Challenges of the implementation of language policies in southern Africa: what is the way forward?

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Abstract

At the attainment of independence, most African governments adopted the colonisers' foreign languages as official languages to be used in business, the judiciary, education, local government and parliament. Examples of foreign languages that have dominated local languages in Africa are English, French and Portuguese. This paper argues that indigenous languages in Southern Africa, which is the focus of the survey, have low variety status vis-à-vis foreign languages for a variety of reasons, the major being the challenges faced in the implementation of the language policies in these countries. While the survey found that there are language policies in the country studied, it can be concluded that having a language policy in place is not congruent to its implementation and its desired effects. The study recommends adopting the Tanzanian language policy model that formalised Swahili as a national language for all purposes. To all intents and purposes, the Swahili model has been a resounding success.

Keywords: Linguistics, language policy, Southern Africa

Introduction

For the past decades, conferences have been held on issues surrounding the status of African languages, not only in southern Africa, but in Africa as a whole. One can cite, as examples, the UNESCO Intergovernmental Conference on Language Policies in Africa which was held in Harare, Zimbabwe, in 1997; the African Conference on the Integration of African Languages and Cultures into Education which was held in 2010 in Ougadougou, Berkina Faso; the Cape Town Language and Development conference held in South Africa in 2015; and the African Languages Association of Southern Africa (ALASA) conference held at the Namibia University of Science and Technology at the end of June in 2016. Imagining these and other deliberations and efforts on the African-languages question as battles, the major question this paper tries to answer is: are we as linguists and language practitioners with a keen interest in the preservation of African autochthonous languages losing the battles? Based on critical analyses of works on the language policies of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries, this paper discusses a number of challenges that affect the implementation of language policies in these countries. The major challenges the paper highlights include: the diglossic situations which perpetuate the supremacy of the language of colonisers at the expense of indigenous African languages; the neo-colonial elites who promote languages like English, French and Portuguese as languages that buttress their power, in most cases paying lip-service to the promotion of indigenous languages; the absence of strict monitoring of the implementation of language policies in domains like primary, secondary and tertiary education and training; the lack of support for the development of African languages from the private sector; the lack of interest in promoting the use of languages of minority groups which are faced with extinction; and the conundrum multilingual polities face in determining which indigenous languages have to be officialised as national languages and/or 'standard' languages. We argue that although the task seems to be insurmountable, linguists, language practitioners and other concerned entities have to step up the fight for our African languages which are the vehicles of our cultural identities, heritages and indigenous knowledge systems. In this fight, we need to respect multilingualism and linguistic diversity, guided by the fact that there is no language that is linguistically superior to another.

As a point of departure, we note that indigenous languages studied actually play second fiddle to foreign languages. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms* (2010: 125) defines the idiom 'play second fiddle to' as 'to take a subordinate role to someone or something.' Applied to the language question and language policies discussed in this paper, one can conclude that indigenous African languages are given secondary roles in the SADC countries whose language policies were investigated. From the onset, let me categorically say that SADC linguists, language practitioners and researchers, and like-minded progressive forces should condemn situations in which indigenous African languages play secondary roles in our countries and that the situation should be redressed without further delay. In this spirit, this author published two articles titled "Development of indigenous languages needs strong support" and "Time for SADC to save indigenous

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African languages" in the *Windhoek Observer* (2015, 2016), an influential weekly newspaper in Namibia, hoping to stimulate debate on this sensitive topic. To the author's utter dismay, no response came to this effort, not even in the form of a letter to the editor. The absence of response suggested to the author that there is a lack of interest in linguistic matters in Namibia.

Equally disturbing, the dearth of interest in local languages seems to be widespread. In the research for this paper this author 'travelled' and 'sojourned' in SADC countries, not physically (except in Namibia), but spiritually and intellectually. The spirited academic journey left my heart and mind in tatters as the cruellest facts about the situations of indigenous languages that had previously been taken for granted or glossed over were discovered.

The political elite and language policies

The most painful thing that struck me was that the political elite in each of the countries studied have deliberately perpetuated the supremacy of foreign languages over indigenous languages. There is clear evidence that language and power are closely related and in this case the foreign language that was used to subjugate the local people and their languages is the most preferred language by the new governments. The socio-political environment created by the political elite has had a negative perception of the status of local languages against foreign language. In other words, the power that is exercised by the new rulers or elite is entrenched in the foreign language of the colonial master. To show how powerful a language is, Yiddish linguist Max Weinrich's remarked: "A language is a dialect with an army and a foreign policy". This statement is sometimes quoted as "A language is a dialect with an army and a navy[2]"

As has already been stated above, the common denominator of most sub-Saharan countries is the obvious choice of the former coloniser's language and that power is entrenched in the coloniser's language instead of indigenous languages. For example, according to Augusto (2012), there is overwhelming evidence backed by statistics in Angola that shows that although the official language the government chose at independence in 1975 was Portuguese, most Angolans living in non-urban areas did not speak or understand the language. The choice of Portuguese as the only official language and as the language of instruction in Angola was condemned by Fernandes and Ntondo (2002) who strongly argued that it was detrimental to the development of indigenous Bantu languages and Khoisan languages in the country. Similarly, the Mozambican language policy puts Portuguese as the official language showing a clear inheritance of the former coloniser's language. Portuguese has the prestige of having been selected for all official functions, including education, while the indigenous languages have the status of local 'minority' languages, thus playing little or no formal role at all in both countries.

English dominates as an official language in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, Malawi, Lesotho, Swaziland and Namibia. Although English is the former coloniser's language in other countries, it was not a former coloniser's language in Namibia which used Afrikaans as an official language before independence. The choice of English as the official language offered a neutral lingua franca in a multilingual society in Namibia in which Afrikaans was viewed with suspicion by the new leadership mainly because it was the official language during the apartheid colonial rule. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, French dominates local languages like Kikongo, Lingala, Luba-Kasai and Congo Swahili. The DRC's indigenous languages can be classified into three distinct types: the Bantoid, the Adamawa-Ubangian and the Central Sudanic groups. In Mauritius and Seychelles French and English are the official languages despite the fact that the majority speak Creole. In sum, we see the perpetuation of a diglossic situation which treats foreign languages as High Varieties and indigenous languages as Low Varieties in education, the judiciary and government, and related spheres of the socio-economic and political contexts. Accoding to Wardhaugh (2006:94) 'Diglossia reinforces social distinctions. It is used to assert social position and to keep people in their place, particularly those at the lower end of the social hierarchy. Any move to extend the Low Variety . . . is likely to be perceived to be a direct threat to those who want to maintain traditional relationships and the existing power structure'.

So the diglossic situations created perpetuate the supremacy of the language of the coloniser or the foreign language. The inherited language enjoys the status of unifying and prestige in commonly multilingual societies typical of the majority of African countries at the expense of indigenous languages. We can summarise this scenario as follows: diglossic situations were created during the colonial periods; diglossic situations were extended at independence and still exist today; diglossic situations will continue into the future unless something drastic is put in place by our governments to stop this colossal monster that will devour our languages and cultures.

Coupled with the above, some language policies are so vague and inconsistent that upon implementation they themselves create challenges that negatively affect the implementation process. For instance, Mauritius lacks clarity as no language is legally recognised as official or national but the country shows a bias toward French and English at the expense

2. *https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/01/...language-dialect/424704/.*

of Kreol, which is widely spoken. This vagueness leads to confusion and wide variation in languages of instruction across the country. In most Mauritian classrooms, a combination of Kreol, French and English is used, though for different purposes. Zambia is ambiguous and Malawi is mixed up as children with different national language backgrounds learn some subjects in multilingual contexts, as the books are written in Chichewa and the teachers' teaching guides are written in English. The policy is very silent about the language of assessment at these particular grades. Lesotho has its language policy labelled as ambiguous as the question of whose mother tongue the policy is referring to remains unanswered.

Inequality among indigenous languages

Some language policies in multilingual societies are accused of promoting inequality as the chosen language is elevated to an official language thereby relegating other national and minority languages to lower rungs of the social ranking as noted in Mauritius, Zimbabwe and Namibia. Societal norms have assigned roles to local languages as of low status, while English or other colonisers' languages are of a high status. In relation to this, Wright (2004) states that lax and non-interventionist policies promote the languages of power and prestige which will eventually take over in all situations of contact. Also social constructs in a way downgrade indigenous languages, a case of Seychelles where parents despise their own Creole, stating it to be not a proper language nor prestigious enough for education, thus opposing home language teaching. Namibia, though a different case, declared English as an official language despite the fact that it is not its former coloniser's language, but the virtue of the prestige attached to it, at the expense of numerous indigenous languages. In South Africa Ngcobo (2003:86) observes that "the language policy is objectively designed to maintain ethnic diversity and the politics of compromise." The politics of compromise that led to the formation of a democratic South Africa influenced the decision of making eleven languages the official languages of the country to be used at all levels. Although this is commendable, the dominance of English in most spheres in South Africa cannot be overlooked.

The influence of globalisation

From a global perspective, challenges include the pressures of globalisation and increased volumes of information in English via the Internet. In addition, there are many hurdles encountered in promoting bilingual and multilingual education and literacy, which include increasing the number of multicultural teachers, developing appropriate teaching materials and providing safe learning school environments for the intermixed nature of the population. There is also a need to develop programmes that are compatible with bilingualism and multilingualism, and in essence are relatively expensive. This however entails changing existing language policies in an effort to accommodate the indigenous languages. Generally, indigenous languages in Africa have failed to occupy a high status position even where they are officially recognised in the statutes. They have remained languages of informal business yet they are the languages of the majority (Makanda 2011).

Most African countries will find it difficult to come up with an official language policy document because any language policy will mean embracing the English language. The official acceptance of English as an ideal language for communication across peoples of multiple linguistic backgrounds in most African countries seems to be perceived as re-colonisation by Europe.

Unavailability of resources

Another major constraint on the implementation of the Language Policy is the unavailability of resources including human resources, funding, facilities, materials and books. This is a prevailing and common feature in the majority of the African countries that are still developing. With many different indigenous languages in most of the countries studied, it a big challenge to fund all those languages supposing they are to be elevated to national and official languages. The problem is compounded by the lack of a clear policy or direction on indigenous languages and follow-up by authorities. Government agencies advocating the development of local languages do not receive the necessary funds as they do with social activities like soccer leagues and horse races.

No monitoring of implementation of policies

The absence of strict monitoring of the implementation of the policies in domains like primary, secondary and tertiary education, and training, poses a major challenge as well. In Zimbabwe for example, most schools prefer to use English from the outset to ensure their student's proficiency in English, which is considered the language of power and economic wellbeing, disregarding the language policy that English must be introduced at Grade Four level. English is often viewed as the key to opening the door to opportunity in terms of education and jobs and as such, even early-grade educators are aware of the eventual fourth grade switch, the drive to encourage English as a primary mode of communication often happens sooner than it was meant to, thereby flouting the policy.

In Namibia, the government drew up a new language policy for schools in 2002, but this was never implemented. From 2000-2008 the National Institute for Educational Development (NIED) raised the home language issue several

times to try to convince the government to extend its teaching until Grade Seven. The final attempt by NIED was during the drafting of the National Curriculum for Basic Education in 2008. All these efforts to review and change the 1991 policy were without concrete and tangible results. In relation to English as an official and national language in Namibian schools, Wright's (2004) argument is insightful. He contends that "When mandatory schooling occurs exclusively in a national language, the use of local languages almost inevitably declines" (Wright 2004:503).

The dilemma of using mother tongue for instruction in schools

In most of the SADC countries, the policy on education stipulates that learners from Grade One to Grade Three should be instructed in the mother tongue, but this is not strictly adhered to, especially in private schools. Also, it is sometimes difficult to find a common language in some schools where authorities have no other option except to use a foreign language like English. What would be a common language be for the cosmopolitan city of Windhoek, Namibia, for example? The Ministry of Education and Culture tried to enforce the rule in Windhoek and the results were appalling – no single indigenous language could be found suitable or uniform for local schools. The rule was implementable only in rural schools where the predominantly spoken languages are regional languages like Oshiwambo in northern Namibia and Subya and Lozi in Zambezi region and Otjiherero in Omaheke region.

Resistance from parents

Parents have been reported to resist the use of indigenous languages at school, arguing that their children should be taught in English in order to have a good command of the global language. The ability to use English proficiently in both speech and writing has been associated with success and upward mobility. As a language of wider communication, English has opened opportunities for employment across the globe. It becomes natural for parents to demand that their children be taught in English from Grade One onwards, fearing that without English, their children will be doomed in life. For example, Otjiherero speaking parents would bring their two children to our house so that we could speak to them in English because we could not speak Otiherero with the children. The mother would say: "The people at home are speaking to my children in our language and I don't like that. I tell them not to speak to my children in Otjihereo, but they continue speaking that language."

In addition, some names that parents give their children do promote foreign languages. For instance, in Zimbabwe, among the Shona speaking people, the following English names are common: *Loveness, Lovemore*, *Talkmore, Godknows, Privilege, Nomatter, Surprise, Evidence, Evermore, Last, Takesure, Polite, Pretence, Perseverance, Witness, Peace, Manfire, Hatred, Energy, Pardon, Memory, Praise, Cloud, Sunshine, Eventhough*, *Editor, Forget*, *Pretty*, *Hardlife,* etc. These English names might have been meaningful in the contexts in which they were given, but the argument of this author is that giving equivalent names in the Shona indigenous language would promote the local language. The paper advocates for indigenous names for indigenous people in order to promote local languages. There is fertile ground for onomastic studies in the nomenclature of people not only in the SADC region but also in Africa as a whole.

The African model – Tanzania

Remember at the beginning it was said this author went on an academic journey to SADC countries searching for the truth and justice about treatment of indigenous languages. Not being satisfied with his findings in this region, he went far afield to East Africa and landed in Tanzania. The investigation made him conclude that the Tanzanian language policy was the best model which African countries could have adopted and adapted at independence. Why? A significant step that the government of Tanzania took at independence was to promote the development and usage of Swahili by setting up the National Swahili Council. The Council was established by an Act of Parliament in 1967. The Act spells out the functions of the National Swahili Council as:

> (a) to promote the development and usage of the Swahili language throughout the United Republic;
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> (b) to co-operate with other bodies in the United Republic which are concerned to promote the Swahili language and to endeavour to co-ordinate their activities;
>
> (c) to encourage the use of the Swahili language in the conduct of official business and public life generally;
>
> d) to encourage the achievement of high standards in the use of the Swahili language and to discourage its misuse;
>
> (e) to co-operate with the authorities concerned in establishing standard Swahili translation of technical terms;
>
> (f) to publish a Swahili newspaper or magazine concerned with the Swahili language and literature;
>
> (g) to provide services to the government, public authorities and individual authors writing in Swahili with respect to the Swahili language (Whiteley 1969: 112).

Tanzania differs from some of its neighbours in that Swahili is spoken as a second language by a vast majority of the population and is a presumably the choice for a national language. Swahili is a Bantu language in structure and vocabulary, making it closely related to many of the country's local languages, but it also draws a great deal of its vocabulary from Arabic due to the influences of coastal trade. Swahili is the mother tongue of the Swahili people living along the coast and in Zanzibar, as well as of the younger generations of city dwellers. An estimated 30 million rural Tanzanians are second-language speakers, using their local language at home but Swahili for cross-tribal communication. Swahili is used in primary education while English is the medium of instruction at the secondary and post-secondary levels.

Swahili and English in education

We found the following points of great interest as far as Swahili and English are used in education. The points are presented as they appear in the policy to avoid misrepresentation.

1. The medium of instruction in primary schools shall be Swahili, and English shall be a compulsory subject (United Republic of Tanzania 1995: 39). However, the government had already legalised English as language of instruction in private primary schools in 1992. In 1997, following the redefinition of language policy in education, the dominance of Swahili was no longer clear since English and Swahili were given more or less equal status, implied in the statements below.
2. English shall be a compulsory subject at pre-primary, primary and secondary education levels and shall be encouraged in higher education. In addition, the teaching of English shall be strengthened (United Republic of Tanzania 1997:2).
3. A special programme to enable the use of Kiswahili as a medium of instruction in instruction in education and training at all levels shall be designed and implemented (United Republic of Tanzania 199: 3).
4. Kiswahili shall be a compulsory subject in pre-primary, primary and secondary education levels and shall be encouraged in higher education. In addition, the teaching of Kiswahili shall be strengthened (United Republic of Tanzania 1997: 3).

Although we cannot completely root out linguistic imperialism that was created by the colonial government, the development of Swahili in Tanzania is a model that SADC countries should emulate.

Way forward

As the way forward for SADC countries, the following should be done.

1. Change the attitudes of the ruling elite so that they can see that they are perpetuating linguistic imperialism.
2. Use African Languages bodies and organs to lobby governments to promote the development of indigenous languages.
3. Establish African Languages institutes like the one at the University of Zimbabwe.
4. Develop dictionaries, grammar books and promote fiction writing in indigenous languages.
5. Seek funding from government and non-governmental organisations.
6. Involve the private sectors, e.g. advertising companies.
7. Extend the use of mother tongue to secondary level so that learners can see the link between life at home and at school through their home languages.
8. Focus on corpus planning – corpus planning involves providing terminologies to serve socio-economic development. It also involves developing new vocabulary and discourse which will in turn help in the development of teaching material and other applications. Eventually, developing corpus resources could facilitate the ultimate functioning of previously disadvantaged languages in most or even all socio-economic communicative domains.
9. Language specialists should utilise new and technologically-based initiatives to develop and preserve each and every language. Computers can play a pivotal role in corpus planning especially in development of dictionaries and localising content. Computers are also used in storing a large amount of speech-based and text-based corpora for further research in African languages.
10. Catch them young – develop nursery rhymes and songs in indigenous languages in order catch children young in their languages (Finger Family Rhymes; Mickey Mousy; Zool Babies).
11. Adopt inclusive language policy – language planners must give the former colonial language and indigenous languages equal functional status. If indigenous languages are used in teaching and in school subject exams, they will gain prestige, which will increase the need to study them seriously.
12. Translate government documents written in foreign languages into indigenous languages; that would also enhance service delivery.

13. Establish community radio stations in indigenous languages. According to Wright (2004:503), 'Radio services run by indigenous people can also contribute to political, cultural, educational and linguistic awareness.'
14. There must be awareness campaigns to educate people on the importance of promoting their languages in order to preserve the culture of black people in Africa (cultural festivals like the Olufuko and Totem festivals in Oshiwambo; Zulu cultural festival)
15. Follow the Tanzanian Swahili model. Promote the learning and teaching of Swahili in all SADC countries. (At least we have started at UNAM and the results are encouraging. If we launch Confucius Centres to teach Mandarin at our Universities, why not Swahili centres also?)

Conclusion

This exploratory narrative has highlighted the challenges that SADC countries face in implementing their language policies. Judging from the research done on this matter and the reality on the ground, there is enough evidence to suggest that governments, linguists and other language practitioners need to work together more in order to change the statuses of indigenous languages. The suggestion is not to do away with foreign languages, but to create a conducive environment in which a mutual and symbiotic function can be promoted between indigenous and foreign languages in each country. The shining example of Swahili as used in Tanzania vis-a-vis English should inspire SADC countries to redress the language situation before some languages are forced into death or extinction.

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