

# Linguistic Diversity and Language Planning in Modern Africa

Matthew Johnson  
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Professor Najim Animashaun  
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As African nations enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they are faced with a myriad of social and governmental issues to contend with. One of the most crucial, and often overlooked, of these issues is that of linguistic diversity and language planning. When Europeans and Americans consider the situation in Africa, language planning is not something that immediately comes to mind as a major concern. This is because the issue of linguistic diversity, and the need for language planning, are peripheral in America and almost nonexistent in Europe.

The crux of linguistic diversity is the existence of numerous primary, living languages within a single state. This stands as a contrast to the conception of languages that exists in the West. In Europe, each country has a single, national language that is overwhelmingly used by the populace, and in government and commercial applications.

However, governments in countries where there is a plurality of languages must deal with language planning – which specifically refers to how governmental bodies establish a policy on language use both by the government and by various public services accessible by the people who speak the varying languages of the country. Language planning is certainly not without controversy. Countries dealing with language planning must balance several factors and variables. Supporting a multitude of languages requires more funding than supporting fewer languages. Conversely, a government's refusal to support a specific group's language immediately and acutely alienates that group. The larger the group, the more dispossessed the members may feel when their language is made peripheral and unofficial.

Americans are slowly becoming more acquainted with linguistic diversity and language planning as the influx of Spanish-speaking immigrants into the United States

begins to establish a monolingual Spanish-speaking population. The United States is also slowly beginning to deal with language planning, though on a very basic level. There is widespread debate on whether to allow Spanish-speaking populations to access public services in Spanish, or whether they must learn English to participate.

It is interesting to compare this example to what happens in Africa in regards to linguistic diversity and language planning. While the United States experiences linguistic diversity on the simplest level possible – one majority language group (English), and one slowly growing minority group (Spanish) – African nations experience it with many more variables and underlying issues involved.

The first major issue affecting African language planning is huge multiplicity of languages existing in Africa. Of the world's ten most linguistically diverse countries (in terms of smallest percent of total population that is a member of the largest language group), seven are African (Robinson, Varley 1998). The most linguistically diverse country in Africa as of 1996, the Central African Republic, included 68 distinct language groups over a population of 3.4 million people, with only 350,000 people belonging to the Sango, the largest language group in the country. Situations like this, where each language group is very small, and an enormous plurality of languages exists, are not uncommon in Africa. 68 language groups is hardly the ceiling for total living languages in African nation. Of those seven African nations in the list of the most linguistically diverse in the world, Cameroon encompasses 279 language groups, Zaire 221, Tanzania 131, Chad 127, and others with similarly high numbers. Africa's most populous country, Nigeria, possesses over 400 language groups.

Compounding this, however, is perhaps the more formidable obstacle to effective language planning in Africa. In most African states, the government's primary language of administration is the language of colonial master – English, French, or Portuguese. Much of the political debate and discourse in Africa and Africa's institutions of learning is also conducted in these European languages. A major aspect of Africa's linguistic diversity, however, is that the majority of people in the nation rarely speak the language of the colonial master fluently enough to be able to participate except via an interpreter. Thus, when the populace of the country must deal with the national government, they often lack the ability to communicate directly. This paper will discuss the varying attempts by modern African governments to solve this problem and return to the populace of the country the political clout that comes with speaking the language of administration fluently enough to argue one's case before the government when necessary.

Africa's language issues are exacerbated by the European conception of language left as Europe's legacy to the colonized African nations. After the European colonial powers drew arbitrary state boundaries through Africa that cut across countless existing ethnic and linguistic boundaries, an expectation was imposed that the entire European-created state would adopt a single national language, as the nations of Europe itself had. This perhaps made sense for Europe, where the nation existed before the state. However African states encompassed several nations (nations in the sense of ethnic and linguistic identity), making the notion of adopting a single national language for the entire state not only ill advised, but almost physically impossible.

As indicated by the numerous small and isolated language groups in Africa today, Africa in the pre-colonial period was almost entirely formatted this way for a variety of cultural and geographic reasons that are beyond the scope of this paper. It is important, however, to note the serious differences between the European conceptions of a monolingual state versus the reality of African's linguistic configuration. Prominent African novelist and author of *Decolonising the Mind* (an exploration of African literature as political expression of language ideals) Ngugi Wa Thiong'o writes in *African Visions*:

There is an obsession with monolingualism as seen as a natural form of human intercourse. The Christian era has been for too long haunted by the image of the Tower of Babel. People see many languages as a sin and say, "No, we must have one language." I think it is necessary for African to accept the reality of multilingual societies. (160, 2000)

As Ngugi points out, a multilingual society is, for better or worse, an inescapable feature of Africa's linguistic landscape. Many of the current issues Africa deals with in language planning are the direct result of Europe's failure to compensate for the differences between their own language configuration and that of Africa.

As Ngugi goes on to describe, Africans were "robbed" (156) of their own languages by Europe's decision to use the home language for administration in Africa. During the colonial period, this policy was driven by strong institutional racism classifying African language and culture as inferior or uncivilized. Ngugi uses the example of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as accurately summarizing what Europe's popular opinion of African culture was for decades. Given this attitude, African languages were quickly and completely suppressed by the colonial masters, leaving most Africans unable to speak the primary language of administration. Even after African

nations achieved independence, they were left with a European-style government, infrastructure, and state that assumed Europe's monolingual configuration.

Another aspect of language policy in post-colonial times involved reconciling the actual structure of African languages as distinct from European languages. Though extensive detail is not possible here, African languages tended to exist more in an oral tradition (though there certainly was a written tradition in some indigenous African languages), while European languages placed a heavy emphasis on writing. Administration and government in the European style that African nations are now saddled with requires, by extension, a significant amount of writing. This meant most African languages were unsuited to the task of governance and commerce. To rectify this problem, as Wauthier describes in *The Literature and Thought of Modern Africa*, attempts were made to apply Arabic or Roman script to African languages, most of which met with only limited success. Not until the 1963 establishment of the Organization of African Unity were African languages instituted in any sort of official government business.

Given this historical background, the question now facing African nations in the next century will be: why do we need to make provisions for African languages? Robin son and Varley argue:

Within the two paradoxical trends of globalisation and localisation, the question of the relationships between majorities and minorities has come into sharper focus. There are increasing claims for the state to be accountable to its minorities. This question is all the more pressing in countries which are made up of a mosaic of diverse communities, where even the terms 'minority' and 'majority' are meaningless. Language rights advocates are increasingly vocal in demanding the right for a community to use their own language in all the domains they wish, particularly in institutions. Education, administration, the legal system, development, communication – all function best when obstacle-free communication occurs and when those most concerned are able to use their own

languages. This calls for massive institutional change. Recent moves towards creating structures in which more democratic participation in African societies is permitted are likely to see an increasing demand for linguistic human rights. (1998)

Ngugi also argues this in his essay in *African Visions*, citing the same goal of empowering local populations to be able to interact directly with their government, rather than forcing them to forego interaction altogether or act through an interpreter. Ngugi poses this hypothetical scenario:

Imagine a peasant, a worker, or any other person for that matter accused of murder in a colonial court of law. His own life is at stake. The judge or magistrate, most likely a white person then, spoke English. The poor peasant accused of murder was entirely dependent upon an interpreter. Fighting for his life, the poor peasant was denied the use of his language. He was like a foreigner in his own country. You can imagine the strain we all feel when we visit a foreign country and have to communicate through an interpreter. Here we are not talking about one or two visits by one or two people. We are talking about the majority of the people turned into foreigners in their own countries. (*African Visions*, 2000: 157)

This scenario, though he uses it in this instance to describe a colonial court of law, is just as applicable to any government situation where the language or languages of administration cannot or will not adapt to suit the needs of the citizens of the country. It is, Ngugi believes, unreasonable to expect an entire population to be held in linguistic imprisonment in their own country. People of the country lose the basic dignity of defending and negotiating for themselves when their language is not considered legitimate.

The other main point raised by Ngugi in his essay is that while governments cannot realistically direct or regulate languages spoken at home, the language used for instruction in public schools is a very sensitive subject for many African governments and populations. Ngugi laments the lack of African language speakers present in African

institutions of higher learning, where the language of instruction remains English, French, or Portuguese. Ngugi's desire to see a focus on African languages has been occurring slowly in one African nation, Cameroon. Though the Cameroon experiment, named PROPELCA (*Projet de recherche operationelle pour l'enseignement des langues au Cameroun*, Operational Research Project for the Teaching of the Languages of Cameroon) works at the level of primary education, it retains the spirit of Ngugi's argument. Conducted mostly in private schools (though its success later influenced the public schools) in 8 languages by 1994, the results were highly positive, indicating increased performance in both the local and colonial languages. (Robinson and Varley, 1998).

Having determined both theoretically and realistically that language planning can and will achieve beneficial results for individuals in African nations, the question then becomes how the African governments will go about implementing language planning. Governments implement language planning by legislating standards on language policy and use in official situations, as well as making provisions for the use and linguistic development of certain languages. The reasons for a defined language policy can be social (empowering the populace and giving them a political voice, as Ngugi describes) or cultural, attempting to foster and strengthen threatened cultures by emphasizing their languages.

One of the forerunners of progressive language policy in Africa is South Africa, which engages in language planning for both of these reasons. After its highly publicized, popularly supported democratic elections in 1992, South Africa became a prime



candidate for language planning. The basic language policy is outlined in the country's constitution in chapter 1, section 6:

- (1) The official languages of the Republic are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu.
- (2) Recognising the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people, the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages.
- (3)
  - a. The national government and provincial governments may use any particular official languages for the purposes of government, taking into account usage, practicality, expense, regional circumstances and the balance of the needs and preferences of the population as a whole or in the province concerned; but the national government and each provincial government must use at least two official languages.
  - b. Municipalities must take into account the language usage and preferences of their residents.
- (4) The national government and provincial governments, by legislative and other measures, must regulate and monitor their use of official languages. Without detracting from the provisions of subsection (2), all official languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably.
- (5) A Pan South African Language Board established by national legislation must:
  - a. promote, and create conditions for, the development and use of:
    - i. all official languages;
    - ii. the Khoi, Nama and San languages; and
    - iii. sign language ; and
  - b. promote and ensure respect for:
    - i. all languages commonly used by communities in South Africa,
    - ii. including German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Telegu and Urdu; and
    - iii. Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit and other languages used for religious purposes in South Africa.

*(Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996)*

The foundation of language planning under this constitution is the direct adoption of exactly eleven languages considered “officially” supported by the government. This guarantee of support extends to educational institutions: “Everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable.” (ch. 2, sec. 7). It

also extends to the legal system, addressing Ngugi's hypothetical concern above: "Every accused person has a right to a fair trial, which includes the right...to be tried in a language that the accused person understands or, if that is not practicable, to have the proceedings interpreted in that language;" (ch. 2, sec. 35).

Demographically speaking, South Africa resembles many other African nations. English, the language of its primary colonial master, still holds to some degree the position of *lingua franca*, though the logistics of using it as such are not very favorable with less than 25% of the black majority population understanding English well enough "to obtain meaningful access through it to educational development, economic opportunity, political participation and real social mobility." The most widely spoken languages in South Africa are Zulu, Xhosa, and Afrikaans. During the apartheid regime of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century in South Africa, the government heavily favored Afrikaans (derived from the language of the Dutch-speaking European settlers) as the national language. Government-controlled, institutionalized media, such as radio and newspapers, was solely given in Afrikaans, further increasing the firm monopoly the language had on many cultural avenues in South Africa. Though the apartheid-supporting National Party did favor English and Afrikaans as the official broadcast and media languages, government-sponsored broadcasts in the indigenous African languages were actually used a segregation tool to differentiate and demarcate individual ethno-linguistic groups. (Barnett, 2000). The favoritism of Afrikaans in other arenas, however, served to cement its cultural status as the language of the apartheid regime.

After a rule punctuated by such monolingual practices, the South African constitution shows a sharp contrast in how explicitly it insists on language parity in

government and official business. This is a specific feature of countries such as South Africa, which must implement language planning. It is distinct from, for example, the United States constitution, which makes no provisions at all for language planning, reflecting the fact that issue did not exist when that constitution was written. Though the 1996 South African constitution provided equally for eleven languages, the eleven that were chosen were largely holdovers from the apartheid regime's language policies (Barnett, 2000). However, all eleven now enjoyed the privilege and parity that was only given to English and Afrikaans during apartheid. The South African constitution also had provisions for the cultural encouragement of languages such as that of the San, the indigenous inhabitants of the region. With only an estimated 4,500 San currently living in South Africa, the provision for the San language is clearly an attempt to revitalize a native culture that was almost eradicated at the hands of colonization and continued immigration into the nation during the post-colonial period.

Though the new language policy may have changed language parity *de jure*, the question of language use *de facto* remains slower to move. A 2000 study published in the *South African Journal of African Languages* attempted to ascertain public opinion about the new language policy – the opinion of the people that Ngũgĩ, in his theoretical argument for African languages, wishes to assist. The study claims:

In South Africa the recognition of the indigenous languages as official on the national level may be the declared goal of the policy but, from observation, most linguistic communication in domains of national significance remains English and to a lesser extent Afrikaans. The people do not see much value in African languages. Authorities seem to be reluctant to ensure that African languages, by appropriate legal provisions, assume their rightful role as the means of official communication in public affairs. No one seems to take African languages seriously. They seem to have nothing to offer except in everyday communication between members of families. For example, if one were to go for an interview for a post to teach an African language, the whole process is conducted in English. Even if one is

proficient in the African language, being able to communicate using all its idioms and proverbs if he/she cannot communicate his/her ideas effectively in English, he/she does not get the job. (Mutasa, 2000)

The study went on to find that, in the arena of public schools particularly, 99% of parents surveyed preferred to have their children educated in English, believing it more viable and useful, while 99% of students themselves preferred to be educated in English for similar reasons (Mutasa, 2000). Proponents of the plurality language policy would most likely find these results somewhat disheartening, especially with over 21% of the South African populace speaking Zulu, the largest language group, as a first language.

In summary, South Africa's policy is one of the more progressive ones in Africa, allowing for eleven languages with the proactive promotion of even more. The 1996 constitutional revision has succeeded in legitimizing the most widely spoken African languages in South Africa (particularly Zulu and Xhosa), up to and including multilingual broadcasts on the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). However, public support has been lukewarm. Though 80% of respondents in Mutasa's study believed the policy was a good one while 3% believed it was a poor one, the overwhelming majority still personally preferred English for the official language of administration. Thus, it can be inferred that while South Africa has made strides in the right direction according to the current theories on political empowerment through language, it still has a ways to go. At the end of his study, Mutasa does suggest that he, too, would like to see further progress on the language parity issue, and encourages parents of schoolchildren, especially, to insist on education in African languages as guaranteed to them by the constitution.

Another African hotbed of language diversity, and Africa's most populous nation, is Nigeria. Nigeria was a textbook case of governmental favoritism towards the colonial

master's language. Having divided Nigeria into four regions (North, South, East, West), the British used English as the sole language of business and administration with the exception of the North. In the other regions, the lack of a written record as pointed out earlier by Wauthier led to the quick implementation of English as the operative language. In the North, the Hausa language was written using Arabic script, making it viable as the language of trade and administration.

After independence, English remained dominant as the language of administration until a constitutional reform in 1979. Citing a considerable population speaking one of the “majority languages” – English, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba – the constitution recognized all four as the official languages of Nigeria. Since then, and through the 1989 major revision of the Nigerian constitution, English remained the primary government language, but the government officially maintained a “quadri-lingual” policy for government publications.

On the educational front, Nigeria adopted a similar policy to that of South Africa. Nigeria educational policy claims cultural development as one of the educational system's primary goals, and purports to accomplish this by pursuing public education in one of the four majority languages. 1990 marked the beginning of a broad program of education in indigenous languages led by Federal Minister of Education Babs Fafunwa. (Ajulo, 1995)

Nigeria today contains at least 400 living languages spoken amongst its populace. Unlike South Africa's sentimental support, yet lack of pragmatic support for the phasing in of indigenous languages, Nigerian support for indigenous languages has been much more consistent. Despite this, the national assembly continues to conduct all business in

English. The original 1979 constitution called for publication of legislative terms in all four official languages, installing translators and translation equipment, and arranging for quadri-lingual recordkeeping at the assembly. So far, only the translation of legislative terms has occurred. Discussion of which language ought to become an official national language of Nigeria has continued throughout the last decade, with the general consensus being that it should be one of the Nigerian languages rather than English. (Bamgbose, 1994).

Many other African countries are also making proactive attempts to increase the vitality of indigenous languages, as in the example in Cameroon mentioned above, and in Northwest Zaire where a joint government and church-run literacy program attempts to bring adults to functional literacy level in their indigenous language using an agreed-upon orthography, with favorable results until the program was suspended due to government instability in the area. (Robinson, Varley, 1998).

In summary, the linguistic issues in Africa are unique and often not considered by the West due to Africa's highly multilingual language configuration. Critical obstacles for the African countries arose during the colonial period as a result of European colonial powers forcing an incompatible linguistic paradigm on the African nations. Many modern scholars and writers on the issue agree that there is a necessity to bring African languages back to prominence in their own countries in order to empower the populace politically and keep intact a valuable indigenous and important culture. This support for language planning and proactive language policy has spurred numerous African countries to make efforts to include and emphasize African languages. Though the progress has been slow due either to lack of widespread public support or government instability, there have been

many successes, and both the populaces of the various nations dealing with these issues as well as many scholars and theorists on the issue agree that African governments cannot conscientiously continue to ignore the need to support indigenous languages. Language planning is a crucial issue in African nations today, and will likely continue to be in the future for years to come.

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