Webb and Grin 2000, Grin 2004, Heugh 2004)

The use of African languages as media of instruction brings to the fore the question of intellectualization of these languages. Where adequate terminology does not exist, it will need to be developed so that African languages can be used in a wider range of domains. Examples of efforts in this regard will be given later in this presentation. For now, suffice it to say that one major advantage of extending the use of African languages to domains in which they were previously not used is the resulting prestige they acquire through intellectualization.

In view of the high incidence of illiteracy in Africa, it becomes inevitable to use African languages for adult literacy. This is because an imported official language which is not known to adult learners cannot be the language of literacy. Experience with the failure in the use of Portuguese for literacy in Mozambique bears this out (Unesco 1992:23). According to UNESCO, an ideal language for literacy should be familiar to both learners and teachers and it should be functional as a tool for communication (Unesco 1992:23). In a Foreword to Prah (2000), Govan Mbeki (2000:xi-xiii) has this to say about illiteracy:

> "The loss which a country incurs when half its population is illiterate is incalculable. In the highly competitive world in which we live it is necessary that every man and woman should acquire skills to compete with their counterparts wherever they may be found in the world. If 50 per cent of our population is illiterate, the country is not in a position to compete in the global market…The fastest way to reach out to the illiterates is through the use of the home language. Before we can seriously talk of development we should first wipe out illiteracy."

African languages, as the first choice for literacy, deserve an enhanced status by the very fact that no other language or languages can perform this role adequately.

3.2. National Life

There are many aspects of national life in which language is of crucial importance. They include communication, participatory democracy, and access to justice and information on health.

In most African countries, communication between the governed and those who govern is supposed to be done through an imported official language. The fact that such mode of communication excludes the majority of the governed is strong reason for empowering African languages for official purposes. Arguments about multiplicity of languages, cost, and language development status will inevitably be invoked in support of the alternative of an imported official language. The experience of South Africa, however, shows that strategies can be evolved to make official communication feasible in several languages. Such strategies include multilingual documentation and a telephone translation service by which a citizen can communicate with a government department and receive a reply in his or her language.

The electronic media are another potent means of communication with newscasts on radio and television in several African languages. Of particular significance is the community radio, which is close to the people and which has programs in which local participation in the language of the community becomes a regular feature.

Access to information and participation are the essence of a citizen's right in national life. Without a language that makes these possible, a citizen is virtually excluded from national life. It has been suggested that

> "Healthy democracies are composed of individuals who are able to communicate with fellow citizens and use their linguistic skills to participate actively in, for instance, associations, movements, cultural groups and political parties" (Starkey 2002:9).

In many African countries, the majority of the citizens are marginalized because participatory democracy means little to them, since the language of government is one in which they are not competent. The posers raised in the following comment are most salient:

> "For instance, how can you guarantee democracy when the law of the land is not understood in the language of the people? How can you abide by what you do not know? How can you use information to which you have no access or to which you only have limited access? How can you fully participate in anything, or compete, or learn effectively or be creative in a language in which you are not fully proficient or literate? Above all, how can a country develop its human resource base to full potential without the languages of the people?" (Chimhundu 1997:63).

The concept of participatory democracy goes beyond ritual voting to elect governments. It includes "a citizen's right to make his or her views and needs known as well as the right to be able to influence policy in so far as his or her welfare is concerned" (Bamgbose 2008:24). It follows, therefore, that

> "As long as the language of governance is accessible only to the educated elite, majority of the citizens will be excluded thereby making nonsense of participatory democracy" (Bamgbose 2008:31).

There is therefore no alternative to empowering African languages if we are to ensure maximum participation in national life. Hence, there is a compelling case for enhanced status and roles for African languages in national life.

Two other aspects of national life which are worth mentioning here are justice and health. In a system of justice in which a litigant or an accused has to be subjected to questioning through an interpreter, it is not unusual to discover that there is often miscarriage of justice arising from faulty interpretation. Similarly, information on health which is not presented in a language that the consumer understands can lead to failure or even disastrous consequences. The prevalence of HIV/AIDS in Africa has led to a realization that the war against the pandemic can yield no tangible results unless it is conducted in a language familiar to most people. At least in this respect, African languages are coming into prominence in terms of their role in this domain. But there is still much left to be done. Labels on medication continue to be mainly in the imported official language (or in the language of the country from which the medicines have been imported). Although pharmacists try to explain the use of the medication they dispense, there is no substitute for instructions in a language that patients can understand.

3.3. National Development

National development, including economic and human development, is crucial to the progress and survival of any nation. The United Nations' Human Development Index (HDI) is based on a series of social, educational and economic indices such as population growth rate, GNP per capita, mortality rate, life expectancy, literacy rate, etc. To the extent that the index provides objective comparison, it could be used to assess the level of development among nations of the world. All the 22 countries listed as having low human development are African countries and the list includes Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania and Zambia. (UNDP 2007:289). The five-yearly HDI trends from 1975 – 2005 indicate that Africa is at the bottom of the world HDI. While the top 20 of the 177 countries surveyed are from Europe, North America, Japan, Australia and New Zealand, with Iceland in the first position, the last 31 countries, with two exceptions, are from Africa south of the Sahara. Sudan leads the pack at No. 147 and Sierra Leone takes the bottom position at No. 177. (UNDP 2007:249-252).

Why are most African countries consistently in the underdeveloped category? A study commissioned by the UN in connection with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), finds an

explanation in five factors: high transport costs and small markets, low productivity agriculture, high disease burden, adverse political history, and slow diffusion of external technology (Sachs 2005). Nowhere in the probable causes is language mentioned. Even in the MDG 2008 Report, Sub-Saharan African still lags behind in many areas. For example, while primary school enrolment has reached 90 per cent in South Asia, it has only reached 71 per cent in Sub-Saharan Africa (United Nations 2008). The fact that strategies of development in Africa are predicated on the use of an official language which excludes the majority of the population in the formal economy is hardly ever recognized as a probable cause of failure in development. Yet, the eight MDGs (poverty eradication, universal primary education, gender equality, reduction of child mortality, maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS and other diseases, environmental sustainability, and global partnership (UNDP website) largely require for their implementation awareness programs, which, in turn, require reaching the unreached and the excluded. This should mean making more use of African languages.

4. Avenues for Empowering African Languages

In enhancing the status of African languages, it is useful to consider three dimensions: agents, domains and scope. Agents could be individuals, government, civil society organizations (CSO), regional and international organizations. Domains of language use are many and include public domains such as education, legislature, administration, judiciary, etc. as well as private domains such as the home and private organizations. Scope could be local, national, regional and international. The following recurrent activities will be used as an illustration of the three dimensions: medium of instruction, language development, legal status, working languages, cross-border languages, linguistic human rights, and Internet and Communication Technology (ICT).

4.1. Medium of Instruction

Medium of instruction, particularly in basic education, is a potent dimension of enhancing African languages. Beginning with the 1953 historical recommendation that a child's education is best begun in his or her mother tongue, UNESCO has provided theoretical underpinning for the use of African languages as a medium of instruction with such force and persuasion that it is difficult for policy-makers to avoid paying adequate attention to the theory and practice of medium of instruction. Although advice by UNESCO comes in different forms such as recommendations, declarations, and conventions, the outcome is generally accepted as "standard-setting" from which stakeholders take their cue in formulating policy (Yusuf 2007:15). One such standard-setting document for medium of instruction is UNESCO (2003a) *Education in a Multilingual World*, which reaffirms the basic principle of mother tongue instruction along with the two other principles of multilingual and inter-cultural education.

One practical application of UNESCO's relentless advocacy for mother tongue based multilingual education is to be seen in the number of pilot projects in several countries across the continent, involving the use of African languages in education. Such countries include Cameroon, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Malawi, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Burkina Faso. Of these pilot projects, the Six-Year Primary Project in Nigeria is perhaps one of the best known in that it has provided good justification for the use of an African language as a medium of instruction for the entire six years of primary education, with English only taught as a subject. No less spectacular is the pilot project in Burkina Faso which has introduced instruction in African languages into a primary school system, which previously had a language policy of French only as a medium of instruction at all levels of education. In 1994, a project was started with the use of eight African languages as media of instruction in primary schools along with French. The primary school certificate examination has shown an overwhelming superior performance by the children in the project schools as compared with the children taught only in French. For example, in the 2004 examination, children in the project schools recorded a success rate of 94.59% as compared with the national average success rate of 73.73%, giving a clear superiority rate of 20.86%. (Information provided in a pamphlet "L'Education Bilingue au Burkina Faso" published by the Ministère de l'Enseignement de Base et de l'Alphabétisation, and reporting the situation as of 25/11/2004). The result of this outstanding

performance is that the Government has been forced to admit that the case for bilingual education is compelling, and it has now accepted it as a policy. Parents have also embraced it and there are now considerably more applications for enrolment than there are places.

The following outcomes from the pilot projects may be identified:

- Introducing literacy in a child's first language yields better results than having such literacy in an unfamiliar language
- There is greater proficiency in the indigenous language and easier and deeper acquisition of concepts
- There is greater prestige for the language concerned
- There is increased language development, especially as shown in vocabulary expansion and terminology creation, curriculum development and improved materials.

What is required in most African countries is the need to move from pilot projects to generalization of the experimentation into the regular school system.

4.2. Language Development

Language development is one activity that lends itself to participation by a variety of agents including individual authors, language commissions, university departments, media houses, writers, language societies, and translators.

In schools run by missionaries, even in the colonial period, wherever an African language was used as a medium of instruction, it was usually accompanied by readers introducing a variety of topics, including history, nature study, geography, and religion. These early efforts helped to set the stage for later work on intellectualization, thus exploding the myth that certain concepts cannot be expressed in some languages. Terminology is often created in the process of translation. For example, Julius Nyerere's translation of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Merchant of Venice* into Kiswahili; Mamadou Doucoure's Translation of Albert Einstein's Relativity Theory into Bambara and J.A. Odetayo's translation of a *Dictionary of Engineering Physics* into Yoruba. Similarly, terminology may emerge from work done by university or government departments or terminology committees. Examples are *Kamusi ya Tiba* (Dictionary of Medicine) by A.M.A. Mwita and H.J.M. Nwansoko and *Kamusi ya Biologia, Fizika na Kemia* (Dictionary of Biology, Physics and Chemistry) both in Kiswahili and published by the Institute of Kiswahili Research in Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, the *Quadrilingual Glossary of Legislative Terms (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba)*, published by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council in Nigeria, and the *Multilingual Mathematics Dictionary* in the eleven official languages of South Africa, published by the National Language Service of the Department of Arts and Culture.

Another type of terminology is that devoted to the teaching of language and linguistics. This type, known as metalanguage, has been compiled for Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba in Nigeria, with the result that, at least in one university, doctoral theses have been produced using the Yoruba language as the medium of presentation and discussion.

4.3. Legal Status

There are two major ways of giving legal empowerment to language. One way is to grant a prestigious function to the language such as making it an official language or a language that can be used in certain crucial domains such as education and the legislature. Some African languages such as Somali in Somalia, Amharic in Ethiopia, Tigrinya in Eritrea, Kiswahili in Tanzania, Sesotho in Lesotho, Setswana in Botswana, Kirundi in Burundi, Kinyarwanda in Rwanda, Malagasy in Madagascar, and nine African languages (IsiZulu, IsiXhosa, SiSwati, IsiNdebele, Setswana, Sepedi, Sesotho, Tshivenda, and Xitsonga) in South Africa are recognized as official languages either singly, or jointly with an imported European language. A variant of such recognition is the designation of a language as a national language, not in the sense of a language native to a country, but rather in the sense of a symbol of national identity. This is true of Kiswahili in Tanzania and Kenya, Somali in

Somalia, Amharic in Ethiopia (particularly before the revolution), Sesotho in Lesotho, Setswana in Botswana and Tigrinya in Eritrea.

The second way of ensuring legal empowerment is entrenchment of a language in the Constitution. The most extensive example of this is the South African Constitution which entrenches nine African languages as official languages in addition to English and Afrikaans. The Nigerian Constitution also recognizes the three major languages of the country (Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo) as languages of debate in the National Assembly. It is worth mentioning though that mere designation of a language as an official language or its entrenchment in the Constitution does not by itself ensure empowerment, unless concrete steps are taken to implement the provisions of the relevant laws or regulations.

4.4. Working Languages

An important initiative of empowering African languages is their use as working languages. From the inception of the Organization of African Unity (O.A.U.), which has now been transformed into the African Union (A.U.), the working languages were French, English, Arabic and Portuguese. As far back as 1986, the O.A.U., through its "Language Plan of Action for Africa" had conceived the idea of making African languages official languages to be used as working languages at national, regional and continental levels. This aspiration has so far not been achieved, except that Kiswahili has now been admitted as a working language of the A.U. Some regional organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) are also planning to include a dominant language of their region as one of their working languages. The outcome of such efforts, when fully realized, will be an empowerment of the languages concerned as well as an affirmation that African languages can also function in a domain previously dominated by imported official languages.

4.5. Cross-Border Languages

Cross-border languages have earlier been identified as a by-product of the colonial partition of Africa. Basically, cross-border languages fall into two main categories: extensive cross-border languages which are widely spoken across two or more countries and limited cross-border languages which are either symmetric in that they are spoken by small populations in each country or asymmetric in that they are spoken by a large population in one country and smaller population in another (Bamgbose 2002). Several of the cross-border languages spoken by large populations are vehicular in the sense that they are learned and used for communication also by those for whom the language is not a first language.

In its mission of empowering African languages, the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) which is an A.U. specialized institution devoted to collaborative research and empowerment of African languages, has made vehicular cross-border languages as its initial focus. Such languages are to be identified and Cross-border Language Commissions are to be set up. After a series of regional colloquia, ACALAN has recently held a Synthesis Conference at which 12 vehicular cross-border languages were identified as the initial group for which commissions are to be set up. They are: Hausa, Fulfulde and Mandekan for West Africa, Lingala and Beti-Fang for Central Africa, Cinyanja/Chichewa and Sestwana for Southern Africa, Kiswahili, Somali, and Malagasy for Eastern Africa, and Modern Standard Arabic and Berber for North Africa. Dominant limited cross-border languages (such as Yoruba or Shona) and dominant non-cross border languages (such as IsiZulu and Amharic), which do not feature in the list of the language commissions, will, for now, be handled under Country language structures.

As an institution of the AU, ACALAN is one continental institution whose activities cover the entire continent as well as regional and national structures. When its organs are finally fully established, it should serve as a catalyst for empowerment of African languages, much in the way as UNESCO has done for mother tongues in the world.

4.6. Language Rights

Linguistic human rights (LHR) are based on the presumption that language rights are like human rights which are enshrined in the UN-sanctioned Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In its stronger version, as stated in the 1996 Barcelona Declaration of Linguistic Rights, all language communities have the right to use their languages for all purposes including education at all levels and all commercial transactions and documentation (See Bamgbose 2000: 130-135 Appendix III). In it weaker version, it simply means that all languages should have a role in some given domains, but not all languages will be used in all domains. This weaker version enables language communities to make language choices, where they feel the need to use a language different from their own in certain domains.

Potentially, LHR are a powerful means of language empowerment, but this is only the ideal. In practice, declarations of rights are not matched by action and even some of the expected outcomes are unrealistic or unattainable. Hence, LHR can only be regarded as a limited means of enhancing the status of African languages.

4.7. Internet and Communication Technology (ICT)

The acknowledged digital divide between the developed and the developing world has led some observers to doubt whether ICT is really a blessing or a curse to Africa. A rather pessimistic view is that, considering all the problems involved in the adoption of ICT, including access, cost, diffusion, and maladjustment to situations, ICT may not really be the solution to rapid development (Kabamba 2008). Yet it is true to state that any country that ignores ICT in the modern age will lag behind for a long time.

The idea of expanding access to knowledge in cyberspace by making it possible for most languages to be used for this purpose is another initiative of UNESCO. Both the preparatory documents for the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) (UNESCO 2003b) and the Tunis Commitment arising from the WSIS held in Tunis November 16-18, 2005 emphasize the need for all knowledge societies to be concerned with ICT. Since access to information in the knowledge society and part of cultural heritage is through language, UNESCO's position is that a user's language should not constitute an obstacle to accessing the multicultural heritage available in cyberspace, but rather the facilities of cyberspace should be used to provide multilingual and multicultural content as well as language teaching, translation and multilingual web search.

Although progress is slow, some efforts are already being made towards the use of African languages in computer application and ICT. For example, at the University of Pretoria in South Africa, much work has been done in translating computer terminology into African languages such that computer operations need not be carried out exclusively in English. In addition, at the University of Stellenbosch, also in South Africa, much work has been done in Human Language Technology (HLT), particularly automatic translation between interlocutors speaking different languages. Not long ago, I observed that anyone using the Google Search Engine for web searches in Nigeria now has an option of searching in Hausa and Yoruba in addition to English. Such empowerment will, no doubt, enhance the status of these as well as other African languages so treated.

5. Conclusion

This presentation has examined the complex factors militating against the empowerment of African languages, the conditions favorable to their empowerment and the avenues that can be exploited to facilitate such empowerment. What is the prognosis for a change in the existing situation towards an enhancement of the status and roles of African languages? This brings us back to language policy. Do policy-makers have a proper perception of the challenges and possibilities? Are they willing to translate the possibilities into a viable language policy, which will be backed by a language plan of action? Unless this is done, the favorable possibilities and avenues of enhancement will not necessarily lead to greater empowerment and future conferences on African languages and linguistics will still continue to list "The empowerment of African languages" as one of the themes.

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