LANGUAGE AND RELATED STUMBLING BLOCKS TO EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the role of language in development communication. This is achieved by looking at literature in the areas of development and development communication as well as an analysis of language use of development workers and beneficiaries in two villages in Northern Ghana. Two views of development are discussed, resulting in the conclusion that development implies improvement on existing living conditions by collective effort. The language(s) used and language related issues such as power and participation are also discussed. The methodology was mainly the use of questionnaires and participant observation. It concludes by calling for a closer look at language issues in multilingual societies since language is one of the major means by which people can truly participate or not.

INTRODUCTION

In spite of the fact that through globalization and the use of information technology (IT), the world is getting smaller, local level realities appear to have lost little legitimacy, particularly in the use of indigenous knowledge and language. While languages such as English and French are international languages and continue to catch the attention of many people, many other languages, especially the least developed ones in Africa are suffering inadequate attention, thus creating imbalance in power through the use of language. Recent studies on power in Africa have focused on the nature of governance in African countries. This paper looks at power relations between partners with specific reference to language use in two villages in Northern Ghana in the context of development and development communication strategies.

Before going any further, an exercise on development communications a worth trying. Attempt to answer the following questions:

As a development worker

- What language(s) do you use when communicating with your communities?
- Have you ever considered learning the language of the communities with whom you work?
- Are you happy with your interpreters?
- What do you think is the role of language in development?

As a development partner (beneficiary)

- What languages do you use when interacting with people of your community?
- Have you considered learning the language that is used if different from the
- language(s) that you use?
- Are you happy with the interpretations you get?
- What do you think is the role of language in development?

If you have ever worked in development in a culture different from your own you would have struggled extensively with many such questions as these. Amazingly, despite the dogged persistence of such questions, they are hardly considered and barely dealt with by the development powers. This paper investigates the causes/reasons-----, especially with regard to the development cooperation and the emerging changes.

SOME CONCEPTUAL AND CONTEXTAUL ISSUES

Despite the hundreds of programmes designed by international NGOs and the governments to 'alleviate' local poverty, it is still very much a part of life in Ghana. While many reasons such as natural disasters, corruption, poor economic policies, unemployment, and exploitation may account for this, the issue of language and related issues such as power also play an important role – as argued in this paper.

Even among such grassroots-oriented development thinkers such as Melkote and Steeves (2001), White et al, (1994), Chambers (1983) and, Kenny and Savage (1977), there is little emphasis on the importance of language. In the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in September 2000 by world leaders and in other more locally based declarations such as that on Africa's development challenges (adopted at the end of the CODESRIA conference in April 2002 in Accra), there is almost no mention of language – although concerns about the low levels of literacy feature in some of their discussions. Where language is mentioned at all, it is in relation to terminology – mainly in the form of a shift from one era to the next. Some examples of the shifts are: from '*modernisation*' to '*development*', from '*third*' to '*developing countries*', from '*poor* to '*underprivileged*'.

A Paradigm Shift

In development literature over the years, there have been quite a number of differing views on the understanding of development, but all boil down to two main categories: (1) *development as economic growth* and (2) *development as meeting human needs*. The first and older view sees the achievement of development as being through free market strategies and structural approaches in which only certain people benefit directly, though it is claimed that there is a trickle-down effect which benefits some poor (McKay, 2004: 47). This type of development approach intervenes at

national rather than at rural levels. Here 'development' is measured in terms of economic success, particularly the per capita level of a nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and the proportion of the population living above a specific level of income – the so-called 'poverty line'. However, this type of intervention may actually widen the gap between the rich and the poor. In his discussion about the effects of modernisation, Kumar (1994: 83) shows through various development studies that an increase in economic growth does not necessarily trickle down to benefit the poor.

Today, development goals are broader and to some extent less directed than previous approaches. Those trying to narrow the rich-poor gap have come up with another approach, which focuses on human needs. This is the second major approach to development. Here 'development' is in terms of the whole person – it is "human development". The goal is the development of individual persons and their social self-determination efforts. It involves education in all the different aspects and issues of life such as health, environment, politics, equality and gender.

Although both positions aim at improving conditions of life the two are quite distinct from one another. The first focuses on wealth (at national level) as the means to improve life, while the second attempts to help people with the skills and knowledge needed to improve their lives. Neither approach need be condemned outright but clearly each has its own peculiar weaknesses. My own preference leans toward the latter. I identify more with the approaches that aim to promote the improvement of people's lives. Development is about increasing the capacity of individuals, families, communities, local authorities, private organisations, central government and nations to plan and manage their own resources and affairs, (Wood, 1993). It is the learning needed by individuals, communities and nation states to prepare themselves to live the present and to live in the future.

Over the last two decades these positions or polarities in development have undergone many changes. In particular they have both moved from the top-down delivery of development to a more recent stress on the active participation of local people. "Active participation" is the new development paradigm. It rejects the conservative values of the "old professionalism" which sought to pass on "expert knowledge" of developers to the 'beneficiaries', or the poor. Active participation means the rejection of the top-down approaches whereby prescribed activities were imposed on rural peoples as a formula for improving their lives.

Robert Chambers (1983) is one of the principal architects of the new development paradigm. His "new professionalism" reverses the values, roles and power relations of the old professionalism, by putting the poor and weak people first. He says rural people should be helped to identify their own undesirable conditions and decide on the activities they think are the best way to improve these conditions. He further argues that development must be a flexible and adaptive learning process. What I find lacking in this new professionalism as it applies to either of the two positions is

its neglect of the language issue. The new professionalism is no more sensitive to the language issue than was the old professionalism. Language issues are still, to a large extent out of the picture.

Thus, the major schools of development are divided into two camps: *top-down* (which most people *claim* they don't use any more) and the *participatory model.* This is where language comes in. If we accept that participatory approaches are more effective and offer the better strategy then we must also accept that they can only do this if the lines of communication are kept open. No matter what overall ap- proach is used, language will always play a crucial role if the participatory model is followed for it connects the 'providers' to the 'beneficiaries'.

Participatory Approaches and Cognition.

The participatory model puts the fulcrum of development on responsible and accurate communication. Thus the language issue is key. It also seems that there are different levels at which language is key. Scholars and practitioners of development have re- cently emphasised the need for two-way communication between the providers and beneficiaries. This is the first level. It involves the use of language as a tool for ex- changing ideas. At a much deeper level there is the direct involvement of beneficiar- ies as 'experts' of their own knowledge systems. This involves their understanding of their human development in terms of their own expansive worldview, symbolic sys- tems and systems of meaning - the deeper realms of language and culture. Here we have a deeper necessity for language, at the cognitive level. Insightful and creative understanding – the kind that leads to highly motivated action towards virtue and truth – is only really possible in one's ethnic or first language.

Participatory communication involves participatory learning, decision-making, and action. It involves open discussions, identifying needs and problems, and together deciding on plans of action for people to improve their own lives (Melkote and Steeve 2001: 250). Thus the concept of good development has moved from the top- down, 'delivery' model through the participatory model, to the realisation that this involves communication, to the recognition of the importance of language in both its communicative and cognitive aspects and, to the realisation that we need a strategy for improving our communication and understanding. A two-way flow of informa- tion and understanding is now advocated. This means the developers have as much to learn about human development as those being developed. In fact, all are potential providers and beneficiaries according to this new model. This new communicative focus then brings to the development forum a host of new issues revolving around the who, what, where, when, how of communication as understanding.

Development as communication between partners

Involving the society is a direct means of raising people's consciousness of develop- ment issues. This in itself is capable of influencing and changing society as Paolo

Freire (1973) demonstrated more than three decades ago. Awareness raising or conscientisation as Freire calls the development of critical awareness is an open ended learning process carried through "group dialogue". A group of people comes together to discuss and try to solve problems they have in common. The approach, apart from creating awareness also aims at helping beneficiaries acquire technical knowledge and the required expertise and, where ever applicable, to make information and communication technology a tool of empowerment (Bessette, 1997). Development communication, in this case, should include putting systems and institutions in place to create knowledge, skills and attitudes for developing people's capabilities. It should also give people at the grassroots level positive feelings, creative inspiration and confidence about their development and their formative role in it, regardless of the overall approach, provided only that it is truly interactive and dialogical.

This implies finding a means or a medium of communication that will foster maximum understanding between providers and beneficiaries of development. As we shall see, this is seldom achieved because the actual 'communication' on the local scene is still one-sided and more heavily weighted on the side of the provider. The medium is almost always the provider's language. The concepts related to development are always validated by the knowledge and understanding implicit to the provider's language. Yet, the reality of the people's situation and its inherent problems can only really be known from an insider's perspective, and that situation needs to be expressed in the insider's language. Perhaps 'insider' versus 'outsider' is more appropriate than provider and beneficiary.

Although the paradigms are clear enough, as are their implications, there is still little progress on the issue of local involvement. Experts agree that the people on the ground must be heard and understood. But efforts to implement this in any way seem to meet with stubborn resistance. Schon further challenges us to examine just who is the real 'expert' or 'professional' when it comes to local cultural knowledge. "Professionally designed solutions to public problems have had unanticipated consequences, sometimes worse than the problems they were designed to solve" (Schon 1983: 4). Brokensha (1980) laments the inability of professionals (despite all their political correctness) to believe that the rural poor can know anything of consequence.

The framework within which an increasing number of development communicators are beginning to operate, and where I would place my own views, is that constructed by Paolo Freire (1970). Through this framework, we are beginning to be able to slowly chip away at the resistance offered by sheer power of the western view point. His model consists of getting rural people to recognise the unfavourable conditions under which they are living and to take action to transform that situation. This falls under his 'liberation' manifesto in which the purpose of development is freedom from oppression. For Freire, finding solutions to problems begins with identifying the sources of oppression and power. Development communication, from this

perspective, is the emancipation of people so that they can make decisions that affect their current and future lives.

Resistance from Prestigious Positions

Modern development communication, it seems, is moving in this direction. It aims at two-way interaction between those at the grassroots (who are both receivers and pro- viders of information and those positioned to facilitate development (who, at least theoretically, are also receivers and providers of information). But we still have a long way to go. Underlying these positions is the implicit expectation of both insiders and outsiders that the *primary and most important information* is from the outside, for the provider. Here the prestige of western culture reinforces the top-down model. No matter how well this is mediated by development communicators, whose role is to facilitate participation of beneficiaries in the process of development, the real knowledge is still expected to flow in only one direction. So, quite predictably, true mutual participation usually fails in practice.

Therefore, although participatory approaches are being advocated by theorists, they have not had the anticipated success. As a rule development planning has not taken into consideration the local conditions, the available resources or the real needs of Africa's rural poor, much less their language and culture. To echo Robinson, "the definition and design of rural development frequently does not involve rural popula- tions, who are regarded as groups that development is provided for..." (1996: 40). He adds that as a result national and international planning has had to draw on uni- form development programmes which turn out not to be appropriate for local com- munities and when the locals are asked to 'participate' in their implementation, it becomes a game with the objective being personal gain.

Resistance from the Rich: "Beggars cannot be choosers"

There is a third source of resistance to the participatory approach. This comes from the fact that one party is rich and the other is poor. Despite the positive benefits of the participatory approach we are constantly reminded that "programmes supported by international agencies have frequently been conceived and executed in a top- down... manner" (Cernea, 1988: 27). International agencies are rich (and therefore de-facto the provider) and Africa is poor (and therefore de-facto the receiver). The heart of the problem is that the money and resources for development are still mostly controlled by outside powers. African governments come as beggars not choosers. Then the cycle continues when the governments offer their services, again from the 'top-down' and as outsiders to the local situation, to the impoverished and needy citizens at the grass roots.

Resistance From Disbelief

A further reason for the less success of participatory development is that those at the top do not trust those at the bottom to handle their own development. They do not believe that this is possible. This is sometimes justified or further explained by reference to the concomitant belief that there is little capacity at the local level to initiate and sustain this sort of development.

In the face of this implicit resistance from the rich, the powerful, the prestigious and general disbelief, the new development-in-action is simply unable to escape the top-down mode and structures of the past.

Nevertheless, if we are true to the participation strategy, even in the face of compelling resistance we must accept that communication and interaction between local people and development agencies is absolutely crucial. And so we cannot avoid the enormous issue of language. Coulmas's (1992: 213) almost off-hand observation about the role of *endoglossic* vs. *exoglossic* language in development offers the barest hint of the enormity of this issue. He says "the 20 richest countries in the world without exception possess endoglossic written languages, while 20 of the 25 poorest countries, exoglossic". The really tough questions this raises about the need to use one's own ethnic language as the epistemological basis for creative learning and development in turn raises huge and ongoing questions about educational and development policies.

A Coherent Language Policy

Although one would not wish to reduce the number of Ghana's 60 languages – which in any case would be impossible to do – this does indirectly highlight the need for a coherent and acceptable language policy among agents of development. And this, in turn, raises to the surface a flotilla of sub-issues for further investigation and reflection. What are all the possible roles of language in development? What is its role in establishing and maintaining relations of power? How are changes to political systems understood and encountered across the language barriers? To what extent are the languages adaptable and to what extent is cultural pluralism possible? All of these are intimately related to our well-being and human development as a community and they absolutely require major research, reflection and decision concerning language policy, not only for education but also for development.

A good language policy will not solve all the developmental problems but it is fundamental both philosophically and physically. Drawing up an effective language policy would be a major contribution to the development process here in Ghana. It is this conviction that has led me to do some preliminary research on this topic, of which only the barest bones are presented here.

METHODOLOGY

Given the theoretical importance of language in the design and implementation of participatory development models and policies for national and rural development, as it has been stressed above, it became necessary foe me to ascertain what actually takes place on the ground. In a study carried out in the Northern Region of Ghana from November 1998 to August 2002 (Mahama 2004) I examined and compared the way language was used in people's daily interactions over and against the way it is used in special contexts, especially developmental. I was also interested in how some sociolinguistic issues such as ethnicity or identity affected the way in which people used language. I used mainly qualitative research methods including participant observation, interviews, questionnaires and linguistic analysis. The study compared the responses of two rural communities that were quite different linguistically and culturally, namely Daboya and Pong-Tamale. Where the people were multilingual I was particularly interested in their preferred language for development issues.

KEY FINDINGS

In the analyses of language use in different domains in these two villages, it was realized that both literate and non-literate use the local language in most of the domains, particularly in social life. My observation about real language use in these villages supports the use of the local languages over English. Local languages were preferred in nearly all the domains except for the choice of a language for instruction in school. Even in the context of prayer, the Moslems who use Arabic most of the time said they would prefer to be able to say all the "set prayers" in their local languages. Language is a constituent of unity and therefore the use of a language for inclusion is preferred. Further investigations proved that the use of the local languages, especially ethnic ones is an expression of people's allegiance to their ethnic language. In the case of competition between local languages, natives express allegiance to their ethnic languages while non-natives choose more widely spoken ones. In trying to find out language use in "non traditional settings" such as school, the local languages were preferred for all types of interaction except as a language for instruction. The institutional nature of the school and the national language policy for education were some reasons that accounted for this preference. When factors such as the subject and difficulty level of the topic change the choice of language alters. For example topics considered relatively easy were taught in English while those considered difficult usually with unfamiliar words are taught in the local language if not entirely at least partly by code switching.

Some respondents from development organisations when asked about the languages they used among the local people said they used the local languages. Those who did not speak the local languages expressed their desire to do so. This use and expression of the wish to use local languages by respondents from development organisations reveal that development organisations do recognise the need to use them more di-

rectly but have not found it necessary to include in the policies of their institutions. Even for employment, some of the respondents from Catholic Relief Service said that the linguistic ability of applicants was an advantage in some cases.

While the knowledge of some local languages is an added advantage for getting a job, the knowledge of English is not an added advantage but a main requirement for development organisations for all levels of staff except cleaners in a few instances. The gap between language use of the community and language use among development workers suggests therefore that there is a preference for the institutional nature of development agencies than participation at grass root level.

The study revealed that the people of both communities:

• use their local language for social interactions as well as in special domains such as development and;
• preferred to use their own local languages over English as the ideal means of communication for all development purposes because it offered full interaction (with insiders and outsiders) whereas English did not.

The inclusion of language is meant to seek the perspectives of the rural people. It is not just about language competence but also about being able to communicate effectively within a particular community. "Using language appropriately involves knowing the sociolinguistic rules for speaking in a community. It means understanding the influence of social factors on speech behaviour" (Holmes 2002: 366). It also means using a particular language or in some cases, a particular dialect. Unfortunately, this is not always the case on the ground. For example, one of my development officer respondents said the following about language and communication:

"I feel comfortable speaking my own language to them … as long as I can understand, that's important, as long as you [referring to the local people] can understand that's important. I will not struggle to speak Kusaal when I know that when I speak Dagaare you understand, if you speak Kusaal I understand. It brings us together. That's the beauty of diversity. When someone speaks a variety of a language, I expect people to understand".

Another officer expressed more awareness of language problems, but had a laissez-faire attitude. In response to the problems they (development organisations) encounter with the local people, he said that:

"…sometimes some basic things you expect them to understand, at the end of the day, they have their own interpretation or meaning to some of these things, which sometimes I consider a problem of semantics … and at the end of the day, you have a few challenges and this is how I perceive it but on the whole its alright".

Development issues must be integrated with local perspectives and using beneficiaries' own language can best do this. The understanding of the role of language as a tool of development by our development officers in these two development agencies seems to be limited to only language competence and the dissemination of information but it goes far beyond that. Shared expertise can overcome obstacles to communication. This is exemplified in our second development officer's comment. Some things may be taken for granted and considered basic but if the two groups do not have shared knowledge, those basic issues may still pose problems.

CONCLUSIONS

The use of different languages-English, Tampulma, Gonja, Hanga, Dagbanli and Hausa (in the case of this study) defines the level of participation in development intervention. While the indigenous language of beneficiaries is likely to get all beneficiaries within a particular community to interact with each other and outsiders, the use of some languages such as English, especially in rural settings, may lead to exclusion. A confirmation stems out from the fact that all the development agents who can speak the local languages have said in this study that they actually use them in different contexts, while those who do not express the desire to do so.

None of the respondents said that all the village people understood English, which means that they were aware of a gap between the language use of their institutions and the language use of the village people. Attempts have however, been made to bridge this gap by doing interpretations and translations from English to the local languages.

IMPLICATIONS

The study demonstrated very clearly that the local language is in each case the ideal for participatory development but it goes strongly in the face of current governmental and developmental "top-down" policies. Although there are obvious practical problems here, it suggests that the way forward is to go for a local "community language." The acceptance of local languages for both literacy and development communication would both increase people's access to information and raise their self-esteem. At grassroots level around Ghana it is therefore worth looking critically at the language(s) used for education and evaluating this with a view to finding a language in which a majority of the people within a particular community feel comfortable and creative.

International and national development efforts have reached the benchmark of participatory development. But thus far we are simply mouthing the words. For this to become a reality there must be true dialogue across cultures – always giving preference to the grass-roots, to local knowledge and to the local language in which it is conceived. This is because one's native language is the main medium through

which all useful knowledge and skills are first acquired. If the objective of participatory development is to help people to acquire the knowledge and skills to deal with their problems and improve their situations, it must proceed from what is already there. Hence the language used in instruction and information sharing is absolutely crucial. If developmental knowledge is really movement in both directions, involving a give and take (as it claims to be), and not just a one-way street, then the agents of development, and those in some way fostering this process must begin to become seriously involved in the local knowledge 'bank' which is reflected by and in local languages.

APPLICATIONS

As mentioned earlier I do not wish to say that a good language policy will solve all the development problems of Ghana but I hope that this essay has helped to clarify how much it is needed. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that without it there is not much possibility of ever establishing an effective participatory process here in Ghana.

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