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Introduction:

Language Policy Implementation in Africa – What is Holding Us Back?

Pius W. Akumbu & Blasius A. Chiatoh

African multilingualism is well recognised (Wolff, 1999: 333; Obanya, 1999: 82; Trudell, 2008: 1) and multilingual and multicultural practices on the continent are real and current. Yet the policies which regulate language treatment and use as well as the linguistic attitudes are essentially exoglossic in nature because they accord primacy to and promote external languages (Ruiz, 1995:75) in a vast majority of countries. As offshoots of colonial perceptions and treatment given to African indigenous languages vis-à-vis foreign languages, these policies have tended to undervalue and so disregard the former. Over the postcolonial decades, therefore, colonial languages have continued to be perceived as the most acceptable instruments for nation construction. Coupled with this orientation has been the determination to uphold the “one-nation-one language” approach to language policy and planning. Consequently, except for a few countries that have defied generalised practices by adopting multilingual policies based on the realities of linguistic diversity, most of the countries have maintained the colonial legacy of the supremacy of foreign languages. In fact, even when the need for multilingual policies has been recognised, the putting in place of appropriate policies to cater for this need has not proven to be an easy task. While governments openly acknowledge the necessity for a shift in linguistic behavior, their actions on the ground reveal a completely different reality. Their actions demonstrate that they are either unconvinced of the need to undertake fundamental language policy reforms based on linguistic diversity or that they are simply unprepared to embrace a change in policy. Whatever the underlying motivations for this behavior, the impact of the maintenance of foreign language-based policies for Africa is not only increasingly being felt but also it has become the focus of debates in recent times.

Whenever the need for alternative language policy and planning has been expressed in society, education has been at the centre of the debate. The debates have been even fiercer in settings where a majority of the languages have minority statuses. In these contexts, demands and advocacy for more contextually-relevant

approaches to language policy and planning been observed to be greater. Long years of dependence on hegemonic languages, usually but not limited to foreign languages, have bred serious misconceptions about the value and functions of indigenous modes of communication. Faced with the challenge of innovation, both governments and the general population, probably due to limited understanding of the potential multi-dimensional gains of educational reforms based on indigenous African languages continue to resist change. A look at ongoing practices suggests that either Africa is uncertain of the benefits of any such innovations or that it simply wants to maintain the status quo by choosing the path of convenience rather than that of necessity. While the path of convenience has to do with the maintenance of foreign languages and the resources available in them for learning and other purposes, that of necessity entails radical overhauling of present policies and practices through obligatory integration of indigenous languages into all language policy and planning processes especially with respect to education. Obviously, the latter is more challenging because it involves changing long established linguistic attitudes. It entails the development and promotion in learning and other functions of languages hitherto considered as not good enough for these functions.

By opting to persist in the pursuance of foreign language-based policies for a multilingual Africa, governments have failed to realise that effective development of nations depends greatly on the choices and options made with regard to educational planning and delivery. Clearly, on this continent, where multilingualism is the norm rather than an anomaly, these concerns are even greater. Regrettably, the linguistic choices that have guided educational promotion in Africa have not matched development requests founded on culturally-sensitive and ideologically appropriate models of theorisation and application. The blame has not only been the subjection of educational planning and delivery to foreign language policies but also the determination by successive leaderships in postcolonial times to uphold their loyalties towards these policies, thereby, relegating to the background the huge linguistic resources of the continent. The puzzle that continues to burden many minds today, therefore, is why Africa cannot craft its own policies and so liberate itself from the linguistic colonisation and mental enslavement perpetuated by current policies and practices. How do we explain that unlike other continents that have suffered the pangs of colonisation, Africa seems to be the

only continent that is least prepared to adopt alternative approaches to cultivating its development? For how long will this situation persist in the continent? Indeed, one wonders whether Africa is aware that no country has ever achieved development by despising and so discarding its languages and cultures in favor of alien ones. Put differently, one wonders people of the continent of Africa can break out of the “fateful logic of the unassailable position of the colonial language” (Alexander, 1999: 3). Rather, what we witness today is that vibrant, promising and emerging economies today have defied the colonial yoke by ensuring that although they encourage the learning of foreign languages, their learning, the basis of modern socio-economic and political advanced are founded fundamentally their languages and cultural values. The case of Asian countries that share the same colonial history with Africa is glaring. Questions like the ones asked here, signal the dangers of foreign language promotion perpetuity on a continent that is in dire need of linguistic and educational reforms.

Quite often when issues of language policy have been debated in Africa, the focus has been on the inability of governments to propose appropriate frameworks for effective language planning theorisation and actual application. Accordingly, failures in the development and promotion of education based on the language of instruction have been attributed to the absence of strong political will and unpreparedness to officially endorse learning in mediums other than languages inherited from colonisation. In recent years, though, the focus seems to be shifting fairly quickly to new dimensions of complication and challenges. This current shift in language policy and planning discourses has highlighted a rather paradoxical situation whereby, despite marked advancements registered at individual country levels, actual application has continued to suffer thus raising concerns as to whether there is really need for policy changes at all on the continent. The shift has thus has tended to draw attention to formulation inadequacies and implementation insufficiencies. On a general note, policies on the continent are either not well-formulated or they are well-designed but are not properly implemented. As the situation stands, this problem can be perceived from several angles involving but not limited to: government’s desire to maintain the status quo by ensuring that foreign languages continue to dominate learning at all levels, the unwillingness of parents and communities to adopt alternative educational models based on languages they

consider as limited in the performance of functional roles in a society that is rapidly being transformed into a global village and in which language of limited diffusion have little or no space and the challenges involved in bringing indigenous African languages into the limelight of educational planning and delivery.

In this collection, we pool together a wide range of language policy and planning experiences from six countries in Africa. These are countries that have made some significant strides towards the establishment of African indigenous language-based policies. However, from experiences reported in the various contributions, it becomes clear that between language policy and its actual implementation, there exists a great variance (Prah, 1999: 543). In fact, what we gather from these experiences points to some kind of dilemma, indeed, a serious paradox. While in countries where appropriate multilingual policies have not yet been established, advocacy for such policies is rife, in those that have already adopted them the situation still leaves much to be desired – they have fallen short of ensuring the effective implementation of the policies. In these countries, a critical look at implementation leaves one with more questions than answers. Despite the presence of attractive policies, the educational system as well as all written communication in the public arena is still largely dominated by foreign language use with little or no official endeavor to usher in the required change. The very big question that we are tempted to ask here is: Why, despite all the expressed needs for contextually-relevant language policies and given the policy advancements observed, is effective language policy implementation so difficult to achieve? In other words, what is really holding us back from engaging in appropriate language policy and planning even when it is evident that governments are now more conscious of the benefits of alternative policies? The various contributions provide some clues to some of the intriguing peculiarities of language planning and policy at various country-levels.

Gabriel Mba reviews language policy and planning in Cameroon. In a journey through “the linguistic profusion” in Cameroon, coupled with a historical study of reflections that various stakeholders have had for its exploitation, he questions the different positions and actions regarding language policy and especially those with a say on the immense reservoir of mother tongues in the field of education in Cameroon. He observes that the linguistic complexity of

the country has led stakeholders to engineer different language policy and management models based on their understanding of the situation, their expectations and felt needs. After briefly presenting language education enactments representing what is generally considered as Cameroonian language policy, he summarises the key policy orientations made by Cameroonian linguists. He thinks that the history of Cameroon's languages is yet to be written due to the difficulties encountered in implementing present policy orientations.

Blasius A. Chiatoh examines language policy developments against the background of mother tongue-based education application. He argues that the failure to implement mother tongue education has generally been blamed on the absence of appropriate policies especially with respect to the specification of goals and the definition of strategies and mechanisms of implementation. He questions the appropriateness of decrees, legal and constitutional frameworks as language policy and submits that rather than constituting policy in themselves, they actually only constitute language policy-related legislation which in view can appropriately be referred to as "expressions of intent". However, he concurs that despite the insufficiencies of current legislation, it does provide some important window of opportunity for government and educational stakeholders to initiate transformative change through the introduction of mother tongue-based education in Cameroon. Drawing from Bagmbose (1999: 23-28), he highlights the essential qualities of an ideal language planning model for Cameroon.

Beatrice L.L. Titanji's paper focuses on the more practical level of language planning and policy. Her contribution centres on the Mungaka experience of literacy promotion in Cameroon. She retraces the history of the development and promotion of Mungaka in education and evangelism notably the role of the Presbyterian Church in the colonial and postcolonial era (1800s-1970s). She argues that the successful spread and use of Mungaka as a language of education, literacy and evangelism provide evidence that a language policy that gives prominence to Cameroonian indigenous languages would enhance learning and subsequently accelerate development in the country.

In his chapter, Josephat Rugemalira argues that the Tanzanian experience in language policy and planning is not as unique and laudable as many scholars have been tempted to think. His submission is that the promotion of a single national language – Swahili, as a

replacement of the language of the colonial masters – English is not a success story. In his opinion, the conflict observed in the three layers of the Tanzanian linguistic environment arises from two sources, namely, the purist tradition in linguistics and then the imbalanced economic relation between Tanzania and the Anglophone centre situated in Europe and America. He strongly argues that there are no guarantees in the long-term for Swahili as the national language to play its rightful role since the Tanzanian economy continue to be a negligible appendage of the powerful economies of the North.

Linda C. Nkamigbo in her paper presents an overview of language policy and planning in Nigeria. According to her, Nigeria's language policy recognises English and the three major languages – Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as official languages. As such, government encourages their use in vital public domains such as education and legislation. However, the policy fails to address the fate of Nigerian minority languages. As contained in the Federal Government National Policy on Education (NPE), indigenous mother tongues are to be promoted in the first three years of primary schooling with English used subsequently in later stages. However, she regrets that policy is not being implemented as English remains the medium of instruction in a vast majority of Nigerian schools right from the first year of the nursery. According to her, the failure to implement the policy comes from the lack of political will on the part of government. She then discusses the benefits of mother tongues in education particularly in early childhood and recommends a National Policy on Education based on the principle of biliteracy.

Kathleen Heugh examines the South African experience in language policy and planning. She traces the history of language policy and planning over the last century. In her opinion, the marginalisation of Dutch (Afrikaans) speakers by British colonial policy after 1901 unavoidably had a huge impact on apartheid language policy during the second half of the 20th century, a situation that led to implementation of mother tongue education that was perceived by speakers of African languages as a mechanism for the advancement of separate and unequal development for these different groups of people. In her argument, the post-apartheid language policy adopted for the country, although founded on multilingualism, has defaulted towards an English monolingual paradigm for three main reasons namely; the legacy of apartheid, the lack of political will and

deliberate misinterpretation of language policy by key official advisors.

In her paper, Atikonda A. Mtenje reviews the Malawian experience in language planning. She examines the development of language policies in Malawi from the colonial era to post-independence (a period marked by the one-party state) to the era of democracy with a focus on the dominance of Chichewa over other local languages in the one-state period. She then goes further to explain the declaration of the Malawian Ministry of Education authorising the inclusion or integration of local languages into early primary school learning (standards 1-4) and posits that despite some major strides made in this direction, the declaration is yet to enjoy government approval and implementation. Among the main challenges affecting policy, she cites improper planning, lack of political will, negative attitude of the elite towards African languages and the lack of sensitisation. At the end, she presents a number of outstanding lessons one could learn from the Malawian experience.

In the next chapter, Seyum Bekale attempts an overview of the Ethiopian experience in language policy and planning. Centering on the different historical epochs, he analyses the evolution of language policy in Ethiopia. The earliest historical period, the Pre-LP era, was marked by the development and spread of Ge'ez, then the language of the monarchs with other Ethiopian languages used in oral communication by native speakers until they were replaced by Amharic. As for the imperial and Derg periods, these saw the emergence of Amharic as the sole national official language within a one-nation-one-language state. This policy marginalised all the other languages of the country until recently with the official recognition of the country's linguistic plurality. On the whole, despite problems related to policy implementation, several Ethiopian languages now enjoy written development and are being used as languages of instruction and as official languages in decentralised localities as well as in the media.

Abdelrahim Hamid Mugaddam's presents an overview of language policy and planning in Sudan. He addresses the problem of language policy in two different historical periods, namely, the colonial period and the postcolonial period. Basing his discussions on the language of education, arabicisation of education and the status of indigenous Sudanese languages, he explores the efforts made by Sudan's successive governments to manage the use of languages in

different domains. He carries on what he refers to as “the prolonged debate on arabicisation” between both scholars and decision-makers in the North as well as in the South and concludes that so long as Arabic maintains its hegemony in the North with English gradually assuming a similar position in the South, indigenous languages will remain marginalised.

Blasius A. Chiatoh and Pius W. Akumbu come in with a proposal for a national language policy for Cameroon. Observing that 50 years after reunification of the two Cameroons (1961), and despite its linguistic diversity, Cameroon still operates an exoglossic language policy based on the promotion of English and French in education and other domains. Moving from the position that such a policy is neither integrative nor representative and so cannot fully respond to the needs of Cameroonians, they strongly advocate for a total overhaul of present educational practices based on the language of instruction. In the guise of providing guidelines on the procedures and ingredients for adoption of an appropriate language policy, they briefly present language as having vital economic, educational, cultural, political and ideological value. They then propose general and specific principles to be considered in language policy elaboration, the qualities of an appropriate policy as well as the steps in policy formulation. They conclude their submission with a fervent appeal for the diagnosis and treatment of language issues in Cameroon to be informed by scientific and inclusive approaches.

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