

Language and Cultural Diversities in Africa: Implications for Survival
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This article attempts to look at the complex language situation in Africa. The continent is second to Asia in terms of language and cultural diversities. A major point of concern among linguists and other concerned Africans is the threat posed to indigenous African languages by the foreign European languages that have been adopted and assigned the status of official language(s). Based on the status assigned to those adopted foreign European languages they now serve, among others, as the language(s) of instruction in schools thereby alienating the indigenous languages. The paper concludes that the stage in those African countries is set for a process which usually starts with language shift, followed by enculturation and results in language death; this is a very serious implication to the survival of indigenous African languages. The paper then recommends that African countries should assign a greater role to indigenous languages especially in education; and there should be mutual regard for and between the speakers of the perceived major and minor languages.

Introduction

Language and culture are very important tools for the human development of any society. It is difficult to state the exact number of languages in the world today but Gorter, Cenoz, Nunes, Riganti, Puzzo & Sachdeva (2016) put the figure at between 5,000 and 7,000 languages. Language is a means of communicating through an organised system of speech. It is a tool through which information, concepts, skills and values of a given society are transmitted in codes from an encoder to a decoder (Bloomfield, 1967). Language is intimately tied not only to man's feeling of self (Lado, 1964), but also his nationality and religion. Language has the expressive power to convey meaning and cultural life of a people. Ngugi (1972) posits that language is a carrier of culture by which people come to identify themselves and their place in the world. Culture is a fragile phenomenon but a powerful tool for human survival. It is dynamic and the dynamism could make it easily get lost thereby making it to exist only in the minds of the beholders.

Language or rather linguistic diversity is an issue of social relevance in the world today, especially in Africa. The concern in Africa is predicated on the premise that the continuous existence of majority of languages in the continent is threatened; and by extension therefore, the diverse cultures of the people too are under threat

of extinction. The major languages in Africa are assimilating the minorities while English and other foreign languages are fast assimilating the indigenous African languages and cultures. Internal or external assimilation has the tendency to create a language death or a cultural hybridisation. Any language death according to Olaofe (2006) is the death of a culture with all its attributes and expressive power. Likewise, cultural hybridisation which tends to disregard relevance, appropriateness, positive values and world view in favour of ‘everything comes and everything goes’ could have a devastating effect on human development in the continent. The African languages should therefore neither be restricted to expressing African diverse cultures or foreign cultures alone, but cultures of the world as the world is now a global village.

The global capitalist and materialistic driven economic culture is posed to destroying all other cultures. The term globalisation tends to affect all spheres of human endeavour including languages and cultures. Names and terms of innovations in science and technology are mostly expressed in African languages with words that have either been coined or domesticated from foreign languages. Furthermore, the education of most African countries is tailored along foreign European models and this too has been viewed by critics as an effective way by the colonial masters to continue to maintain the master-servant relationship. By African cultural standards, some courses offered in schools and colleges in Africa are outside the confines of morality. In some cases in the African continent, linguistic and cultural diversities have resulted in serious socio-political crises leading to great loss of lives and properties. The case of the Rwandan genocide of the Tutsis by the Hutus in 1994 is a typical example of conflict emanating from linguistic and cultural differences. Within a period of one hundred days; from April 6th to July 16th, 1994, the Hutu ethnic majority and extremist attempted to wipe out the entire minority Tutsi population. At the end of the crisis, about 800,000 people were reported to have been killed (www.history.com/topics/rwanda/genocide).

Linguistic and cultural differences should not, if handled properly, be a source of conflict in any country; rather, they should serve as an asset for human development. This article takes a look at the linguistic and cultural diversities in Africa and their implications for the indigenous languages and cultures of the continent.

The Languages of Africa

African languages have been classified by various linguists into families. The most prominent classification is the one done by Greenberg (1963) and later improved

upon by Blench (2006). In the classification, the languages of Africa were conventionally classified into four continental phyla; Afro-Asiatic, Khoisan, NigerCongo, and Nilo-Saharan. The African continent and the nearby islands are also said to constitute one-fourth of the earth surface (Lodhi, 1993). Approximately, Africa is said to have about 2000 languages spoken by about 500 million people (Babatunde, 2015). Furthermore, only less than 100 of these languages are spoken by more than 1 million people. The percentage of languages in Africa is the second on the list of languages in the world as can be seen in the table below:

Table 1: Distribution of Languages

Region	Number of Languages	% of Total
Africa	2,058	30%
Asia	2,197	33%
Europe	230	3%
The Americas (South, Central, North)	1,013	15%
The Pacific	1,311	19%
Total	6,809	100%

Source: UNESCO (2006) *Sharing the World of Difference*

Table 1 shows Africa to have 2,058 languages constituting 30% of the world's languages, a figure that is second only to Asia. The data further indicates that Asia and Africa have more than half number of the total languages in the world; incidentally, the two continents also have more than half the world's human population. Since culture is closely associated with language the inference drawn is that both Asia and Africa are culturally diverse. However some languages in Africa just like in other continents are endangered probably due to the role assigned to them which is far less than that assigned to adopted foreign languages. The situation has the implication of creating multilingual individuals and societies as in the case of Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, Nigeria, India and Mexico; as well as the risk of language endangerment. The number of endangered languages in the world is presented in the table below:

Table 2: Most Severely Endangered Languages According to Continent

Region	Number of Languages	% of Total
Africa	46	8.91%
Asia	78	15.12%
Europe	12	2.33%
The Americas	170	32.94%
The Pacific	210	40.7%
Total	516	100%

Source: Gorter et al. (2016:4)

Table 2 shows the level of language endangerment in the world. Languages of the Pacific face the greatest risk of endangerment with 210 representing 40.7% of the share of global language endangerment. The Americas have 170 languages representing 32.94% of endangered languages. Africa has only 46 languages representing 8.91% of most severely endangered languages in the world. This tends to indicate that a good number of languages in Africa have vitality. However it should be noted that the extinction of a language is also the extinction of a culture.

The Language Situation in Africa

The linguistic map of Africa can be divided into Anglophone, Francophone, Luzophone, Arabiphone and Swahiliphone parts based on the choice of the language of administration. Due to political and/or economic reasons, most African countries use colonial languages as their official languages and in some cases with one or more African languages as national languages. In this regard, 19 countries use English (examples are: Gambia, Ghana, and Nigeria) as their official language, 22 countries (such as Benin, Burkina Faso, and Gabon) use French, 5 countries (Like Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Sao Tome and Principe) have Portuguese, and 1 country (Equatorial Guinea) has Spanish as its official language (Lodhi, 1993). However 7 African countries (Algeria, Comoros, Libya, Egypt, Morocco, Mauritania and Sudan) have Arabic as their official language, while several countries in the continent have an African language as the first or second official language together with a metropolitan language; for instance, English is used as the official language together with Amharic in Ethiopia, with Swahili in East Africa, with Somali in Somalia and with Chichewa in Malawi.

Some African countries have attempted, with some degree of success, to replace the colonial language with an indigenous one. Consequently, Swahili has now become prominent in most African countries south of the Sahara. In Tanzania, for instance, it is the national and official language; and while it is the national

language in Kenya, Comoros, Mozambique, Rwanda, Burundi, and parts of Somalia, Malawi and Zambia (OAU, 1988), it is also one of the six national languages in Zaire. However, it is worth noting that, in some countries, the official language of a country is one in which the country makes and publicises its laws while the national language is, so to say, more often orally used for governance/administration, education, law, trade as well as the mass media. This is the situation obtainable in Zanzibar, Tanganyika and Kenya where Swahili was spread by Muslim traders and the British colonialists utilised it in their indirect rule system. But in some countries like Nigeria, the official language – English, serves as the language of education, law, government, international trade and relation, and the mass media.

Africa probably has the most complex and varied language situation in the world. Kloss (1968) in Lodhi (1993) linguistically divided African countries into *endoglossic* and *exoglossic* typology. The former is a situation where a country's national/official language is spoken as a mother-tongue (primary language) by a large percentage of the population; while the latter is a situation where the national or official language is imported and implanted from abroad and the small percentage of the population that speak it as a first language do not significantly dominate any part of the country. Several African countries have imported languages as their official language among which are Benin, Burundi, Chad, Republic of Congo, Niger, C'ote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Gabon, Mali (French); Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique, Sao Tome and Principe (Portuguese); Gambia, Ghana, Malawi, Mauritius, Namibia, Nigeria, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe (English)

http://www.nationonline.org/oneworld/african_languages.htm

In another typological classification of African national languages, Abdulaziz (1977) identifies the following:

1. Countries where one language is spoken by the vast majority of the populace as a:
 - a. Mother-tongue:
 - Botswana (Setswana), Burundi (Kirundi), Lesotho (Sesotho), Rwanda (Kinyarwanda), Somalia (Somali), Swaziland (Seswati)
 - b. Lingua franca:
 - Central African Republic (Sango), Ethiopia (Amharic - 20%, Oromo - 50% native speakers), Kenya and Tanzania (Swahili), Mali (Bambara), Senegal (Wolof – 35% native speakers) former Sudan (Arabic – 54% native speakers).

It would seem to appear that countries in this group would have a more favourable basis for developing an African language that would have a national or official status. In fact with the breakaway of Southern Sudan, the Republic of Sudan has 100% speakers of Arabic and the language serves as its national and official language; thus, Sudan can be grouped under the second group.

2. Countries having one predominant African language:

Dahomey (Ge)

Ghana (Akan/Twi)

Malawi (Chichewa/Cinyanja)

Niger (Hausa)

Togo (Ewe)

Burkina Faso (Mosi/More)

Zimbabwe (Shona)

3. Countries where several dominant indigenous African languages are competing with one another: Nigeria (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba,)

Sierra Leone (Mende, Temme)

Zaire (Chiluba, Kikongo including Kituba, Kingwana, that is, Kongo Swahili, Lingala and Standard Swahili)

If not because of the constant threat of rivalry between the various languages, countries in groups 2 and 3 have a good chance of developing one or more indigenous African language(s) as their national or official language

4. Countries where there is no predominant African language(s):

Mozambique

Ivory Coast

Cameroon (Bulu and Ewanda are widely used in the south, while the north which shares a border with Nigeria has Fulani)

The dominance of foreign languages serving as official languages in Africa is not a good development for the continent. The policy deprives majority of the populace from having access to education as well as hindering them from participating in national politics and decision-making process. Furthermore, using a foreign language to serve as an official language is viewed by critics as slowing down national integration and development of a nation-state with a national culture, thereby creating a sense of insecurity and a feeling of inferiority complex among those who have to operate in the imported language of the elitist ruling class. Consequently this has resulted in frequent ethnic unrest, political instability and

brutal violence in several parts of Africa. The reasons for the unrest may not be too far from ethno-linguistic rather than ideological differences.

Language Policy and African Languages

Governments and other critical stakeholders in education all over Africa continue to ponder over the linguistic and cultural diversities and their impact on learning especially among learners in schools and colleges. This concern has been the motivating factor in the various language policies the countries operate. A language policy is usually the outcome of a language planning process. Cooper (1989:45) submits that language planning refers to '*deliberate efforts to influence the behaviour of others with respect to acquisition, structure or functional allocation of their language codes*'. Language policies are established with the intention of maintaining language diversity taking into consideration issues such as endangered languages, the relationship between language loss and power, discrimination and marginalisation.

Language diversity in itself is not a bad thing; but conscious effort must be made to allocate functions to languages in a country. Reasons have been advanced to justify the importance of language diversity. Crystal (2000) for instance opines that language diversity is important because languages:

- i. are interesting in themselves; ii. express identity; iii. express ecological diversity; iv. are repositories of history; and
- v. contribute to the sum of human knowledge.

So just like in the business world where there is the slogan '*free economy*', in cases of languages competing with one another too, there is the slogan '*language economy*' which if allowed to operate, would lead to the extinction of many languages and by extension many cultures. This justifies the need for language planning and language policy.

It is very difficult to get a comprehensive document, as far as language policies are concerned in African countries. The reason for this may not be too far from the fact that language policies are usually taken for granted and most often than not, they are handed down through decrees or directives from the ministries of education explaining the language(s) of instruction at various levels of educational system of the countries. Some countries like Egypt and Nigeria have written policies in their constitutions detailing which languages are encouraged by government.

Many Africans passed through a lot of language hurdles to achieve academic desires. This is because of the many stages of language learning that they experienced at different levels of their education. An example is the experience narrated by a former student of the author of this article. The person was Chawai by tribe, attended a public primary school in Sabon Gari Zaria where the regional language, Hausa, was employed to teach him at the first three years of his primary education; and from primary four English became the medium of instruction. While studying for his Junior Secondary School Certificate he was made to choose one of either Arabic or French; he chose the latter. After his secondary education he secured admission at the University of Leningrad where he had to study and pass Russian for a year before he commenced his programme. He proceeded to Poland for his masters' degree and later went to Germany for his doctoral studies, where he had to learn Polish and German respectively. The gentleman is an employee at a hospital in Riyadh where he is battling with Arabic so as to fit well into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Several studies such as the Rivers Readers Project, the Ife Project and the Karatu Project have documented tremendous advantages of using indigenous languages in educating young and beginning learners. The National Policy on Education of Nigeria (FGN/NPE, 2014) and the various reviews of it give backing to the use of

Nigerian languages at certain stage of a child's education, but then because there is no effective monitoring of schools to ensure compliance; schools tend to operate as they wish. While some adhere to the policy some adopt what is referred to as *Straight for English* style. In the opinion of some critics, the language challenges facing many African countries have made the countries to continue educating their citizens in the colonial metropolitan languages. Some of the challenges include the fact that most African languages have not been standardised, orthographies are slow or nonexistent, and education is still seen as an elite-oriented venture.

The Implications of Linguistic and Cultural Diversities in Africa

Language has long been acknowledged as playing a very important function in public domains of human life. It is a vehicle of economic activity, socio-political mobility, and above all educational accomplishment. In the African continent, linguistic and cultural differences tend to be sources of rift among the citizenry thereby giving the impression of serving negative roles. As a means of avoiding conflicts, most African countries use foreign languages for the education of their learners; a position of neutrality. In the submission of Bamgbose (1991:15) in Babatunde (2015), it is said that '*it is not language that divides but the attitude of the speakers and sentiments and symbolism*

attached to the language'. The language situation in Africa, where there are many languages coupled with the colonial language legacy have combined to render African languages impotent in the educational system of many countries. Consequent upon this even in countries where education occur through the medium of the mother tongue, it is usually in the early years of the primary school; because there will be a shift at the upper level to the European language. The implication of the lack of use of African languages in education is that a wealth of indigenous knowledge and culture is being locked away in those languages; and with time when the custodians of those knowledge and culture die, the indigenous knowledge will be lost.

The recognition of some languages in multilingual societies of Africa as either major/minor or official language/language of wider communication, etc has the tendency of polarising the populace along ethnic divide. Babatunde (2015) identified some psychological implications of language stream-lining; three of them are:

- i. The speakers of major languages tend to look down on other languages and the speakers of minor languages look at the major languages with suspicion.
- ii. Speakers of both major and minor languages tend to have an unusual excessive attachment to and affinity with their language or tribe to the exclusion of other tribes.
- iii. The former colonial languages are promoted with the misconception that they are the only languages that can enhance social mobility and foster inter-ethnic cohesion.

Language and culture are closely interwoven. Ndoleriire (2000) in Babatunde (2015) submits that language can be considered as cultural practice, and that language is both an instrument and a product of culture. This tends to concur with the submission earlier made by Mazrui (1966) which states that culture, among other functions, is a mode of communication, a basis for identity, and a means of perception and cognition. In the light of this, since most African countries are multilingual societies and the educational systems tend to foster bilingual or multilingual individuals; the process could result in cultural plurality. If this cultural plurality is not tailored to give a rich cultural knowledge to the citizens, the implication could be inter-tribal misunderstanding and misconception – two necessary ingredients for disunity and strife.

The major challenge associated with functions assigned to African languages by different countries is that of alienation. Because many African countries have European languages as their official language(s), the African indigenous languages

are assigned functions that make them look inferior to the ex-colonial language. Consequently a process starting with language shift, passing through enculturation and ending with language death would commence. Webb and Sure (2000:13) explain this process better. According to them, language shift is a process where *'the speakers of one language begin to use a second language for more and more functions, until they eventually use only the second language, even in personal and intimate contexts'*. The shift becomes total when the speakers of that second language see it as a symbol of socio-cultural identity. Language shift naturally leads to enculturation or cultural alienation. Because of the link between language and culture as explained earlier in this article, people whose language has shifted will also have their culture shifted. The process ends with language death; a situation where no man is left who will speak a particular language.

Conclusion

The paper has taken a look at the complex language situation of the African continent. The complexity arises from both internal and external factors and the resultant effect is the struggle for supremacy between and among the indigenous languages on one hand and the challenges faced by the roles assigned to foreign European languages on the other. The implication of the different language situations in Africa is the gradual process of language shift by some Africans and the process could ultimately lead to language death. And because language is intricately related to culture; whatever happens to language also happens to culture. Thus if there is a language shift there would enculturation; and when there is language death it would mean the death of a culture associated with it.

Recommendations

In the light of the implications the language situation in Africa pose for the survival of indigenous African languages, the following recommendations are proffered:

1. The education policies of African nations should assign more roles to indigenous languages by using them to educate citizens for a good part of the education strata; the Chinese system is a good model worth emulating.
2. Labelling languages as major or minor and the likes creates a feeling of inferiority/superiority complex; African nations should deliberately embark on serious sensitisation to make speakers of all languages have regard for all languages as no language is superior to another.
3. Having regard for all languages translates to having regard for cultural diversities; this should be encouraged to avoid the death of culture and indigenous knowledge that goes with the culture.

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