
PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE PLANNING AND POLICY IN AFRICA: FOCUS ON THE NOTION OF MULTILINGUALISM

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Abstract

This paper examined the notion of multilingualism as social practice (Heller 2007) to critique postcolonial language planning and policies in Africa. Drawing on illustrations from Ethnologue's (2009) languages of Africa, studies on language planning and policy in Africa, and recent developments in harmonization of cross-border language research (Prah 1998; Banda 2008). The paper argued that there are distortions in the conceptualization of multilingualism and what it entails in Africa's socio-cultural contexts. In turn, the paper faults monolingual biases in the notions and models used to describe and promote multilingualism in Africa, which mirror descriptions of the language situation in Western socio-cultural contexts. The paper argued for cross-linguistic and cross-border status and corpus planning to take advantage of multilingualism as a linguistic resource for socio-economic development in Africa. The paper concluded by highlighting the prospects for linguistic repertoire-based multiannual models for language planning and policy in Africa.

To critique the monolingual characterization that has informed language-planning and policy in Africa entails an exploration of the utility of certain language-planning and policy pronouncements, as well as models arising out of these. In this regard, the efficacy of notions such as 'additive multilingualism' as well as the categorization of some languages as "official" and others as "non-official" are discussed in relation to multilingualism in late modern contexts. One of the main drawbacks of current policy is that it is still based on Western and colonial notions of multilingualism, which basically involves multiple monolingualisms.

On this view, for instance, promotion of multilingualism in South Africa is erroneously seen as a case of promoting eleven (11) monolingual streams of distinctive languages in their equally homogenous speech communities, and bilingualism is paradoxically said to rise through education using a singular language (albeit the mother tongue). Given the monolingual orientation in language planning and policy in Africa, it

is not surprising that in the majority of cases, colonial languages have retained their official status and are the main languages of education, state functions and business in general (Heugh, 2006 and Rassool, 2006). Peirce and Ridge (1997) lamented the dearth of material in language planning research in Africa, except for South Africa. However, even in South Africa there has been a preoccupation with the mother tongue debate, rather than with establishing how African language can be harnessed into an integrated multiannual teaching programme. As regards the former (i.e. speakers' mother tongues), an African child is often said to have a singular "mother tongue", which is seen as in opposition to other African tongues spoken in the region or nation. The danger here is that African languages which have existed side by side for significant periods of time, complementing and supplementing each other in multilingual symbiosis, are suddenly cast as competing for spaces. Additionally, multilingual African communities are then erroneously characterized as made up of distinctive monolingual enclaves.

Motivated by the language rights paradigm and linguistic human rights activists, the mother tongue debate has further been fuelled by some linguistic imperialist arguments Philipson, (1992) pertaining specifically to the global dominance of English. As stated by Philipson, (1992:1), in essence "the British Empire has given way to the empire of English". One major component of the notion of linguistic imperialism is cultural domination of Africans through education in English. The problem is that the argument about how to improve and integrate African languages in education is then overshadowed by arguments about detrimental effects on African languages and cultures as a result of using English as medium of instruction and in other domains of socioeconomic development in Africa. Both the mother tongue debate and linguistic imperialist arguments find focus in the perceived "sanctity" of monolingualism and monoculturalism.

In other words, contact with English necessarily leads to English monolingualism. Multilingualism and multiculturalism are thus inadvertently discounted as viable options. Resources and donor-funded projects on the detrimental effects of colonial languages in the education of Africans abound, while very little attention is given to developing of indigenous "culture" and "tradition". In fact, in African countries, funding is often poured into ceremonies celebrating African "culture" and "tradition" at the expense of establishing research facilities for the development of African language (i) as viable alternatives to English and other colonial languages and (ii) as languages of education, the economy and modernity. In this paper, it is argued that there is a need to explore models in which two or more languages are used as media of instruction. Current models focus on one language, while the other languages are seen as optional "additional" languages.

African Languages for Tradition and Culture

Despite the fact that, after independence, most African countries recognized several languages as official languages, classroom practices and official government functions remain the domain of colonial languages. For instance, in Zambia, seven regional languages and in South African 11 regional languages have nationals or official status, but English has retained its position as the main language of education, government and business. The linguistic influence of the official African languages is mostly confined to the same regions to which the colonial governments had assigned them, mostly for administrative convenience.

In the case of former British colonies such as Zambia and Kenya, the “regional” linguistic borders served the colonial government’s divide-and-rule policy well, as they were further divided into “tribal” or “ethnic” villages. Even though Zambia is one of the most urbanized countries in Africa, the National Registration Card (which is what a Zambian identity document is called) has the name of the chief and village on it. In essence, every person should be under the jurisdiction of a chief and should be domiciled in a village, so that their stay in urban areas or wherever they reside is supposed to be temporary. This state of affairs was created by colonialists to keep Africans out of the developed urban areas, where non-Europeans would only venture for work purposes.

The argument is that African language policy and planning is not only constructed in the image of Western countries (Anchimbe, 2007), but also retain the colonial heritage which directly associates African languages to (ethnic) tradition and culture, rather than socio-economic development and mobility.

Therefore, three observations can be made. Firstly, African languages are promoted as autonomous and bounded systems linked to equally autonomous homogenous communities, regions and in some cases, far flung villages. Secondly, even though there is evidence of multilingual speech patterns all over Africa, the official doctrine is to promote singular languages to the exclusion of other African languages spoken in the communities or regions. Thirdly, even though English and other colonial languages are part of the multilingual landscape and have become critical components of the linguistic repertoires of Africans (due, in part, to the advent of information technology), the policies favoured by language education researchers are those that restrict instruction in English to later stages of a child’s education (Banda, 2000 Hengh, 2006 and Williams 2008;) in practice, this would mean replacing mother-tongue based monolingual education with English-based monolingual education, both of which are incompatible with the multilingual discourse practices that characterize the late modern multilingual spaces of Africa (Banda, 2009a).

Resisting Westernization of African Knowledge Systems

Shi-xu (2007), Asante (2006) and others have warned against wholesale Westernization of knowledge, particularly when it is at the detriment of local knowledge systems. The need for hybridity and for individuals being able to communicate across ethnic boundaries and speech communities, and in different social networks and modalities in late modern times means appropriating and adapting Western knowledge to local conditions. In essence, this means that there is a place for both African languages and English in the repertoires of late modern Africans. After all, most Western knowledge is currently stored in English for their children from day one at school, or as soon as possible thereafter (Banda, 2000 & 2003 and Heugh, 2006). Parental aspirations are thus in direct opposition to those of language education researchers, who advocate for education in the mother tongue, or at least in an African language, in the early years of a child's education.

However, the very notion of 'mother tongue' is problematic in late modern times where urbanization, hybridization and multilingualism are the rule rather than the exception, even in Europe (Appadurai 1996). It would be argued here that, in late modern multilingual African societies, rather than "a mother tongue", there are "mother tongue" that constitutes speakers' linguistic repertoires. In essence, the argument is that there are individual, community, regional or national and, increasingly, transnational linguistic repertoires, that should guide the design of multilingual education models (Banda, 2009a). Monolingualism, even mother tongue-based monolingualism, is not ideal. In other words, a monolingual model which champions the mother tongue in multilingual contexts of Africa is wasteful, as not all knowledge embedded in the repertoire of speakers is utilized. Thus, rather than developing, for instance, Zulu, Sotho and English as linguistic repertoires of people in Johannesburg, Pretoria and other regions/provinces, the trend in South Africa is to develop these languages as autonomous language systems belonging to different monolingual speech communities, each with its own language.

Linguistic Repertoires and Models of Education

Based on the monolingual perception of a direct relationship between language and identity, the failure of imported models of education is crystallized in the language planning and policies in African education, which are pursuing a monolingual agenda. The language policies and the models that they spawn are designed for a monolingual child and his vernacular/mother tongue, or a child and his second language English. The models take an "either/or" approach when, in fact, the two languages are both important, and thus both need to be developed as part of the child's linguistic repertoire.

This paper used "linguistic repertoires" to refer to the total range of codes available to the bilingual speaker which enable him to perform different roles across

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ethnic, community, regional and national boundaries, and across modalities, styles and registers. Thus, it is perceived that linguistic repertoires is operating not merely within, but also across social networks; not only within the context of the speech community, but also across heterogeneous and multidimensional localities, communities, regions and nations. In other words, the notion of linguistic repertoires involves more than a monolingual's language knowledge and more than monolingual competence in each of the codes in a multi-lingual's repertoire. In essence, comprehensive models of bilingualism in African countries, for example, need to account for the range of African languages and English and/or French, Portuguese, etc. spoken by African speakers. Rather than the pedagogy of a singular mother tongue, it is argued for models that account for linguistic repertoires such as those referred to above.

Distortions in Official, Regional and National Language Designations

After independence, the emergent African states followed the "Western" tradition of labeling certain languages as "official" and others as "Regional" or "National". The distinction between official and national languages is not always clear, as these are described differently by different countries. In practice, some of the languages designated as national languages are best described as "Regional" languages, as they are restricted to regional use. This seems to be the case with the seven national languages of Zambia (Bemba, Nyanja, Lozi, Tonga, Luvale, Lunda and Kaonde), which are region-based and mostly used for cultural functions as occasionally in local governance, while English is used nationally in all functions. In South Africa, official government functions are almost exclusively performed in English, even though on paper 11 languages have been given "official" language status. It is with this in mind that one should consider the following Ethnologue (2009) list of languages of Africa:

1. Angola: One official language (Portuguese); seven national languages; 42 listed languages (41 living, one extinct).
2. Botswana: Two national/official languages (English and Tswana); 28 listed languages.
3. Cameroon: Two official languages (French and English); 230 or 286 listed languages/dialects.
4. Congo Democratic Republic: Five national/official languages (Koongo, Lingala, Luba-Kasai, Congo Swahili, French); 254 listed languages.
5. Kenya: Two official languages (English and Kiswahili); 61 listed languages.
6. Malawi: One official language (English); two national languages (Chichewa and Tumbuka); 14 listed languages.
7. Mozambique: One official language (Portuguese); 43 listed languages.
8. Namibia: One official language (English); 13 indigenous national languages; 28 listed languages.
9. Nigeria: 10 national/official languages (English plus nine African languages); 521 listed languages (510 living, nine extinct; the status of the other two

languages is not stated possibly because Ethnologue could not verify whether the languages are extinct or not).

10. South Africa: 11 official languages (English plus 10 African languages — or, if one does not regard Afrikaans as an African language, then English, Afrikaans and nine African languages); 31 listed languages (24 living, four extinct; the status of the other three languages is not stated, perhaps for the reasons given above).
11. Tanzania: Two national/official languages (Kiswahili and English); 128 listed languages (127 living, one extinct).
12. Zambia: One official language (English); seven national languages; 72 listed languages/dialects.

In almost all cases, the colonial languages became the official languages and, ironically, what should be regional indigenous languages are proclaimed national languages. The proclamation of languages as official, national and non-official imposes a power and status hierarchy not only among the languages, but also among the speakers of these languages. Material resources for the development and use of the languages depend on official designations, meaning that the colonial languages retain the monopoly in terms of national exposure in the media (private and parastatal) as well as in government communication. This has led to distortions in the multilingual landscapes of Africa as it becomes desirable, and even fashionable, for individuals to acquire colonial languages at the expense of local ones.

Conclusion

It is necessary to recognize that geographic, linguistic, ethnic, etc. borders are social constructs and not impermeable structures. Indeed, Appadurai (1996) noted that the structures that we perceive as constituting communities, localities, nations, etc. are in fact tools to stabilize objects that are in a state of flux. In this regard, it needs to be recognized that the colonial governments' motivation for erecting particular borders was to exercise power and control over people (Harries, 2007).

Therefore, language planning and policy in Africa and comprehensive multilingual models arising from them need to account for:

1. Localized multilingual practices that are innovative enough to allow for cross-border language practices.
2. Hybridity and urbanized, mobile, diasporic populations; and
3. The semiotically constituted spatial identities exhibited through multiple languages (Stroud, 2008).

Recommendations

1. There is a need for multilingual models of education and language policies which are based on natural linguistic repertoires of the speakers concerned and for the cross-border configuration of such models and policies that account for border configuration of such models and policies that account for border-crossing multilingual landscapes (Banda 2008, 2009a, and 2009b). As demonstrated above, Africa is constituted of multilingual landscapes that cross national, ethnic, etc. borders.
2. Multilingualism and multiculturalism being the norm means that Africans do not shy away from “crossing” ethnic, cultural and linguistic border in their quest for voice and agency. Thus, language planning for multilingualism needs to take into account that languages spoken in a specific country are also spoken outside this country’s borders, and that ethnic, cultural, linguistic, etc. borders are, in reality, social constructs. The idea is to build and extend multilingual democratic spaces for speakers as a way of enhancing and taking advantage of multilingualism as a voice for experiences and identity performance, and hence as a linguistic resource. This would enable material production of multilingualism through local agency and voices across borders, be they ethnic, community-based or national. In this way, multiple languages would become ethnic, community-based or national. In this way, multiple languages would, community-based or national. In this way, multiple languages would become tools for the social, political, cultural and economic transformation of Africa, as multilingualism becomes the means for increased socio-economic, political, etc. participation across broad African populations. These considerations lead to the notion of ‘linguistic repertoire-based multilingual models’ (Banda 2009a).
3. Lastly, for status and corpus planning to be successful, regional organizations such as the African Union or Southern African Development Community the latter a grouping of 15 southern African states which unite to address their shared challenges pertaining to education, socio-economics, health, security, etc. — need to become involved in language policy and planning in Africa, across borders (Banda 2008).

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