

AUTHOR:
Ibrahima Diallo¹

AFFILIATION:
¹Retired United Nations linguist
Email: diallo444@hotmail.com

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AFRICAN LANGUAGES: FAILED PLANS AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

1. INTRODUCTION

Estimates of the total number of languages spoken in Africa range from slightly more than 1 000 to over 3 000. The number of languages in use varies widely from one country to another. Nigeria is said to have over 400 languages, while Comoros has four (Gadelii 2004, citing <https://www.ethnologue.com>). Since African states started gaining independence from colonial powers in the 1960s, the status of national languages versus colonial languages has been the subject of ongoing debate. Numerous conferences, books, academic papers and studies have examined the topic and produced proposals and plans, sometimes extremely detailed, to address the question of national languages. However, even though consensus slowly emerged among stakeholders about the value and benefits of developing and using national languages, and a few countries achieved notable real-world outcomes, the most fundamental problems remain unresolved to this day. The linguistic imbalance inherited from the colonial era continues to plague the vast majority of countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

The purpose of this opinion piece is to review the main issues and proposed solutions, followed by my take on why such solutions have failed to materialise thus far and what can be done next. Whatever the next step is, in terms of promoting African languages, linguists in general and translators in particular will have a major role to play. I devote a few paragraphs at the end of the paper to anticipating and examining that role.

2. EVOLVING OUTLOOKS AND ATTITUDES

When it comes to describing the African linguistic landscape, the first hurdle we encounter is that of naming. In comparison with the languages of colonising powers, African languages and their subvarieties are variously referred to as local languages, national languages, mother tongues, native languages, indigenous languages, dialects and even



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vernaculars.¹ Each of these terms suggests an attitude towards African languages and whether they are considered to be fully developed languages that can be used in all areas of modern life, or simply as rudimentary communication tools to be used locally by uneducated people.

Fortunately, attitudes, especially among language professionals, have evolved over time, away from the use of terms with a pejorative connotation, such as 'vernacular', and towards the use of more neutral and respectful terms, such as 'national languages', to describe languages in local use in Africa and other places. For example, a document reporting on a UNESCO meeting held in 1951 is entitled "The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education" (UNESCO 1968). It is safe to assume that, today, the term *vernacular* would not have a place in any document written by a serious analyst, unless used in reference to past practice.

The consensus among language professionals today is that, regardless of their influence, circulation, number of speakers, geographical scope, official status and other attributes, languages are all otherwise fundamentally equal, as Peter Griths (1990 43, citing Hudson.) notes:

It is probably true that the principal triumph of twentieth century linguistics has been to establish (amongst a small and perhaps uninfluential band of academic linguists) that all languages are equal as languages.

The view that all human languages are fundamentally capable of expressing ideas and describing their environment, and that they are all deserving of study, is now the dominant position among contemporary linguists, as the quotation below reflects:

All human languages and dialects are fully expressive, complete, and logical, as much as they were two hundred or two thousand years ago... all languages and dialects are rule-governed, whether spoken by rich or poor, powerful or weak, learned or illiterate. Grammars and usages of particular groups in society may be dominant for social and political reasons, but from a linguistic (scientific) perspective they are neither superior nor inferior to the grammars and usages of less prestigious members of society (Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams 2014, 35).

This theoretical agreement on the merits of all languages provides a valuable foundation for people who are interested in promoting national languages everywhere. It allows them to imagine a future in which the languages natively spoken by majorities in every part of the world enjoy the same status as today's world-dominating languages.

3. OVERVIEW OF THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE

A theoretical agreement, however, as important as it may be, does not negate the need to face up to the myriad issues surrounding the question of national languages in a place such as sub-Saharan Africa. Those issues include the difficulty of determining the number of languages in each country. Estimates of the number of languages in sub-Saharan Africa vary widely. This variation is due, in part, to the existence of small languages, spoken only in a couple of neighbouring villages, which may be included in some counts but not in others. Variation is also largely due to the difficulty of determining whether a given idiom is a language or a dialect. Furthermore, the languages of sub-Saharan Africa have been the subject of fewer

1 The author of this paper elected to use the terms African languages and national languages to refer to languages used in African countries (especially countries of sub-Saharan Africa) that were not brought in by European colonisers, regardless of the number of speakers, geographical scope or official status of each language.

scientific studies than other, more influential language groups. Add to this the fact that, in many cases, researchers must rely on self-reporting by speakers, which is not always reliable. Consequently, it is not easy to arrive at an accurate language count.

North Africa has a relatively simple linguistic map. Countries such as Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Libya have one dominant language (Arabic), which enjoys official status in every country, side by side with colonial languages (French or English). Additionally, some countries in the northwest have minority languages such as Berber, with various statuses, including limited use in primary education (Africanews 2023).

Once we cross the Sahara Desert to the south, the linguistic map becomes significantly more complicated.² Existing linguistic maps, though complex, do not present the full extent of linguistic diversity in the region. Language maps tend to classify languages into large families, such as 'Semitic' or 'Bantu', which designate large groups of languages that are believed to have evolved from the same parent language in the distant past, but which are quite dissimilar in their current forms.

4. DEEPLY ROOTED LINGUISTIC TREE, WITH MIXED FRUITS

The linguistic panorama in Africa before colonisation was neither simple nor static. Africa is the cradle of humanity. It has always been a place of ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity. Before the colonial era, the continent was shaped by multiple kingdoms, conquests, peaceful exchanges and migratory movements (Ki-Zerbo 1978). There were minor languages and ones with significant regional dominance, because of their number of speakers or their imposition within a given kingdom/empire by the dominant group.

Upon gaining independence from European powers, the newly minted African states inherited linguistic maps that were complicated further by the presence of European languages. These countries' national borders were often arbitrarily drawn by colonial powers. They included a mixture of linguistic communities, some of which were limited to a few villages while others spanned several neighbouring countries. In addition to these national languages, each country inherited a colonial language (usually English, French or Portuguese) which was the de facto medium of communication in government and schools and among the small Western-educated class. The presence of a dominant foreign language that was not understood by the vast majority of citizens was a common starting point for the independent nations of sub-Saharan Africa. This new linguistic state of affairs created a profound imbalance in many spheres of life for citizens.

² See, for example, this map of African languages on the website of the US Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov/resource/g8201e.ct001294/?r=-0.294,0.24,1.424,0.497,0>

The fact that only a small minority of citizens in each country was fluent in the official language of their country³ constituted a major obstacle, not only to citizens' participation in national affairs, but also their ability to navigate administrative procedures, such as obtaining birth certificates and identification documents, or accomplishing civic duties, such as voting and paying taxes. More broadly, the linguistic imbalance also constituted an impediment to development, democracy and the exercise of human rights. This situation has continued to the present.

5. THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

Modern education was brought to sub-Saharan Africa by colonial powers. Theoretically, it offered the opportunity to increase the literacy rate and enable citizens to acquire new skills and seize new economic opportunities. Development as we know it today cannot be accomplished without a large percentage of the population being able to read and write. However, in sub-Saharan Africa, modern education came with a fundamental flaw. In most places around the world, children attend primary school in order to learn to read and write the language they speak at home. However, because of the dominance of foreign languages, most children in sub-Saharan Africa are confronted, on the first day of school, with the immense task of learning an entirely new language, dissimilar to their own in every aspect. Adama Ouane and Christine Glanz, in their advocacy paper entitled "Why and how Africa Should Invest in African Languages and Multilingual Education" (2010, 9) provide the context for this strange situation:

Although most African education systems focus on the use of international languages, only between 10 and 15 per cent of the population in most African countries are estimated to be fluent in these languages.

Schoolchildren are expected to navigate educational content based on a reality that is unrelated to theirs. This makes it much more challenging for African children to succeed in school. In addition, too few schools and crowded classrooms created, from the beginning, a fiercely competitive environment in which children with limited resources and little support at home, such as the children of illiterate peasant parents, face almost unsurmountable odds against achieving success in school. This has caused a high dropout rate during the course of primary school education.

As a result of such hurdles, a large percentage of adults among the post-colonial generations in Africa either did not have the opportunity to go to school in the first place, or quit before reaching a level of literacy sufficient to join the educated class. Many simply slid back into complete illiteracy or were mired in a state of semi-literacy. Illiterate citizens are basically excluded from most aspects of modern life. They cannot distinguish their own official documents from those of their family members, unless the document has the bearer's photo, or unless they can find a literate person to check it for them. This exclusion worsens as the world becomes digitised and more daily transactions move to an electronic platform.

3 According to "Language Policies in Africa", the report of the Intergovernmental Conference on Language Policies in Africa, held in Harare, Zimbabwe, 17–21 March 1997 (UNESCO 1997), only 15 to 20 percent of the population in the majority of African countries had the minimum level of proficiency in the official languages inherited from the former colonial powers. According to this report, that percentage is down to 10 percent or less in certain countries, such as Burkina Faso. It is safe to assume that those percentages were much lower immediately after independence.

In the modern world, education is the main pillar of any attempt to develop a language, because it is one of the few aspects of a country's social and cultural dynamic that can be planned and shaped by a central authority. It is also one of the few areas where results can be measured reliably. This is why most policies, proposals and plans elaborated at national, regional and international levels to promote national languages tend to focus on education. This is also why institutions that are active in education, such as UNESCO, have always played a central role in the debate on language questions and in the design and implementation of language-related plans and strategies.

When they joined the community of nations, African states found themselves lagging behind the rest of the world, not only in education, but also in most areas of economic, technical and scientific development – a state of affairs that contributes to a vicious cycle of underdevelopment, poverty, illiteracy, economic and social iniquity, political instability and myriad other challenges.

Of course, economic and social phenomena are complex. It would be simplistic to attribute underdevelopment to education alone. Nevertheless, there is no denying that the failure of sub-Saharan African countries to build inclusive educational systems that capitalise on national languages represents a major obstacle to socio-economic development in the region:

Evaluation of development policies has shown that one reason for the failure of development plans is that the populations concerned have not been actively associated with them, and this is so because the plans are drawn up using a language and terminology the populations do not understand (Chimhundu 1997, 3).

Some analysts, such as Kwesi Kwaa Prah, go as far as to say that no country can make progress on the basis of a borrowed language (eLearning Africa News 2013). I hold a more nuanced view, that if a borrowed language must be used, it needs to be rooted among the country's population, to the extent that a majority of the citizens of the current generation perceive it as their language. The collective experience of the nations of sub-Saharan Africa clearly shows today that the adoption and use of a language that is at least recognised as theirs by a significant portion of the citizenry is an important factor in achieving favourable results in other areas of nation building.

Despite the unfavourable odds of achieving development using a foreign language, once a politically and economically dominant elite emerges within the country using that foreign language, the easiest and most appealing course, from that minority's perspective, is to live with the status quo, to avoid upsetting the established order, and to hold on to the linguistic configuration they are already familiar with. This, however, is an unsustainable model. It cannot create inclusive prosperity at the national level, since it leaves the majority of the population behind and, ultimately, leads to resentment and instability.

6. EARLY DEBATES AND DIFFERENT DIAGNOSES

The Conference of African States on the Development of Education in Africa, held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in May 1961, was attended by the representatives of more than 30 African nations and several European countries. It was a landmark gathering on the topic of education in Africa. The conference aimed “to provide a forum for African States to decide on their priority educational needs to promote economic and social development in Africa, and... to establish a first tentative short-term and long-term plan for educational development in the continent” (United Nations & Economic Commission for Africa 1961, page 38).

Even in those early days, participants in the conference emphasised the need to make room for national cultures and languages in future education plans in the participating countries, as the following quotation suggests:

The educational systems in force were modelled, by and large, on those of the former metropolitan countries... They are in line neither with existing African conditions, nor with the postulate of political independence, nor yet with the dominant features of an essentially technological age or of the imperatives of balanced economic development involving rapid industrialization. Based as they are on a non-African background, they allow no room for the African child's intelligence, powers of observation and creative imagination to develop freely, nor do they help him to find his bearings in the world. For the African personality to assert itself, it is necessary to rediscover the African cultural heritage to which an important place should be allotted in education. Stress must be laid on the cultural and social features common to the African countries, thus strengthening African unity and helping the countries of the continent to get to know each other better. An understanding of African customs, languages, psychology and sociology cannot but facilitate the work of medical personnel, demographic experts, statisticians and other specialists (United Nations & Economic Commission for Africa 1961, vi-x).

The final report of the conference seems to be one of the earliest attempts at diagnosing the problem of education in the nascent African states and proposing a coherent vision of how to lead African countries on the path of genuine development through education, while giving African cultures and languages a prominent place.

The report provided a summarised review of language use in African countries at that time. It diagnosed existing problems and proposed measures aimed at remedying the flaws of the colonial system of education and moving African countries forward on a developmental path rooted in national identity. Such measures included, among many others, adopting official policies for the use of national languages in formal education and literacy programmes, reforming educational curricula, mobilising resources, encouraging the use of African languages in all areas of national life, and incentivising African professionals to learn and use African languages in their fields of work. The use of motion pictures and other technologies of the time was also proposed. In addition to diagnosing problems and proposing remedial measures, the conference also took up the important question of choosing the language(s) of instruction for African schools.

The conference report expressed a very pragmatic position that seems to have been lost – or at least watered down – with the passing of time: The fact that most African countries have a large number of languages and that, realistically speaking, one cannot expect all those languages to be developed, taught in schools and used in official business. With the passing of time, this view has been replaced by the ideological position that all languages must receive equal attention and not be allowed to die naturally.

The conference went further, to evoke the possibility that “many African authorities may consider that this is not a priority sector because an unduly great diversity of languages might produce obstacles to unity in certain countries” (United Nations & Economic Commission for Africa 1961, 87). This notion, that the multiplicity of languages can endanger national unity, is now strongly disputed. For example, it is argued that, though prejudices have been gradually eliminated, accommodating all African languages could lead to the disintegration of national unity:

Over the years, specialists have gradually eliminated all the prejudices which seemed to be an obstacle to the adoption of policies in favour of African languages, which previously included claims that the languages themselves were “poor” and “unsuitable” as vehicles for scientific concepts, and unfounded fears that, where a great many languages existed, recognizing and accommodating all of them would lead to disintegration of national unity (Chimhundu 1997, 3).

Other arguments against the promotion of national languages are presented and repudiated in the advocacy paper by Adama Ouane and Christine Glanz (2010), under the title, “Why and How Africa Should Invest in African Languages and Multilingual Education”. Among the repudiated arguments are those referring to the inherent shortcomings of African languages, the perceived advantages of using languages that already enjoy international dominance, and the concern of some parents who believe their children will have limited prospects if they learn primarily national or local languages. This view is summarised as follows:

There is no proof that economic development correlates negatively with linguistic and cultural diversity. On the contrary there are indications that economic growth is expected because more empowered and creative people are able to contribute (Ouane & Glanz 2010, 15).

While I agree mostly with the analysis presented above in favour of promoting and using of national languages in sub-Saharan Africa, I also believe that realism should prevail in any such efforts, and that excessively romanticising the issue could be detrimental to the prospects of actual success on the ground. We will return to the question of whether it is feasible to accommodate all languages in African countries later on in this paper.

In the years since the 1961 conference (United Nations & Economic Commission for Africa 1961), many other events have been organised and documents produced to advocate for the use of African languages and to propose plans and strategies to facilitate the achievement of that goal. I reviewed some of these documents and cite a number of them throughout the paper.

7. A LONG LIST OF PRESCRIPTIONS

The large number of plans and proposals vary in their detail and their areas of focus, but they seem to converge on the importance of normalising multilingualism for the sake of social cohesion and individual and social development, and valuing African languages and the cultural heritage they embody. They call for developing detailed, practical and context-specific national plans in each country to do the following (Ouane & Glanz 2010):

- Promote language research;
- Collect reliable data on languages in order to understand each country’s linguistic landscape and to map its various languages in terms of geographical area and number of speakers;
- Use work done in other languages (including European languages) to develop national languages;
- Raise awareness and strengthen ownership by engaging in broad-based participatory processes, in order to produce plans and policies that enjoy legitimacy;
- Create national and regional partnerships to promote national languages, especially where multinational languages exist;

- Make strategic decisions on which languages to promote at the national level and which ones to consider regional or local, including legislation on the official status of both national and foreign colonial languages;
- Choose evidence-based models of bilingual/multilingual education that improve children's chances of success at school and their subsequent integration into the various spheres of national life;
- Emphasise training in language-related fields, in order to strengthen human resources and expertise in national languages and methods of implementing language policies;
- Create national and local institutions in charge of language development;
- Produce large volumes of reading and teaching materials, including reference books such as dictionaries, in all languages to be promoted;
- Develop adequate educational curricula, taking into account the unique situation of each country or local area;
- Use the media, the internet and other technology tools to facilitate the learning and promotion of national languages;
- Invite regional and international organisations, such as the African Union and UNESCO, as well as financial institutions, to provide expertise and support efforts of African governments to implement dynamic language policies; and
- Incentivise language learning and use by specifying linguistic competency requirements in key fields of activity.

8. MIXED RESULTS, AT BEST

Guided by these and other plans and proposals, and aware of the need to tackle the language question, all African governments in sub-Saharan Africa developed language policies aimed at increasing literacy rates and training their future workforce, while also promoting national languages. A UNESCO survey summarised by Karl E. Gadelii (2004) reports that, out of a total of 46 countries in sub-Saharan Africa at that time, 38 countries provided data. The missing details were then completed with data from Ethnologue.com.⁴ Together, these two sets of data paint the following picture.

A total of 2 438 African languages were identified. Of those, 24 were said to have the designation of official language, 56 were said to be used in administration (and 66 in business), 63 were reported to be used in the judicial system, 176 in formal education and 242 in the media. In total, 41 percent of the responding countries indicated the use of one or more African languages as official languages. In addition, all respondent countries indicated having adult literacy programmes based on national languages.

If a similar survey were to be carried out today, the results can be expected to be only slightly different. One new sub-Saharan country has gained statehood since the survey was completed (South Sudan in 2011), and a few countries, such as Mali and Burkina Faso, have adopted policies giving official status to African languages. Nevertheless, in terms of implementation, the overall picture today can be expected to be similar, if not worse than the one depicted by the survey.

⁴ See website: <https://www.ethnologue.com/>

Based on my familiarity with the situation of African languages, I believe some aspects of the scenario presented above may be a bit too rosy. The governments that responded to the survey were most probably eager to report success in their national language promotion efforts and, therefore, painted a more positive picture than the reality on the ground. It is certainly not the case that 41 countries in sub-Saharan Africa have effectively given official status to African languages in the sense that such languages are used systematically in government operations on an equal footing with the country's official (European) language. It is also unlikely that 56 African languages are being used in administration in a way that enables citizens to navigate administrative processes without recourse to a European language. Based on the same personal experience, I know for certain that this is not the case in any country in the West African region. It is very likely that the term 'official language', in this case, was simply used in reference to projects with a limited scope that had been implemented in certain regions, or to well-intended plans that had faltered somewhere in the course of their implementation without achieving any measurable success.

Today, for historical reasons, a number of African countries have a dominant national language spoken by the majority of the population. This is the case, for instance, for Somalia (Somali), Rwanda (Kinyarwanda), Burundi (Kirundi), Tanzania and Kenya (Kiswahili), and Swaziland (Siswati) (UNESCO 1997). Other African countries have one African language that is used by a significant portion of the population, even if this language is not the default language of government or business. This is the case in, for example, Zimbabwe (Shona), Mali (Bambara), Niger (Hausa), Malawi (Chichewa) and Burkina Faso (Moré) (UNESCO 1997). Burkina Faso and Mali recently declared that their national languages would be the official languages and the colonial language (French) would be downgraded to a working language. We have not yet seen the practical application of those decisions.⁵

Overall, in terms of deliberately implemented language policies (as opposed to a naturally occurring linguistic situation), a few countries in sub-Saharan Africa seem to have fundamentally altered their linguistic configuration since independence. Tanzania is often cited as the most successful African country at promoting its national language, Kiswahili, which is now spoken by 90 percent of the population. Tanzania's national language policy has been so successful that, besides English in schools and the administration, Kiswahili has become the official language used on a regular basis.

To date, Tanzania is the only African country which has successfully implemented a language policy that promotes a national language, Kiswahili, as an official language in administration and education (Alidou 2006, 5).

Other countries in the East African region where Kiswahili is dominant, such as Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda, have also bestowed official status on that language. Although this status does not place Kiswahili above English in terms of official use, it gives the language a more elevated status in the education system, as well as in daily use.

For the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, although the language situation varies from one country to another, it can be said, in general, that efforts to elevate national languages have not made much of a difference, except maybe to raise awareness. The overall picture is one of a remarkable lack of achievement. In many cases, even the fundamental prerequisites to

5 See, for example, LeFaso.net (2024) on the adoption of a draft bill to modify the constitution of Burkina Faso to officialise national languages.

begin promoting national languages, that is, consensus on the need to teach such languages in school, and broad-based agreement among stakeholders on which languages to use, are not met, as suggested by Zsiga, Tiale Boyer and Kramer (2014, 6):

In the sixty years since UNESCO published “The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education”, the various declarations, conferences, monitoring reports, and publications have not led to consensus on language of instruction at the country level. At issue is how to accommodate the need to build knowledge and skills out of what children already know – especially their language resources – along with the demand for children to learn the country’s international language, which opens doors to economic and educational opportunities.

Today, most African children still start their primary school education by having to transition to a new language and culture. This makes learning much more challenging, and leads to grade repetition and, ultimately, in many cases, failure. Foreign languages continue to be the dominant medium of communication in official business, as well as in any transaction requiring reading or writing. This naturally extends to social media and other online activities, which are slowly but surely encompassing many aspects of citizens’ lives. Those who cannot read and write in the official European language are excluded from many areas of modern life. Furthermore, the national languages spoken by the majority of the population remain largely oral, with attempts to introduce writing systems being fragmented and failing to take hold. This makes it more challenging to use those languages beyond informal communication.

9. WHAT WENT WRONG?

One of the reasons often cited as explanation for the failure of efforts to promote national languages in sub-Saharan Africa among the general population is the reluctance of parents to gamble on their children’s future in the formal education system. Parents in rural areas see the lack of competency in the European language as detrimental to their children’s future prospects of getting out of poverty.

This argument is rejected by some (Ouane & Glanz 2010); however, when I was in charge of private primary education in Burkina Faso in the 1990s, I found that some parents of school-age children were reluctant to have their children educated in national languages. My experience is confirmed by a study conducted in Dagara-speaking areas of West Africa, which notes the following in relation to parents:

Using Dagara rather than English in the classroom, they believe, would “shut the proverbial window on the world” for their children. Outside school, the use of English or French rather than Dagara, even among a group of native Dagara speakers, is a sign of high social status (Zsinga et al. 2014, 5).

As in all development matters, however, there is no simple explanation for the lack of results in promoting African languages, even after more than half a century of independence. Multiple interdependent factors negatively affect sub-Saharan Africa’s efforts to promote national languages. Among them, the lack of resources and political will are probably the most significant, as noted by Hassana Alidou (2006, 28):

However, none of the visions and philosophies has been clearly realized in Sub-Saharan African countries, except in Tanzania. Lack of political will and extreme poverty are the two main factors that prevent African governments from adopting and implementing the use of national languages in formal domains.

Considering the large number of languages in most countries, which increases the difficulty of promoting them, African governments seem to have taken the easy option of leaving the language situation as it is and letting it go in whichever direction natural evolution takes it. Available resources are, therefore, mainly directed towards formal schools that continue to use European languages. Adult literacy programmes mostly lead their beneficiaries to a dead end, because, even if the learner becomes literate in their native language – which is in no way guaranteed – they will find almost nothing to read because there are barely any books, newspapers, websites or mobile applications in those languages. Even where national languages were introduced in school curricula, their presence tends to decline as educational levels go up, and students gradually move to European-language-only classes, where they acquire all of their technical and professional skills.

The dilemma of Africa's language situation, as described in the early 1960s, has not changed in any significant way:

This is a terribly complicated problem. For practical reasons, most African countries have kept the language of the former metropolitan power as their official language. The difficulties responsible for the taking of this decision are well known: there are too many African languages; they have not been scientifically converted to written use; they have no written literature and no international standing (United Nations & Economic Commission for Africa 1961, 57).

In a nutshell, we can say that the plans and proposals that have been formulated, starting immediately after independence, were well-meaning. Their proponents identified many of the challenges we still see today and put forth solutions that seemed reasonable at the time. But the nexus of language, education and development continues to be a sore point in sub-Saharan Africa, in a seemingly endless loop where failure in one area reinforces challenges in another.

10. RAYS OF HOPE?

Whether sub-Saharan Africa's past failures in promoting its national languages are seen as the result of forces the young nations could not have controlled, or not, one should hope that those failures do not have to continue into the future. If African governments, and all of us who are interested in a prosperous and inclusive future for the continent, want to see the linguistic dream materialise, we must critically and realistically reassess what went wrong, learn from past mistakes and turn toward the future, beginning with any practical steps that can be taken today.

Contrary to the impression one might get from reading diagnoses of the failure to advance African languages, the risk of extinction of some African languages, although a painful loss, is not the greatest danger. The greatest danger is that literacy continues to be the privilege of the few, and that official business continues to be conducted in languages that are accessible only to a small minority.

Sub-Saharan Africa is, in fact, and ironically, one of the parts of the world where languages have been best preserved, as proven by the presence of hundreds of languages in some countries. However, elevating a language to the status of official language of a country is something that rarely occurs naturally. The reason European and other developed countries of today (such as China and the United States) have one or a few dominant languages is that those languages were deliberately imposed at some point in their history by some dominant

group, mainly through government action. The manner of imposition may differ from one country to another, but the outcome is invariably the marginalisation of other languages in the country, if not their outright suppression. French, for example, was imposed in 1539 as the sole language for all official acts of administration and justice of the Kingdom of France through a decree by King Francois I, despite the presence of multiple other languages in the country at that time. In China, Mandarin was imposed by the central government in the early 20th century. In the United States, the dominance of English over the languages of native Americans was the result of an even more assertive process, to put it mildly. This pattern applies to most countries that today have one or only a few official languages. In other words, a country ends up with a dominant language through a series of deliberate choices by those in power – choices that were not just proclaimed, but followed by action. If a single African country today can have hundreds of languages, it is because no central authority imposed monolingualism. This is not to say that the multiplicity of languages is bad, but it means that, at one point in their history, governments in countries with less linguistic diversity saw the need to go through a process of language selection in order to achieve the simple, cohesive linguistic landscape they enjoy today. Developing and using hundreds of languages simultaneously is a complicated and costly endeavour, which African governments were unable to carry out successfully after independence, and are unlikely to accomplish today or in the near future, given their limited resources and multiple competing priorities.

Of course, the complete extinction of any language is a loss to its users and to all of humanity, because each language embodies the worldview, wisdom, experience and poignant stories of many generations. Each language has its own poetic beauty, its elegant ways of summarising its speakers' wisdom. Each language brings to the world its proverbs, songs and oral traditions that, if preserved and passed on, can only increase our collective intellectual wealth.

Nevertheless, we do not have examples of a nation that promoted hundreds of languages and gave them all an elevated status in education, official business and other spheres of national life. Therefore, we cannot assume that that option exists. This means that painful but pragmatic choices will have to be made by each country that wants to begin developing, among its multitude of languages, the ones that are most widely shared.

We must recognise that, in the volatile political and social situation prevailing today in the majority of African countries, any attempt to impose a set of national languages on communities that are not already using them is likely to be met with strong resistance. There is no easy solution for the language choice conundrum. Any attempt to make real progress, not just in policy but on the ground, should be guided by this fact.

Nevertheless, this sobering reality still leaves room for some guarded optimism. For one thing, and despite past failures, African governments and their numerous partners continue to believe in the need to promote national languages and to seek ways and means to achieve that end. Sub-Saharan Africa also happens to have about 16 languages that are shared across borders and boast more than 150 million speakers each. In addition, almost half the countries in the region (48 percent) have an African language that is spoken by over 50 percent of the population as a mother tongue (United Nations & Economic Commission for Africa 1961, 9). Furthermore, bilingualism and multilingualism are prevalent. Most Africans grow up speaking at least two languages. Informal translation, in terms of mediating between two parties that

do not share a common language, is a common daily activity that many Africans practice throughout their lives. Finally, the survey by UNESCO (Gadelii 2004, 37) shows that, by that time, 242 African languages were being used in the media. This number is certainly higher today, because of the creation of new, especially local, media platforms in African countries. The recent emergence of the internet and multiple tools to access the worldwide web makes it easier to create all sorts of group communication channels that use voice to share information in languages of more limited reach, thereby helping to maintain them.

Among all these signs, the biggest reason for hope is the multiplicative effect of education. Students who have learned national languages can later become better advocates for those languages, and also better teachers. In addition, some studies have found that bilingual education brings considerable benefits for learners:

Assessments have demonstrated that students at bilingual schools in Mali, Zambia, Niger, Burkina Faso, Senegal and Nigeria fare better in mathematics, sciences and languages – including French or English – than students in monolingual institutions (Association for the Development of Education in Africa 2010, 2).

A focused and realistic plan to promote African languages would capitalise on these positives to generate new momentum. In order to avoid rejection and resistance, the effort must start by negotiating as broad-based a consensus as can be achieved on the choice of languages to be promoted, since promoting all languages is simply not feasible. Such a consensus would require engaging in a transparent national dialogue on the topic, involving all stakeholders, with a view to reaching conclusions supported by the majority, instead of having government authorities, such as ministries in charge of education, come out with ready-made plans elaborated without much input from those affected.

The phenomenon of increasing urbanisation, which is creating a melting pot of cultures in large African cities, could also help reach a stage where, as a result of exposure, certain languages become gradually accepted by most people living in a given city. This trend can be used to streamline the language choice equation.

Once a set of languages has been chosen, the next phase is to turn to the actual task of developing them – a task which does not seem to have received enough attention in past plans.

11. BUT HOW DO YOU DEVELOP A LANGUAGE?

As stated above, from the linguist's perspective, all languages are equivalent in their structure and ability to express ideas. This does not mean, however, that they are all equally equipped to meet today's modern communication needs in practice. Among the diagnoses and proposed solutions reviewed for this paper, one of the areas that has received the least attention is the question of what it means to develop a language, and how this can be achieved concretely.

Based on my experience with African languages, I know that, despite all languages being equally valid tools of communication, many African languages, in their current state, lack the vocabulary to accurately convey meaning in many areas of modern life, from politics, to philosophy, to science and technology. International languages have had long-lasting advantages in terms of rendering knowledge, widespread use, a wealth of written materials, technology, linguistic studies and analyses, economic power and so on.

This is precisely the area of language development where persistent efforts will have to be deployed if we actually want African languages to meet today's communication needs. Teams of language experts will have to be designated in each country to work on each language selected for promotion, with the aim of expanding its vocabulary, in collaboration with active communities of users who understand and share the objectives to be achieved. Vocabulary can be built in one of three ways.

Firstly, the easiest way to create new vocabulary is to simply borrow from a foreign language, with the necessary phonetic adjustments to make the new words pronounceable by those who do not speak the language of origin. European languages, for example, are among the greatest beneficiaries of word borrowing. Not only did they borrow from each other and from living languages around the world, but they also had the benefit of assimilating words from dead languages such as ancient Greek and Latin, which supplied them with an abundant source of new words, simple or composite, thereby allowing for precise rendering of technical, scientific, philosophical and other concepts of modern knowledge. African languages, similar to the rest of the world, have already borrowed many abstract or technical words from European languages. This source of new vocabulary can continue to be harnessed, but in a more deliberate and organised way.

Secondly, it is possible to reclaim obsolete words and modify their meaning to apply to new concepts. The reclaiming of old words is probably a rarer phenomenon, but is still a way of dealing with new ideas and objects. For example, in Fulani, a language spoken in about 20 African countries, when bicycles were introduced, at the same time as the use of horses was declining, the word for saddle (*kirkè*) was used to designate a bicycle seat. This repurposing of old words can be used as a tool by linguists working to update the vocabulary of a language, with the assistance of speakers who are steeped enough in the culture to remember obsolete words.

Finally, coining new words or widening the semantic scope of existing words to cover new meanings can also be a valuable source, especially as it dispenses with the effort of phonetic adaptation. The readaptation of words to cover new meaning is common across languages. For example, when Arabic needed words for modern political concepts such as socialism and communism, Arabic-speaking intellectuals simply adapted the words for sharing (*ishtirak*) and common (*shiyu'u*) to designate socialism and communism (*ishtirakya* إشتراكيا and *shiyu'ia* شيوعية). Examples can be found in many other languages that are trying to 'catch up' to the major European languages, especially English, in fields of knowledge where languages such as English are today undeniably at the cutting edge in coining new terminology.

Each of these three methods of vocabulary enrichment has its own limitations. Excessive borrowing of words from a foreign language without the necessary adaptations can make the new words sound unnatural to speakers and, therefore, difficult to assimilate. The repurposing of old words can only provide a limited supply of new ones. Furthermore, identifying such words may require many years of research, including comparing many dialects and finding resource persons with sufficient knowledge of the relevant culture and history. As for coining new words, the excessive creation of neologisms can require an inordinate amount of learning by native speakers, which can lead to adoption issues. The best approach would therefore be to combine these three methods and vary their use depending on the case.

Simultaneously with vocabulary development, attention needs to be given to the writing system. A few African languages (for example, Amharic) have their own writing systems. Others, such as Kiswahili, have successfully adapted the Latin alphabet to such an extent that a large base of literate users are able to use that script proficiently. Other African languages have also seen recent attempts to create new alphabets that take their phonological features into account. One such example is the Adlam script, developed for the Fulani language in the 1980s. However, such scripts have not gained widespread adoption.

For the majority of African languages, user groups and government authorities have been using adaptations of the Latin script (including the international phonetic alphabet). The Arabic script has also been used, especially in regions heavily influenced by Islam. But the generally observed reality is that no consistent method has been agreed on for writing African languages – a problem that leads to the use of inconsistent and mutually incompatible ways of writing for the same language.

This means that any effort to develop the vocabulary of an African language needs to go hand in hand with the harmonisation of its writing system. This is another area of language development that requires significant planning, effort and resources to follow through. Harmonising a writing system ties into language teaching, language use (including in online platforms) and the production of reading and teaching materials that would make it possible and worthwhile for speakers to learn to read and write it in the first place.

Current trends in the adoption of internet-based technologies in Africa give us reasons to be cautiously optimistic that, in the future, children, as well as adults who did not have the opportunity to go to school, will have access to much better tools for achieving literacy. Modern technologies have made it easier to produce and disseminate written materials once a writing system has been adopted. They can also help learners learn to read and write more quickly by combining written text with sound, images and video. In addition, a greater online presence of African languages will make it easier to introduce new and powerful tools such as artificial intelligence.

If multiple stakeholders can join forces to generate momentum for the advancement of African languages, we can envisage a future where African children, instead of struggling to achieve literacy in a foreign language, will simply need to add reading and writing to the languages they already speak. Experiences in other countries show that this single factor can play a significant role in helping countries in sub-Saharan Africa achieve higher rates of literacy, which would then unlock other areas of development, thereby allowing them to break out of the current vicious cycle. This is, by all measures, a monumental task, but one that is worth pursuing.

12. THE ROLE OF TRANSLATORS AND INTERPRETERS

If and when countries in sub-Saharan Africa finally embark on a path to promote national languages, translators and interpreters will play a central role in all phases of that process.

Firstly, translators and interpreters are linguists, so they can work with other language professionals to facilitate the process of selecting the language or languages to be developed in each country. During the consultation process that must be a part of any national process

of language selection, the language skills of translators and interpreters, including community interpreters who happen to be fluent in multiple local languages, will be needed to communicate with the various language communities, receive their input and bring them on board.

Secondly, when it comes to the actual process of developing languages (terminology work and harmonisation of the writing system), translators and interpreters, having acquired a deep understanding of the workings of language through training and practice, will be a valuable resource. Moreover, in order to develop new vocabulary in the selected national languages, many new concepts will need to be borrowed from foreign languages. Translators and interpreters will be among the best equipped to do this, in collaboration with experts in the relevant fields and speakers with profound knowledge of national languages and cultures.

Thirdly, once the process reaches its implementation phase, when the chosen languages, with their enhanced vocabulary and unified writing systems, are put to use in different areas of national life (education and research, administration, public service, the judicial system, the economic sector, etc.) a large number of interpreters will be needed in all places, from courts to hospitals. A large and continuous stream of documents will need to be translated, including laws and regulations, contracts, educational materials and many others. This need for translation can be seen in countries that currently use more than one official language. Canada is one example where most official documents and websites are made available in both English and French.

The evolution of translation technologies will certainly reshape the translation landscape, including in Africa. Traditional computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools, based on statistical or neural machine translation, have so far served as useful tools for translators. The recent emergence of large language models (LLMs) has revived the debate on the future of the translation profession.

Without getting into the nitty-gritty of this debate, my personal opinion, as someone who has worked at the nexus of translation and language technology, is that LLM-based translation tools will intrude into the translation space in the coming years, and translators will have to adapt. If a target user (the client) only needs a broad understanding of the content of a source text, translation by automated systems will be the first recourse, because these systems are much faster and cheaper than human translation. However, LLMs are known to occasionally 'hallucinate', producing incorrect or nonsensical sentences. Due to multiple factors, including the enormous amounts of material needed to train LLMs, it seems unlikely that this problem will be solved anytime soon. Consequently, for any type of document where unchecked translation mistakes can have grave consequences (i.e., documents requiring high quality translation), human translators will be needed for the foreseeable future. Additionally, LLMs only work in languages where sufficient quantities of linguistic data are available. This is currently not the case for most African languages.

It is therefore safe to assume that, when countries in sub-Saharan Africa start to use their national languages in areas that require high quality translation, translators will be called upon in significant numbers and for a long time.

13. CONCLUSION

The question of African languages is a complex one that touches on multiple other areas of activity, such as education, development, human rights, ethnic identity, social cohesion, economics and politics. A brief review of the literature on the issue shows that, even in the early years of independence, African governments and other stakeholders, including regional and international organisations, had started exploring the field and formulating plans to elevate the status of African languages in relation to languages imposed by colonial powers.

Unfortunately, for various reasons, notably a lack of resources and political will, the majority of African countries are still heavily dependent on the languages of their former European colonisers. Very few African languages have gained official status, penetrated official spheres of life or become the main languages of education. As a result, the vast majority of African children still have to transition to a new language and a new culture in their first years of primary school. Moreover, the majority of adults in sub-Saharan Africa are unable to take part in national affairs because they are illiterate and do not understand the official language of their country.

This failure was not the unavoidable destiny of African societies. Neither does it have to dominate their future. If African governments are able to learn from the past, put in place realistic strategies for the future and carry them through with determination, the next generation of Africans could well see an era in which national languages are used in all spheres of life and have the necessary vocabulary to assimilate knowledge and spur innovation.

For this to happen, however, difficult choices will have to be made, because developing tens or even hundreds of languages is beyond the reach of Africa countries today, due to their multiple competing priorities. Those choices must be followed by vigorous efforts to develop the vocabulary of the selected national languages, while simultaneously harmonising their writing systems and creating enough reading materials and other incentives to make it worthwhile for ordinary people to become literate in their national languages.

If and when that day comes, translators and interpreters who are fluent in African languages will play a major role in creating and implementing language promotion plans, as well as in the long-term follow-up to such plans.

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