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Linguistic Diversity and Literacy: Issues and Way Forward

Ayo Bamgbose

The outcome of a comparison of practices in linguistic diversity and literacy in Europe and Africa would seem, at first sight, to be predictable as it could be assumed that it would turn up more differences than similarities. For one thing, the languages in Africa that are marginalized, particularly in education, are languages indigenous to each country, whereas the languages that have low status in Europe are regional minority languages as well as immigrant languages.[1] For another, since Europe is highly developed, one would hardly expect that funding would be a constraint. Experiences shared at the Workshop, however, indicate that funding of instruction in minority and non-dominant languages is a problem not only in Africa but in Europe as well.

Factors that are common to both Europe and Africa include restricted role and low status of the languages, inadequacy of literacy materials, difficulty in finding and recruiting teachers, indecision and controversy about whether to use the languages as medium of instruction, and, if used, what the duration of such use will be and which subjects will be taught in what medium as well as the problem of transition to the use of a dominant language as a medium. This catalogue of problems is a familiar one in early childhood and primary education in Africa. The fact that the same problems are encountered in Europe more than justifies the rationale for this Workshop.

Factors that are largely peculiar to Africa are the low level of language development (with many languages hitherto unwritten and several in need of vocabulary expansion so that they may be used in a wider range of domains), outdated and one-size-fits-all materials, initial literacy in an imported official language (such as English or French), and premature abandonment of the mother-tongue medium, usually after the first two or three years of primary education. Most of these factors are responsible for the underdevelopment in education in many African countries.

A constant feature of life in Europe is the presence of immigrant populations. There are three categories of immigrants: long-domiciled immigrants who have largely

been integrated into their host communities, recent immigrants (including migrants and guest workers and their dependants), and refugees. Two conventional approaches are adopted in dealing with immigrant populations: One is to subject them to the 'melting pot' theory, i.e. to require that they be fully integrated with the host community. The other is to provide for pluralism in recognition of the multilingual and multicultural reality, which their presence represents. While the 'melting pot' theory may have worked well for long-domiciled immigrants, it is not feasible for the other two categories of immigrants. Recent immigrants tend to live in ethnic neighbourhoods and maintain their ethnic identity. However, they also need to function in the context of the dominant language of their host community. The challenge for the state is how to ensure that the education of immigrant children takes account of their languages, while at the same time providing opportunities for the children to proceed to secondary and tertiary education in the language of the host community. One country in Europe that has an enlightened policy in this regard is Sweden, which is reported to have made provision for a large number of immigrant languages in its language education policy. With regard to refugees fleeing from conflict zones or natural disaster, there is no alternative to using their languages in the education of their children. Refugees, particularly in Africa, are usually kept in refugee camps and catered for by government or humanitarian agencies. It is accepted that they are likely to be going back to their original homes after the cessation of hostilities. Hence, unless provision is made for the children to receive or continue their education in their languages, there is the danger that they will become misfits when they return to their home community.[2]

Language Status Question

A recurrent theme at this Workshop is the low status of non-dominant languages, particularly regional minority languages, immigrant languages and African languages. Since the effect of low status affects practically all African languages and large populations of speakers of these languages, they will be used as the focus of this discussion of language status. Three questions will be considered: First, how is low language status manifested? Second, what are the causes of low language status? Third, how can the status of these languages be enhanced?

Low status of African languages is manifested in non-use or minimal use in education, poor funding of language instruction, failure to harness them for information and mass participation, and neglect in the formal economy.

Up till recent times, there are many African countries, mainly former French colonial territories, which have a policy of using French as a medium of instruction for the African child from its first day in school. Even in the other countries, mainly former British colonies, that have the opposite policy of using an African language in the education of an African child, such use is generally limited to the lower classes of the primary school. Certainly, the impression conveyed is that African languages are not worthy to be used for education at all or only useful as a means of gently easing the child into the world of learning in a foreign medium.

Poor funding of language instruction is shown in the lack of attention to the teacher-training component of language education and inadequate supply of materials. Generally, teachers are not given any special training for teaching African languages because there is a mistaken notion that all it takes to teach a language is to be able to speak it. Often, teachers are posted to areas where they do not speak the local languages, thereby making nonsense of a mother-tongue education policy. There is a general shortage of language teachers. In the case of imported official languages, this problem is solved by intensive teacher training and special incentives for teachers of English or French. However, in the case of African languages, those languages for which teachers are not available are dropped in the curriculum or waivers allowed for them. Materials are often not enough or antiquated. The excuse that is often given by officials is that there are too many languages and the cost of producing material in all of them is prohibitive. It will be shown later that this excuse is no longer tenable.

It is a well-known fact that speakers of imported official languages constitute a small minority of the population of all African countries. Yet the language policy of most African governments is to provide information mainly in the official languages. The effect of this practice is the exclusion of the majority of the population and a negation of the democratic principle of mass participation. Although radio and television programmes in African languages exist, their content is negligible compared with the information disseminated in the imported official languages. Exceptions to this are

occasional mobilization for voting during political campaigns and the fight against the dreaded pandemic of HIV/Aids. If wisdom can prevail in conducting the campaign against HIV infection using the languages that the masses know well, why can't other valuable information about health, politics, the economy, the environment, and civic rights also be disseminated in African languages?

In most African countries, the formal economy (banking, commerce and industry, mining, manufacturing, and multinational corporations) is dominated by the imported official language. The effect of this is the exclusion of the majority of the population from contributing to the formal economy other than as consumers. Suppose the situation is reversed and African languages are also employed in the formal economy, it is obvious that the level of participation will increase and so will the productive capacity. Even if it is admitted that African languages are widely used in the informal economy (such as in the markets, cottage industries and subsistence farming), the fact still remains that the quantum of contribution will be much greater, if such use is extended to the formal economy. The net effect of failure to use the African language resource not only in the formal economy as well as in other domains is underdevelopment that remains a burden to all African nations.

There are many reasons why African languages have a low status, but only three will be the focus of this presentation. These three are: the dominance of African languages by imported colonial languages, the attitudes of the elite, and lack of political will.

The dominance of imported official languages can be traced back to colonial language policies, which gave pride of place to these languages as the languages of administration, legislation, law, communication, education, and the economy. Post-independence administrations have largely continued these policies and relegated African languages to informal and non-official domains. Coupled with the dominance of the imported official languages is the hegemony associated with them, which generally translates into their aggressive promotion, particularly by agencies devoted to the propagation of these languages. Aid in form of personnel, materials, training, and funding is easily available for them, while African languages have to make do with meagre and

inadequate resources. The net result is that African languages continue to be further disadvantaged.

The failure to promote African languages is in part due to the attitude of the elites who are beneficiaries of a policy that promotes official languages such as English or French. Not only do the English-educated elites benefit, they ensure perpetuation of the advantage by sending their children to prestigious English-medium fee-paying schools, where the children may be taught some French as well[3]. In this connection, it can be observed that the English-educated elites are not averse to bilingual education for their children provided one of the languages is not an African language[4]. It must be conceded that negative attitudes arise mainly from the historical experience of domination and the resulting psychological values. However, speakers of African languages, both elites and non-elites, need to cultivate positive attitudes to their languages, if these languages are to be promoted and used in a wider range of domains.

In addition to the causes already identified, a major reason why African languages are not actively promoted is lack of political will. This manifests itself in poor articulation of language policy, policy formulation without definite implementation strategies, building of escape clauses into policies, and policies that are not backed by provision of enabling funds. It used to be thought that the greatest obstacles to the enhancement of the status of African languages are practical ones, such as funds, personnel or material[5] Experience in many countries has shown, on the contrary, that perhaps the greatest constraint is lack of political will. It is this that is largely responsible for the lip service that is paid to the importance of African languages, while, in practice, imported official languages continue to be dominant in most African countries.

There are several ways in which the status of African languages can be enhanced. First, because African languages are at different stages of development, there is need to adopt appropriate language development strategies. For languages that are yet to be reduced to writing, there is need for devising of orthographies, for those that are already written, there may be need for orthographic reform and terminology development, and for all languages, there is need for literary and other texts. Second, African languages need to be empowered through their use in expanded domains. Unless these languages can be used in several domains, without their users requiring translation into an imported official

language, the incentive to acquire knowledge through them will not be strong. Third, a necessary corollary to use in wider domains is intellectualization of these languages. Any time there is a division of labour between African and European official languages such that the latter are for higher academic pursuits and the latter for cultural and artistic expression, a wrong impression is automatically created that African languages are not suitable for higher academic functions.[6] Some ways of achieving intellectualization include the translation of the Constitution and laws of the country as well as major works into African languages and the use of these languages for descriptive and analytical purposes even at the tertiary level of education.

Fourth, there is need for attitudinal change on the part of the elites as well as speakers of each language so that there will be justifiable pride in using the languages for non-intimate and formal purposes. Fifth, political will on the part of policy-makers and implementers is a necessary requirement for success. Sixth, European nations, particularly the former colonial masters, need to accept responsibility for the current plight of African languages, since the origin of their marginalization dates back to the colonial period. African leaders have been making demands for reparation and debt forgiveness. There is need to go beyond the economic aspect of these demands to the human development aspect. For example, there is no reason why African debtor nations should not be required to devote a substantial proportion of the forgiven debt to education, including the use of both African languages and imported official languages side by side in bilingual programmes not only for primary but for secondary and tertiary education as well.

Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education in a multilingual situation is characterized by a variety of practices including the use of one language for initial literacy only, biliteracy, mother-tongue based literacy[7], dual or multilingual medium, etc. Given the range of practices, it is clear that no single fixed model can be adopted for all situations. Whichever model is adopted, the minimum requirement is that every child should be taught in his or her mother tongue or a language that the child already speaks by the time he or she enrols in the primary school. To insist on this is not only a matter of language rights, it is a

linguistic requirement related to concept formation and the technicality of coding and decoding of symbols as well as a psychological requirement related to the cultivation of self-confidence, self-worth and identity.

Two recurrent deficits in reports from different countries concern inadequacy of language teachers and materials. Rather than rely on traditional practices regarding teacher training, it is proposed that new approaches and a complete reorientation are called for. For example, specialized training colleges for training of language teachers such as was tried out at Ajumako Teachers' College in Ghana and more recently at the National Institute for Nigerian Languages at Aba in Nigeria are creative departures from traditional approaches to teacher training, which may be found useful in other countries. As far as the production of materials is concerned, the well-worn arguments about cost are no longer feasible, given developments in technology, which have made possible desktop publishing and facilitated availability of fonts. In addition, new methods of producing materials for smaller languages have been evolved, including co-editions and bilingual/ multilingual texts.

In discussions of use of African languages on the African continent and regional and immigrant languages in Europe, the focus is often on problems, constraints and inadequacies. For example, from the Netherlands comes the disturbing report that the teaching of immigrant languages, which hitherto had flourished in schools, has now been banned in primary schools. This means that all immigrant children now have to receive their education in Dutch from the first day at school. Against such discouraging reports, it is a welcome relief to listen to reports of success stories from a few countries. These include the biliteracy project in South Africa in which children learn to read and write in at least two languages at the same time, the multivariety children's books in Austria, the use of eight languages spoken by non-Latvian minority groups as media of instruction from primary to secondary school in Latvia and the PROPELCA Project in Cameroon which began as a small experiment involving literacy in four African languages and has now expanded to literacy in as many as 38 languages. The significance of the PROPELCA Project is that, from the base of zero use of an African language in literacy and as a medium of instruction, it has broken new grounds and introduced such use.

A similar zero base is that of primary education in Burkina Faso in West Africa. A former colony of France, Burkina Faso (formerly known as Upper Volta) had until recently 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 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%.[8] 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. Some important lessons are to be learnt from this experience. First, the high success rate and the fact that there are no repeaters or dropouts is evidence that the language medium is a major variable for success. Second, educational authorities are more likely to be persuaded by hard facts as shown in the performance of the project children than papers and abstract presentations on the value of mother-tongue education. Third, parents will opt for what is perceived to be in the best interests of their children. The reason many parents opt for English-medium early education is that they believe that it is bound to give their children a head start. If this belief can be shown to be erroneous and a viable alternative can be presented to them, they will opt for this alternative as parents in Burkina Faso have done.

Cooperation: Possible Areas, Framework and Networking

An expected outcome of this Workshop is an identification of possible areas of cooperation, framework for such cooperation, and networking. The areas of possible cooperation include the following:

- Comparison of linguistic context and policy support. In particular, a fertile area of cooperation is the situation of African languages as compared with immigrant languages in Europe, with particular reference to their valorization, teaching and use.

- Compilation of on-going projects with their description and outcomes. It is remarkable that similar problems are being tackled in different countries without researchers in one country being aware of the efforts and the outcomes in other countries. With the sort of compilation envisaged here, more information will become available, experiences can be shared, and duplication of effort will be avoided.
- Exchange of information on design, preparation and supply of literacy materials.
- Support for projects on children's books.
- Exchange of publications and technical reports.
- Awareness campaigns about literacy and education in a child's first language.[9]
- Possible joint projects and /or support for critical pilot bilingual/multilingual education projects.[10]

The framework for cooperation is of three types. First, there can be cooperation between one researcher and another as in the case of Viv Edwards' booklet on six good reasons for learning Welsh and Brigitta Busch's multivariety books, both of which have been adopted as a model for similar books by PRAESA researchers in South Africa. Second, there can be institutional links such as between universities and/or research institutes, international organizations like the African Academy of Letters (ACALAN) with UNESCO, Council of Europe and various organizations of partner languages. Third, there can be cooperation across disciplines. For example, teachers of English and French in some African universities are known to be in the forefront of promotion of African languages alongside their colleagues in African languages, linguistics and language education.[11]

A further step from cooperation is formalization through networking. Some of the strategies for networking include the following:

- Building on current links with ACALAN.[12]
- Compiling a directory of language educators and literacy experts
- Exploiting ICT facilities such as database and websites for contact and information
- Organizing periodic review meetings
- Arranging sponsored visits and lecture tours

- Entering into liaison with international agencies, such as UNESCO.

Way Forward

In order to further pursue the objectives which have been the focus of the Workshop, it will be necessary to intensify current efforts, experiment with new strategies and learn from experiences elsewhere. In particular, the following steps are suggested:

- Intensification of language development efforts and simplified computer-based strategies of production of language teaching materials.
- Generalization and dissemination of results form existing projects and possible adaptation in comparable situations.
- Local and regional workshops for trainers of language educators.
- Support for ACALAN's Plan of Action with regard to compilation of language policies, comparison and adaptation of instructional materials and promotion of African languages.[13]
- Collaboration with UNESCO in getting member states to renew their commitment to mother tongue education.
- Initiative to provide a language policy component to NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa's Development).[14]

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[1] In a survey of such languages Guus Extra and Durk Gorter (eds.)(2001) refer to them as "the other languages of Europe". See *The Other Languages of Europe*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters. Strictly speaking, "immigrant languages" is only a compressed form for "languages of immigrants", since it is people rather than languages that migrate.

[2] The classification adopted here is taken from Ayo Bamgbose (2000). *Language and Exclusion*. Münster: LIT Verlag, pp.15-16.

[3] Ekkehard Wolf made the point at the Workshop that we needed to desist from "elite bashing". However, as long as elitist disdain for African languages persists, it is going to be difficult not to continue to deplore such elitist attitudes.

[4] Reference was made at the Workshop by Margaret Obondo to the difference between "multilingualism of the rich and multilingualism of the poor". The former is prestigious and European language-based (including courses abroad in such languages), while the latter is African language-based and is not highly rated. In Cameroon, for instance, where French and English are joint official languages, bilingualism is usually taken to mean bilingualism in these two languages and for children of the elites, this is usually the bilingualism that matters.

[5] An example of policy not backed by funding which was reported at the Workshop is that of Cameroon, which has enabling regulations in support of using African languages as media of instruction in primary education, but does not accept that it is the responsibility of the government to provide the enabling resources for the implementation of the policy.

[6] There is often a reference to the partnership between European official languages and African languages. If such partnership is based on the kind of division of labour observed here, it will be comparable to the partnership between the horse and its rider.

[7] Against the conventional term, "mother-tongue education", Neville Alexander introduces this term to emphasize that more than one language may be involved as long as it includes the mother tongue.

[8] The report of this Project is presented 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. It will be useful if this pamphlet can be translated into as many languages as possible and widely disseminated.

[9] Two examples of this at the Workshop are (a) Viv Edwards' booklet on six good reasons why children in Wales should learn Welsh in addition to English, which is the dominant language in the region, and (b) Kum'a Ndumbe's informal methods of sensitization of children to learn African languages in the AfricAvenir projects in Cameroon.

[10] The view that there seems to be an addiction to pilot projects in education, even if correct, cannot be blamed on researchers in language education. The blame lies squarely on education authorities that continue to ask for more and more proof before a policy decision can be taken.

[11] One experience shared at the Workshop concerns the way teachers cooperate to teach language across the curriculum. For instance, teachers of science join teachers of English and immigrant languages in labelling specimens in science in several languages.

[12] ACALAN has proven to be a unique experience in inter-regional cooperation in Africa. With this Workshop and thanks to the foresight of Neville Alexander, the scope of cooperation has been extended to Europe. Of course, the total commitment of Adama Samassekou, the President of ACALAN, has been a major factor in the rising profile of the Academy.

[13] For a list of items in ACALAN's Plan of Action, see ACALAN's Special Bulletin of January 2002, pp. 26-27.

[14] This has been a very successful Workshop and our thanks go to the organizers who have put together an impressive team of participants. I wish to acknowledge, in particular, the commitment and interest of Monika Goodenough-Hofmann to have this Workshop take place. In my experience, civil servants tend to impede rather than complement the work of researchers. In this regard, Monika is really a rare breed. Our thanks also go to Brigitta Busch for the academic planning of the Workshop and to Adrian Butler, Director of the European Centre for Modern Languages for the excellent arrangements made at the venue of the Workshop. Through him, we extend our thanks to all those working behind the scene, including the secretarial and other support staff. Finally, we commend and applaud the excellent performance of the interpreters, without whose competence and quiet efficiency, we could not have had a successful Workshop.