

The Language Situation in Africa Today

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The African continent and the nearby islands constitute one-fourth of the land surface of the earth. Approximately 460 million people live in Africa which is about 11% of the world's population. Of the estimated 6,200 languages and dialects in the world, 2,582 languages and 1,382 dialects are found in Africa. Some languages in Africa are spoken by more than 20 or 30 million people, e.g. Hausa-Fulani, Oromo/Galla and Swahili. Arabic is the most widely spread language on the continent and it is the mothertongue of more than 110 million Africans, whereas in Asia there are only half as many native speakers of Arabic. More than 50 languages are spoken by more than one million speakers each; and a couple of hundred languages are spoken by small groups of a few thousand, or a few hundred people. These small languages are disappearing at a fast rate. Altogether only 146 vernaculars are used as "operative languages" in different situations, and 82 of them are classified by linguists as "highest priority languages", i.e. they are used as "local languages" in different contexts by various authorities, aid organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in their projects and campaigns. Of the latter, 41 languages are widely used as "lingua franca" for inter-ethnic, regional and/or international communication.

All African languages compete with metropolitan/colonial languages, as well as with pidgin and creoles. However, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) has recommended 50 languages to be supported along with Arabic and Swahili as the only native African working languages. The lingua francas in Africa are of two types: Type A is spread by Africans, e.g. Amharic, Hausa, Swahili and Wolof; while Type B is spread through foreign influence, e.g. Lingala and Swahili during the colonial period. Most lingua francas have both Type A and B features, and the common denominator for them all is that they have been, and many of them are today, languages which were used by soldiers and warrior groups and African conquerors, languages which were later employed by European colonialists in their African armies.

The languages of Africa can be divided into 5 language families: 1) Congo-Kordofanian, 2) Nilo-Saharan, 3) Afro-Asiatic, 4) Khoi-San and 5) Malayo-Polynesian on Madagascar. The Congo-Kordofanian and the Afro-Asiatic groups have many common cultural and historical ties, and together they account for almost three-fourths of all the languages of Africa.

Today's national boundaries of African countries, which were drawn in Europe by the colonial powers at the turn of the century, do not pay any regard to the

cultural, linguistic or historical affinity of the Africans. These boundaries were drawn arbitrarily at conferences in Europe where no African participant was present.

There are some countries in Africa south of Sahara where the large majority has one mothertongue - Kinyarwanda in Rwanda, Kirundi in Burundi and Seswati in Swaziland; and Somalia is the only country in Africa where almost the whole population has the same Somali language as its mothertongue. Large groups of Somali-speakers are found also in Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya. Cameroon, on the other hand, is an extreme example with no less than 253 different languages!

The abundance of languages in Africa has meant enormous problems of communication, in education and as far as political stability is concerned. It is demanding too much of the human and material resources to produce newspapers, radio programs and teaching materials in several languages in each country, for example. Multi-linguism is therefore an important factor of under-development which in turn perpetuates multi-linguism and slows down development activities. It is a vicious circle! However, this multi-linguism, and the resultant multi-lingualism which is so common on the continent, appears to have given the African a broader cultural understanding and enriched him culturally and made him a tolerant and amiable personality. Many of us Africans speak (read and write), apart from our mother tongues, different national and official languages of our countries, both native and colonial languages (such as Arabic, Amharic, Hausa, Swahili, English, French and Portuguese), one or more neighbouring languages, and one additional lingua franca which is operative as a commercial or market language, police/army, mosque/church, railway or mine and port workers' languages, etc.

We can divide the linguistic map of Africa into Anglophone, Francophone, Luzophone, Arabiphone and Swahiliphone parts, as far as the choice of the language of administration is concerned; and most countries in Africa have, because of political and/or economic reasons, chosen colonial languages as their official languages, at times together with one or more African languages as national languages. 19 countries have English as their official language, 22 have French, 5 have Portuguese and 1 has Spanish. Arabic is the official language in 7 African countries, and in several countries an African language has been chosen as the first or second official language together with a metropolitan language, e.g. Amharic in Ethiopia, Swahili in East Africa, Somali in Somalia and Chichewa in Malawi, together with English.

In many areas of activity, attempts have been made to replace the former colonial language with a native one with some success. Swahili is the language which has succeeded most south of the Sahara. It is now the national and official language in Tanzania, and it is also the national language in Kenya and Uganda, and one of the six national languages of Zaire. It is also used in the Comoros, Mozambique, Rwanda, Burundi and parts of Somalia, Malawi and Zambia. A couple of hundred thousand East Africans settled in Yemen, Oman and the Gulf region also speak Swahili as their mother tongue. Upto 1970 in Basra, Iraq, there

was a government primary school which had Swahili medium upto the fourth grade.

It generally appears that the "official" language of a country is the one in which the laws of the country are made and publicised, whereas the "national" language is the one which is used, more often orally, in parliament, administration, mass-media, primary education and literacy campaigns; but laws do not have to be passed nor published in them. National languages are also those which were used by the broad masses during their anti-colonial struggle and which enjoyed a sufficient amount of literacy and literary tradition. This was particularly so in Muslim societies, or areas predominantly Muslim, where Indirect Rule and Muslim education in local languages was more conducive to mobilisation against Christian European colonialism as in Nigeria and Zanzibar. A similar effect had Swahili in Tanganyika and Kenya where this non-tribal language was spread by Muslim traders and Christian missions throughout the region.

As far as language policies are concerned, it is difficult to find a comprehensive document in African countries. Language policies are usually taken for granted, and very often they are defined in decrees or directives from the ministries of education stating the language, or languages, of instruction at different levels of the educational system. In a few cases it is mentioned in the national Constitution i.e. in Egypt and Nigeria. Normally, the language in which a country's Constitution is written is generally accepted as the official language of the country.

There are several stages of language acquisition that are experienced by an African - nursery (uncommon), primary, secondary, high-school, national university and/or foreign university in one or more countries. The scene is made more complex by vernacular/tribal languages, regional languages (as in Nigeria), national languages, official languages etc. as seen above. There is a large number of Africans who have gone through several or all of these stages of language acquisition. (The present author spoke Swahili at home, but went to a Gujarati-speaking nursery school, English medium primary and secondary schools in Tanzania with Swahili, Arabic and Urdu as additional language subjects. Later at Swedish universities, he had to learn/study Swedish and French, and for his doctoral research on the Indian cultural and linguistic influences in Swahili and related languages, he had to acquire a working knowledge of Sanskrit, Hindi, Sindi and German also.)

In the face of all these languages, it is easy and cheap to frequently continue with the colonial metropolitan languages as education in Africa is still elite-oriented and standardisation of languages and orthographies slow or non-existent; and the level of literacy is generally very low in the official metropolitan languages.

This has led to a situation of "linguistic imperialism" and continued dependence on colonial languages. The use of books written in the European metro-languages perpetuates import of books from the West or from western-controlled publishing and printing houses, sometimes in low-cost countries in Asia; it perpetuates export of foreign currencies which Africa needs so badly for buying medicines, tools and technology. Africans continue to write in metro-languages, and literatures in

African languages suffer disadvantage vis a vis African writings in the European tongues - almost all great African writers are therefore not read by the vast majority of Africans, not even by speakers of the writers' own language or ethnic group. Ex-colonial languages are very much an export commodity from the former colonial metropolises to their former colonies in Africa. The English language, for example, is the sixth largest source of income of Britain, about Pounds 500 millions a year, through export of books, general literature and text books, language teachers and teaching materials, training English language teachers and students from abroad, the huge printing and materials producing industry supported by transport and bookshop services etc, and a huge invisible amount of money spent in Britain by foreign tourists on language courses, their board and lodge, and chartered/package tours.

The dominance of the metro-languages deprives the majority of Africans of access to knowledge, and hinders them from participating in national politics and the decision-making process. It slows down national integration and development of a nation-state, with a national culture, creates insecurity and feeling of inferiority among those who have to operate in the foreign language of the ruling elite. This has led to ethnic unrest, political instability and brutal violence from time to time in several parts of Africa where the main political problems are not really ideological but rather ethno-linguistic. Peace is a pre-requisite for growth and prosperity, and in the African context, peace may be maintained only through some degree of national integration achieved by a reasonable amount of linguistic homogenisation. Language development in all forms should therefore be part and parcel of overall development. In the case of present day Somalia, however, another dimension of ethnicity, viz. clan organisation and clan rivalry, has negated the otherwise extremely strong unifying factor of the common Islamic religion and the common Somali language. Similarly, the violence and unrest experienced in Zanzibar during the early 1960s had its roots in the dimension of ancestry - the common language Swahili and the common religion Islam could not surpass for long the economic/class differences that followed closely the various descent groups in the Zanzibari society.

In between the two linguistic extremes of Somalia and Cameroon, we have a broad spectrum of language situation types, the continent having probably the most complex and varied language situation in the world. We can linguistically divide the African countries into "endoglossic" and "exoglossic" (as suggested by Heinz Kloss (1968) in his article on "Language-Nation Typology". A country is endoglossic if its national/official language(s) is spoken as a primary language (mother-tongue) by a large section of the population and this language is thus referred to as "indigenous language". A country is exoglossic when its national/official language(s) has been imported, and implanted, from abroad and the few who traditionally speak it as their first language do not dominate any part of the country significantly. Such a language is referred to as "imported language".

TYOLOGY OF LANGUAGE SITUATION

According to Mohamed Hassan Abdulaziz (1977), the following national/language typology emerges for Africa:

1. Countries having one African language spoken by the vast majority of the population
 - a) as a mother-tongue:
Botswana (Setswana), Burundi (Kirundi), Lesotho (Sesotho), Rwanda (Kinyarwanda), Somalia (Somali), Swaziland (Seswati)
 - b) as a lingua franca:
Central African Republic (Sango), Ethiopia (Amharic c:a 20%, Oromo c:a 50% native speakers), Kenya and Tanzania (Swahili), Mali (Bambara), Senegal (Wolof - 35% native speakers), Sudan (Arabic 54 % native speakers)

Countries in this group appear to have a favourable basis for developing an African language and give it a national/official status.

2. Countries having one predominant African language:
Dahomi (Ge)
Ghana (Akan/Twi)
Malawi (Chichewa/Cinyanja)
Niger (Hausa)
Togo (Ewe)
Burkina Faso (Mosi/More)
Zimbabwe (Shona)
3. Countries having several dominant indigenous African languages competing with one another:
Nigeria (Hausa/Fulani, Igbo, Yoruba, Kanuri)
Sierra Leone (Mende, Temme)
Zaire (Chiluba, Kikongo including Kituba, Kingwana i.e. Kongo Swahili, Lingala and Standard Swahili)

Countries in groups 2 & 3 have good possibility of developing one or more indigenous African languages as their national/official languages, but there is the constant threat of rivalry between the various language groups.

Nigeria follows the Indian model - in each Region of Nigeria, the regional language (ie the largest language in the region) is the medium of instruction at the primary level; English is the medium at the secondary and higher levels. At the secondary level, one more regional language is introduced. For students of arts, a third regional language (and/or French) is offered. At the university level,

language/linguistics students are offered a non-Nigerian African language e.g. Arabic and Swahili.

4. Countries having no predominant African language(s):
Cameroon (Bulu and Ewanda however are widely used in the south, and Fulani in the north adjacent to Nigeria; Ivory Coast and Mozambique

TPOLOGY OF LANGUAGE POLICY

1. Countries which consciously promote one language with
 - a) Endoglossic language policy:
Comoro (Shingazija/Comorian)
Ethiopia (Amharic, though Oromo is spoken by 50% and Amharic by 20% of Ethiopians; Amharic is however the widely spread lingua franca of the country)
Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda (?) (Swahili)
Somalia (Somali)
 - b) Exoglossic language policy:
Angola, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique (Portuguese)
Liberia (English)
2. a) Endoglossic countries with more than one indigenous language promoted:
Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria and Zaire
- b) Exoglossic countries with endoglossic tendency:
Botswana, Burundi, Central African Republic, Comoro, Lesotho, Malawi, Rwanda, Swaziland and Uganda
3. Exoglossic countries where indigenous languages are used in some fields of activity e.g. lower primary education, literacy programs, press and radio, lower courts, police and rural health care:
Gambia, Mozambique, Senegal, Siera Leone, Zambia and Zimbabwe

REFERENCES

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The OAU has its own Inter African Bureau of Languages (P O Box 7284, Kampala, Uganda) for coordinating language development in Africa. Some of the OAU documents on this subject are: *A Survey Of Language Associations In Africa* (ESCAS/EC/205/164.88); *The Language Plan Of Action For Africa* (CM/1352-XLIV), *Consultative Meeting Of The Pan-African Linguistic Association* (ESCAS/EC/205/174.88); *Draft Constitution of the Pan-African Linguistic Association* (ESCAS/EC/205/175.88); *Draft Final Report On The Consultative Meeting* (ESCAS/EC/205/176.88).

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This is a revised version of the paper "Multilingualism and Under-development in Africa", presented at the 22nd Annual Conference on African Linguistics, 15-19 July 1991, Nairobi.