

The Future of Languages of Kenya: Adopting the Principles of Environmental Conservation

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Abstract

The problems facing local languages in Africa are akin to challenges faced by conservationists dealing with the environment. In other words, the problems attendant to conservation can be shown to inform challenges facing linguistic diversity in Africa. Issues that have been seen as inimical to the development and promotion of the local languages include current educational policies and uninformed politics that have acted as factors that inhibit at best and, at worst, frustrate any attempts to make mother tongues an important part of national development. Suggested solutions to environmental conservation can therefore be seen to illuminate on appropriate (informed) solutions that can help a country harness its cultural and linguistic diversity for the betterment of society in general. Borrowing from the principles of conservation, suggestions are made that can be taken on board in order to stem the threat to linguistic diversity in the Kenya.

Introduction

This paper argues that African linguistic diversity is part of the world's heritage, which faces challenges and threats to its use as a sustainable resource in many ways akin to the world's biological heritage. It also argues that Africa's linguistic diversity is a complex issue that needs more than just an African solution. It requires concerted effort by all those who appreciate diversity as a resource to be treasured and who regard its sustenance as part of Africa's contribution to "building universal culture and general stock of knowledge" (Kembo-Sure 2002:28). Furthermore, Africa's development is hinged on Africa creating policies that will empower the majority, who are the primary users of this

diversity of languages to enable them to effectively participate in nation-building through the usage of these diverse languages as a resource. In the following discussion, therefore, the major issue that has been raised concerning Kenya's linguistic situation is highlighted. This issue is that there is an urgent need for the nation to address the challenges posed by and on its linguistic diversity. The paper will begin by providing a brief historical background, through highlighting both educational and political issues that have promoted the current status quo. This will also include a brief discussion of the current place of English and Kiswahili and vernacular in education. Concepts from ecology and conservation will also be used to show the extent of similarities between biological environments and what may be termed as "linguistic ecosystem" obtaining in Kenya and how these concepts can point the way solving threats to linguistic diversity.

Language in Education in Kenya: A Brief Historical Background

At the turn of the 19th Century, and for over six decades, the administration of Kenya underwent different states, starting as a sphere of influence, then part of a protectorate and finally a colony of Great Britain. Through omission or commission during this time, a number of educational policies that have contributed to the threats to linguistic diversity were practiced. Indeed, within 25 years after Kenya ceased to be part of the East African Protectorate (it became a colony in 1920), the Phelps-Stokes Committee, which made two visits to Kenya, (1920-21, and 1924) noted that colonialism had begun to suppress and discourage the use of mother tongues in the colony (cited in Adegbija 1994).

In response to this criticism, the colonial education department introduced the use of African languages but still put hurdles in their development. For example, (and unfortunately, even after independence up to the 1980s) children in schools were made to

carry ‘discs’ or placards with writings such as “I AM STUPID” (Ngugi wa Thiongó 1981:11) whenever they were found speaking vernacular (and in some schools even speaking Kiswahili was ‘a crime’). It should be noted here also that until 1983, Kiswahili was in the school syllabus as just another course given only three (3) hours on the timetable as compared to English which had (with Mathematics) eight (8) hours a week. This is notwithstanding the fact that ten years earlier, in 1974, what seemed to look like the first official language policy of independent Kenya’s first government had been announced. At the time, the government designated Kiswahili as the national language and English as the official language of government. However, this pronouncement (made by (the former President) Jomo Kenyatta), neither went far enough to say how this policy would be implemented in the education sector nor did it say what would be the status of the other forty or so “national” languages (languages of Kenyan nationals!). This kind of scenario seems to have given birth to a state of *laissez faire*, which obtains up to now. Even when this policy was further developed through the recommendations of the Presidential Working Party on the 2nd University also known as the Mackay Committee (1981), which recommended that Kiswahili be made a compulsory and examinable subject, there is yet no clear language planning body in Kenya.

The Current Status Quo

In the education context, Kenya can be said to have adopted a mainly bilingual policy. In rural areas the mother tongue in the catchment area is generally used in the first three years of basic education. In urban areas, however, it is Kiswahili that is used at this level. Thereafter, English becomes the medium of instruction in the other levels. At the macro-

level, Kenya has been described as one of the African countries with a language policy that consciously promotes two languages, namely, Kiswahili and English (Lodhi 1993). However, the problem currently, which is being addressed more robustly than hitherto, albeit mainly by academics, is that, despite the promotion of the two languages (though admittedly, English is still seen as the more prestigious language) and the attendant arguments that they serve at best as necessarily “neutral” languages of wider communication, the majority of Africans who still live in the rural areas and number as much as 80% of the total Kenyan population, use the forty (40) odd mother tongues in most of their day-to-day transactions (Mbaabu 1996).

It seems to me, therefore, that it would logically follow that the overall cost of the above scenario is that the pre-eminence of what have been termed “metro-languages” will continue to deprive most Africans access to knowledge, is an impediment to their adequate participation in national politics and in most processes that would be necessary for the majority to be involved. In other words, given this scenario, only less than 25% of African people know ex-colonial languages well enough to develop educationally, economically, socially and politically (Webb and Kembo-Sure 2000). This, it has been again argued, “slows down national integration and development of the nation-state, with a national culture, creates insecurity and feeling of inferiority among those who have to operate in the foreign language of the ruling elite” (Lodhi 1993:82).

To exacerbate the problem further, both colonial as well as post-colonial policies have largely, to say the least, neglected Kenya’s indigenous languages to the extent that the popular, but mistaken belief obtaining on the ground (largely because of the *laissez faire* attitude of policymakers) is that Kenyan indigenous languages are not able to cope with

modern realities of being effectively used to impart a meaningful education, which include aspects of modern science and technology.

Thus, the exaggeratedly high prestige that has been accorded to the English language and the fact that at the moment it seems to play a dominant role in the process of globalization, and the lack of political will to put in place policies that are supportive of the use of mother tongues, has created a serious situation in which mother tongue education exists on the margins. The result of this current state of affairs in which English is still given a higher status over other languages (including Kiswahili) is frequently manifested in, for example, job advertisements which state that employers would prefer prospective employees to have good communication skills (which in most cases means **good communication skills** in English!). It should also be noted that normally, learning this second language is in formal situations that are far removed from the everyday experiences of the learners, and therefore plays very little meaningful role in their lives (Webb and Kembo-Sure ibid)

Further, the policy of promoting the two languages, and particularly English, seems to have given rise to another problem, namely, that students have not become fluent in the use of either language. One reason that has been suggested is the nature of the target language. English for example, is different from most Kenya languages in terms of structure. Attempts to learn the language has sometimes led to mother tongue interference (wa Njoroge 1985). Perhaps it is instructive to note that almost if not all universities in Kenya now teach some form of Communication Skills in English to undergraduate students. In some universities, it is also becoming increasingly necessary for students who are studying Kiswahili to be taught Communication Skills in Kiswahili to help them

cope with studying the language at the university level! It is also noteworthy that even with the promotion of Kiswahili as a national language, only a small percentage of the population is able to participate effectively on the issues of the day. All these, it is argued, have contrived to lead to further neglect of (the other) local languages and in effect put users in a position of disadvantage when it comes to political participation (Webb and Kembo Sure 2000).

Citizens of a country are only able to participate in meaningful development if they use a language they understand. This, again in my view, would be in a language that they are, among other things, also literate. And since one of the indices of peoples' quality of life (PQLI) is literacy, then Africa will lag behind in this particularly since fighting illiteracy here is likely to be "bogged down bydependence on the language of former colonizers" (Mbaabu 1996:10). It seems, therefore, logical to say that basic education needs African languages, the language of the common African, not the languages of former colonizers (currently the languages of the elite). The promotion of mother tongue use, it is further argued, will create a shift that will result in our "implicating indigenusness in both objectives and practice of social, intellectual and emotional development of Africa and Africans" (Wane 2006). This will enable us to "evoke alternative paradigms of education, development and social growth through decolonising our ways of "knowing, teaching and learning" (Wane *ibid*).

Habitat Restoration and Repair as Metaphors for Stemming Threat to Linguistic Diversity

As noted earlier in the introduction above, linguistic diversity can be seen in much the same manner as biological (species) diversity. Similarly, the principles and practices of

stemming threats to biological diversity can be seen as analogous to the context obtaining in regard to linguistic diversity. In other words, we can begin to resolve the present problems that threaten linguistic diversity as a resource in development in the same way that ecologists talk about environmental issues, particularly when they consider conservation along the lines of habitat restoration, creation and repair. Ecologically, for example, the existence of (biological) species diversity in a localized 'environment' can come under threat because of degradation through (mis) use and/or abuse of the environment (This degradation could also result from introduction of some imported (exotic) species). The exotic species may exist, at best, for sometime side by side with the local species. With time, however, it (the foreign species) may begin to threaten the local species, either because the people who planted the species begin to neglect or are forced to neglect the local species because this exotic species is regarded (often economically) as more viable than the local species. Over time, for instance, the foreign species may begin to degrade the environment (in biological terms, some species may affect water catchments, soil fertility, etc.)

The same analogy can be extended to linguistic diversity. For instance, linguistic diversity can be seen as a phenomenon that exists in space and time in a linguistic ecosystem. A foreign language (an initially exotic species), in the beginning, arrives on the scene as a novel and often-prestigious species. It may also be seen as economically more profitable (as a means of wider communication, educational advancement, political, social mobility, etc). Over time, however, people begin to rethink about their (historical and cultural) heritage, which in this case includes linguistic heritage and the threat to previous diversity by policies that may have accompanied the introduction of the foreign

language. In other words, we might say that people may begin to rethink of the issues that concern their linguistic ecosystem. They may begin to see the foreign language being a potential threat to the existence the local languages (and hence linguistic diversity).

Though they may not actually resent the use of the foreign language (more often than not, the language still is seen as prestigious to learn and use), they begin to see the (often negative) impact of this on their diversity of history, culture, world-view, and so on.

In the physical world, ecologists and others concerned with stemming and reversing the actual and potential threats to biological diversity argue for a multiple integrated approach. The initial analysis should break down the ecological system into several parts, for instance:

- a) ‘critical natural capital’ - normally ‘non-re-creatable sites considered essential for the maintenance of biodiversity in the area; these are akin to nature reserves),
- b) ‘supportive capital’ - normally “buffer areas adjacent to the above....which are needed to sustain them”,
- c) ‘constant natural assets’ - these are “important for controlling the ecological framework of the district” (Gilbert and Anderson 1998:5-6)

Part (c) above contains “formerly widespread communities (which) provide much of the local character” (Gilbert and Anderson *ibid*) that can be re-created on a large scale using any one of the four methods given below:

- i) **Natural colonization.** This is when we let ‘natural processes determine the habitats developing on an unmodified site’.
- ii) **Framework habitat.** This happens when ‘engineering restoration is undertaken on the topography, soils, drainage, etc with or without some

planning to provide key desired features and to provide a framework within which natural colonization can take place’.

- iii) **Designer habitats.** This ‘involves complete landscaping to a pre-determined design; trees are planted, scrub established, and grassland sown to a precise scheme, and managed to ensure conformity to the original plan. These are also known as facsimile habitats’.
- iv) **Political habitats.** These kinds of habitats ‘are colorful, interesting and attractive habitats created for people in urban areas. They have an educational and propaganda role and do not attempt to reproduce any particular target habitat’. (Gilbert and Anderson *ibid*).

Conservationists see the above methods as useful tools for reversing loss of an ecosystem. They are seen as feasible because people are able to work with nature by giving consideration to “long time-scales rather than expecting instant landscapes, and by employing flexible designs” so that “the need for complex maintenance measures are all greatly reduced” (Gilbert and Anderson 1998:245).

Of course, like all human endeavors, philosophical issues arise here. Arguments can be raised, for example, on whether re-creating a habitat that had been lost will result in authentic communities. There are also conflicts between short- and long-term planning, local economics, and politics. Some environmentalists for example, have argued that reversing habitat loss is at best a mistaken adventure. They have argued that the loss of an ancient habitat which had “occupied a site and evolved a rich and complex structure is neither “possible ecologically or feasible economically; too many species are involved and there are too many unknowns” (Gilbert and Anderson 1998:1). They further argue

that the eventual outcome is in any case one that cannot be considered any longer as a natural feature. Moreover, this habitat could be considered as fake and that it lacks “the value of the genuine article, even when the genuine article includes an element of past use by man” (Gilbert and Anderson *ibid*).

In the same vein, some people have argued that promotion of African languages is almost akin to the biological scenario described above. Wole Soyinka, for example, derides advocates of such a position as merely euphoric and argues for a language such as Kiswahili as a supra-national language that can be developed and supported and eventually used as a language of wider communication in Africa. It can be argued, however, that this kind of sentiment against the promotion of African languages is at best, uninformed and that there is room for other African languages alongside the so-called languages of wider communication. One would say for instance that the African languages should be considered as the ‘*constant natural assets*’ that would need to be re-created through a mixture of the first three methods suggested for the biological environment above. (Re-creation in this case is the restoration of these languages into their proper places in the education systems).

In the biological case above, it has been pointed out that successful restoration can be achieved in areas that are still rich with diversity. It can be argued that this is also the case when we look at the linguistic situation that still obtains in Africa in general and Kenya in particular. The linguistic ecosystem in Africa is still rich and complex and natural. Moreover, at a philosophical level, we might say that adoption of multilingual policies is bound to help rapidly changing communities such as Kenya resolve the

problem of their relationship with the onslaught of factors like globalization, industrialization, and so on.

Conclusion and Prognoses for the Future

So what then is the future of linguistic diversity in Kenya? It seems that what has been said concerning most African countries- that there are a great many good ideas on this vexing issue of language policies- is very much relevant to the situation obtaining in Kenya today. This paper set out to propose that we can borrow the principles of conservation to guide language planners on challenges facing Kenya's linguistic ecosystem. The practical issues on how this can be done for the forty or so languages of Kenya belongs to another paper. What is suggested here is that it is important to boldly grapple with the question of indigenous language use in education and development. The 'enemy' in this scenario seems to be governments and by extension, leaders who are not only doubtful but also 'timid' and uninformed with respect to how much effort and resources should be allocated to local language rights. In other words, "the problem in Africa has not been lack of ideas; rather it has been lack of commitment by African leaders" (Simala 2002:49). Some linguists and language education practitioners in Kenya have suggested that Kenya needs to embrace language policies that are pluralistic in nature in order that it can improve cultural democracy through a more inclusive multilingual or bilingual education.

Ultimately, it is proposed that it is in Kenyans' interest to teach their children "the hidden intellectual and spiritual treasures of the community.....in their mother tongues before they proceed to other matters in another language" (Kembo-Sure 2002:30). One very important suggestion which could produce positive impact is the need to build capacity

through Language Associations both within and without Africa, that are sensitive to and are willing to “plant their roots deeply within African culture” (Simala 2002:53). These associations, whether indigenous or foreign, should facilitate the study of African languages, understand views and attitudes of people towards African languages, objectively report research findings, disseminate knowledge about African languages to wider audiences such as government institutions that are capable of influencing governments to formulate policies that will positively enhance language education that includes African languages policies and enable African linguists and educational practitioners to acquire intellectual and material resources to enhance their research (Simala *ibid*).

In the same way that successful conservation requires that environmentalists equip themselves with more than a good understanding of biology, linguists, language researchers, teachers and policy makers in Africa need to have more than a casual understanding of the language situation in Africa and its educational implications. It is also necessary for them to have “determination, political clout and an understanding of people and economic systems” (Chapman, J. L and Reiss, M.J 1999:302) so that they can appreciate the complexity of decisions to be made concerning what can be sustained and what cannot.

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