THE CHALLENGES FACING IMPLEMENTATION OF AFRICAN LANGUAGE PROGRAMMES AT AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract
This paper is an attempt to focus on the challenges facing universities aspiring to establish programmes in African Languages. The paper draws its arguments from the experiences of some selected cases in the continent and celebrates outstanding examples in the continent where programmes in indigenous languages have been introduced whether by default or planning. The paper concludes that the successful examples are indicative of what ought to be done to forestall the challenges.

Introduction
A decade into the 21st Century but the spirit of revitalizing and empowering the African languages and culture to take the center stage in education and African renaissance that brightened towards the end of the 20th Century could appear to be headed for an uncertain future.

1994 marked the watershed of buoyancy into gatherings across the continent with African linguists making remarkable resolutions on the development of the continent’s indigenous languages for education, technology and development. At several meetings (Cape Town, 1994, 1996; Kisumu, 2000; Asmara, 2000, Nairobi, 2010), strategies to lobby for expanded use of African languages were discussed and concluded. Earlier in 1986, Organization of African Unity (OAU) had passed a resolution on the use of these

3 The First International Conference on African Languages, Maseno University, Kisumu – May, 2000.
4 Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literature, 2000.
languages as means of wider communication within African states and across the borders of the continent.

1994 is also significant because it marked the entry of the Republic of South Africa into the struggle to forestall the dominance of exogenous languages in the affairs of African governments. Contributions of scholars such as Neville Alexander, Ayo Bamgbose, Pai Obanya and Kwesi Prah, among others, eloquently put a case of what ought to be done if Africa has to claim its place in the 21st Century and reverse its decline. But, as if African condition is controlled by fate, Kenyan state and private universities have not shown clear signs of walking a different path from that taken by the other universities in Europe and America. Myers-Scotton (1990) describes the phenomenon as ‘elite closure’, a game in which those who have mastered the colonizers’ language perpetuate that language in all situations to keep out the majority whom they dispossess of all avenues of managing the independent states.

Despite the procrastination among member states and universities, the resolution of OAU was remarkable. The members dismissed the fear that to promote many languages, if not all, may threaten national unity and noted that political unity is not guaranteed by mono-lingualism. The case of political stability in India in spite of its largest number of languages (1600) was juxtaposed to Rwanda, Burundi and Somalia, the latter three monolingual states and yet discordant politically. African Union (AU) is believed to have inherited this position, but subsequent annual meetings of the member countries reflect a very sluggish move towards the attainment of the 1986 resolution.

At the 1994 Cape Town Conference, Pai Obanya, then the Director of UNESCO Regional Office for Education in Dakar, dispelled the “Popular Fallacies on the use of African Languages in Education”. His position has since been repeated in a number of publications (1998, 1999). These fallacies include the multiplicity of African languages, the multi-ethnic nature of urban areas, the low level of technical development of African Languages, the paucity of personnel and material resources for teaching indigenous languages and high cost of educating in these languages. For each of these, Obanya presents a counter argument to drum his positive position on African languages.
Such fallacies are exploited in a variety of ways when Kenyan universities lobby for the establishment of departments of African Languages. Most common question revolves around the type of pioneer students to be recruited given that the languages do not form part of secondary school curriculum. Uppermost in the critics' opposition are the question of the medium the lecturers would use and the source of teaching resources to mount the programmes. And the most disturbing concern is utilitarian: for what use would one study an African language at the university? These questions still stand on the way of the universities eager to begin teaching African languages. Such concerns, being expressed by the public and faculty members in earnest, affect student enrolment negatively.

In the first case, students who are to register for African languages programmes are to do so after fulfilling optimum units required for Bachelor of Education degree. It is a sad case that for the last ten years, Kenyan universities have never produced graduates with strong interest or purely with degrees in these languages. By and large, the students to whom the appeal has been fruitful have been those in mature age category. This is because some of them are either working in the vernacular radio stations or Non Governmental Organizations which use these languages for their daily activities. In the universities where these programmes are, there is low enrolment rate, and drop out rates are very high. A good example to illustrate this case is Maseno University where a considerable number of students enroll in African languages in first year but come second year of study, none proceeds with the programme. On the side of manpower recruitment of staff specialized in general linguistics, with a bias in Kiswahili, is emphasized. Teaching materials are sought from around the world with majority, surprisingly, coming from Germany. Added to these texts with foreign flavor are the theses of graduate students in local universities. These are largely descriptions about African languages. At least they add much needed information on which to base the curricula.

The issue of the medium of instruction is tricky, but English and a mixture of the languages themselves are being used to provide examples because the meta-language of the indigenous languages are in the process of being developed. One might say therein lies the contradiction: relying on English to teach and write about the indigenous languages! But we find solace in Obanya’s arguments that it
is important to lay down long-term strategies to build the interest in African languages before we expect expanded enrolment of the users and governments to create space for their use; that we can only develop these languages when they are being taught; that the utilitarian criticism may be overcome when we mount translation of the materials available in these languages; and that all seeking employment be required to possess functional literacy in the regional languages. All these require good will of the university administrators.

Some Outstanding Examples
The Maseno attempt has been guided by some outstanding examples in the continent. It is true that different countries have employed different ways of embarking on the use of indigenous languages: autocracy as in the case of Ethiopia (Amharic) and Somalia (Somali); initially autocratic but most recently constitutional like in South Africa; experimentation as in Nigeria (Yoruba at Ife); vague policies as is the case in Kenya with trilingual arrangement. The list is endless. Bamgbose categorizes the obtaining situation in African states in a couple of publications (1991, 2000).

The successful case of Tanzania, which was praised in the continent, is beginning to crumble. In the recent past, the situation in the country has been defined as ‘confusing, contradictory and ambiguous’ (Brock-Utne and Holmardottir, 2003). The plans to use Kiswahili as medium of instruction throughout the secondary and tertiary would now seem shelved. Rubanza (1998) had lamented earlier that the Swahilization Policy initially praised has continued to confuse Tanzanians because it was never followed by official statement.

In the recent past after Mengistu’s rule, Ethiopia made a bold move when it began to revitalize the use of regional languages. As Griefenow-Mewis (2002: 192) states:

*The current Government has legalised the use of other regional languages as media in primary education in addition to Amharic. Since 1992 Oromo and other regional languages have been used as official languages within the jurisdictions where they are spoken. Amharic is just one of the national languages. To the north, Tigrinya spreads all the way into Eritrea as a language of wider communication. To the south Oromo will spread right into northern Kenya to be used by about 30 million*
The example of Somali that may be viewed as autocratic presents a positive example of a government's good will in implementing the indigenous languages in education. In the recent past, the disintegration of Somalia following clan wars has overshadowed the success story of language planning of Siad Barre’s regime. Declared an official language in 1972, Somali was so quickly developed that by 1978 the language was being used as the medium of instruction from grades 1 to 12. Up to the time of political disintegration, Somali’s development was proof that given political will, any language can be developed to serve in the academic domain in Africa without reliance on foreign aid and a challenge to Africa’s political leaders and doubting scholars (Owino, 2002).

The progress already made in Uganda is instructive for the harmonization proponents. The Government White Paper on Education spells out the need to develop all languages in Uganda. Luganda, which has been taught up to University for a long time, has now been joined by Runyakitara, an amalgamation of five languages [Rutooro, Rukiga, Runyoro, Runyankore]. Other languages mainly spoken outside Uganda are Ruhaya (Tanzania) and Ruhema (Democratic Republic of Congo)], Lwo (Acholi, Lang’o, Alur & Dhopadhola), and Ateso. The Government owned newspaper, *Uganda Vision*, publishes weekly versions alternately in these languages to make print news available in most of the country’s languages. The Institute of Languages at Makerere University has translated important documents like the Constitution into all these languages (Owino, 2002: 209).

For University Departments, apart from the University of Ife with Yoruba, a unique attempt has been initiated in Cape Town under the management of the Project for Alternative Education in Southern Africa (PRAESA). The project, in its third year, draws students from the southern African countries and takes them through the appreciation of indigenous languages towards the attainment of a Diploma in Bilingual Education. The idea of bilingual approach is to avoid replacing the
already functional and widely used exo-glossic languages as the meta-language of African languages are being developed.

A second successful effort from South Africa is under the Center for the Advanced Study of African Society (CASAS) that is engaged in harmonization of orthographic conventions of African languages. Its main objectives are to expand readership and correct the misconception of the linguistic dichotomies created by the colonialists. CASAS also publishes materials that are useful to university departments in the continent.

Added to these have been the untiring efforts of scholars at the many language meetings some of which I have already referred to above. All these have inspired a spirited interest in the use of African languages in Kenya along with other nations. The interest has been remarkable in establishment and popularity of broadcasting stations using indigenous languages. Within the last four years, no less than five such stations are now operational in Kenya. The unfounded fallacies about the use of languages have been disproved. It is now apparent that with a little planning, it should be possible to ensure that school leavers are functionally literate in at least one indigenous language.

In spite of the interest among the public, the demand for literacy and enrolment in African languages has remained very low. Lack of good will from the governments has only complicated matters. Even the documented policy of mother tongue education in the first three years is not being adhered to in many countries that claim to have such policy. Majority of the schools start instruction in English at primary one, following the demand from the parents steeped in linguistic imperialism. Craving for English that was fashionable at independence continues to riddle education system as large numbers of learners terminate their schooling without meaningful abilities in any of the languages (Alexander, 1999).

Challenges to African Linguists
Given some outstanding examples so far rooted in some countries in the continent as outlined in the foregoing paragraphs, universities introducing programmes in the continent should find it easy because they have directions throughout the continent. But this is not the case. Nida and Wonderly (1971) present practical difficulties that stand on the way of countries planning development of national (read African)
languages. These have continued to be the case decades later. The analyses done by pan-Africanist linguists mentioned in the background of this paper have not helped to overcome these difficulties due to the differentiated styles and conditions of individual states.

The competitive nature of governments has made it difficult for neighbouring African countries to learn from one another despite the fact that they have fundamental similarities in the regions. For example, while Tanzania embarked on Kiswahili as a language of choice as the medium of instruction throughout primary education, Kenya and Uganda were caught up in the mire of neo-colonialism. When Uganda emphasized the teaching and learning of Luganda as a subject throughout the school up to the university, Tanzania and Kenya thought of developing international societies backed by donor funding which has had no room for local initiatives. The same may be said of countries of western and southern Africa. Cooperation among would ensure that neighbouring countries would not replicate the development of trans-border languages (Chumbow, 1999).

These administrative differences have found their way in universities. Even where the country has had a pool of expertise in linguistics, the states that fund programmes in these universities have checked the mushrooming of disciplines anchored on indigenous and local conditions. University leadership that has been guided from outside the campuses has played an extended role of state power that hinders growth of new ideas positive to teaching of African languages. The control on universities through state funding has made a mockery of “academic freedom,” where universities decide what should be taught, by whom and when. What has become the norm is that well trained personnel (usually labeled disgruntled) have pontificated about African scholarship outside the continent. Bureaucratic practice has made it impossible to import books on African languages from within and outside the continent. Foreign scholars in foreign universities have thus accomplished more research in African languages than linguists in African universities.

In countries where African languages have been taught, they are included as appendages of departments of French, English or German. Other universities have used the collective term ‘Department of Linguistics and Foreign Languages’ with African languages presumably covered under linguistics. Very few universities have been
involved in translation of teaching materials into and out of African languages to support any development of the programmes from below. The result is that lack of teaching materials is used by states to confine the teaching of these languages at the basic literacy levels. The lethargic tendency of governments has ensured that the school system only allows for the teaching of African languages in the first three years in a greater part of Africa.

Plans at Maseno University for example to break away from the tradition of hiding African languages in linguistics was dealt a terrible blow recently when the university administration in their quest to reduce expenditure in what are deemed unpopular programmes amalgamated it with four other departments. The resulting department consists of ‘Linguistics, Languages and Literature’. Having pioneered as the first public university ready to offer degrees in African languages in Kenya, Maseno now joins the ranks of other universities that view the teaching of these languages as a waste of time and resources. This has happened at a time when the teaching of languages and literature at the secondary school has been compulsorily integrated. Since the expertise recruited for African languages have been absorbed to teach any of the areas in the new Department, it is doubtful whether the African languages programmes will get the attention the initiators anticipated.

**Which Way African Languages?**

To view African languages programmes in African Universities as a ‘burden’ is to miss the value they would give the continent in the face of high drop out rates of the youth from education system before the attainment of functional education. That other universities have well established departments and that some countries have successfully made fruitful trials, it is time African governments respected the OAU (AU)’s plan of action and set up departments which should spearhead the development of teaching materials through writing and or translations into and out of African languages. That there is a lot of interest in these languages in the United States (see Smitherman, 1998), Germany and the Nordic countries should spur us in guiding the growth, revitalization and study of these languages.

Given that there has been notable success with broadcasting in these languages, an immediate avenue would be to establish FM Radio
station on campuses that start the programmes. This would encourage students to use these languages by way of story telling and greetings. Talk shows aired through such a medium would promote dialogue that is already threatened. This will also help in circumventing the profit motive of the current stations. Collaboration among African linguists in and outside the continent should not end at conferences level even though the meetings have been singularly useful in maintaining the tempo of interest in the development of the languages. It is time these collaborations resulted in realistic regional organizations to heighten the tempo of lobbying to establish the African Languages Departments in African universities. Pedagogic issues that would help diffuse the negative attitude towards any of the languages in the school curriculum should be vigorously pursued. Linguistic interdependence of Cummins (2000) comes to mind.

Other efforts that will significantly change the situation may be based on the initiatives of PRAESA and CASAS. The problem with these outfits is that they have relied on sound donor support from organizations based outside the continent.

References


