

The tension of unity and conflict in multilingualism

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Abstract

In our modern world, multilingualism is a common phenomenon. By broad definition, the term 'multilingualism' is the use of two or more languages, either by a person or by a group of speakers. Though there have appeared debates and countless studies along with the dominance of multilingualism in any given society. It is often agreed upon by many scholars that multilingualism can be both a problem and a resource. This research paper aims at illuminating the tension of unity and conflict in multilingualism and linguistic diversity. In doing so, this research focuses on multilingualism in Africa and possible implication for unity and conflict within the continent. This paper discovers that multilingualism can cause a crisis of identity, language loss, the death of a language. It can lead to violence and ethnic clashes. In some cases, it can help foster unity in a country.

Keywords:

Unity; conflict; multilingualism; Africa.

1 INTRODUCTION

The debate as to what constitutes a language may be extended and inconclusive, but it is an irrefutable fact that language is a fundamental factor of human identification. Other factors, such as shared history, race, religion, common aspirations, etc., combine with language to attribute a distinct ethnic identity to a group. It is imperative that a group formed since such identification would cherish the idea of controlling a separate geographical territory to give full expression to its cherished ideals. However, it is an accepted fact that there are not as many countries as there are languages. Even a conservative estimate puts the number of languages spoken around the world at more than four thousand whereas the number of countries is less than two hundred! (Extra, 2007). The obvious conclusion reached based on such an equation is that most countries must have different language groups within its borders. The degree of heterogeneity may vary, from one country to another, but no linguistically homogeneous country can be encountered. Countries, where more than 90 percent of the population speak the same languages, are few. Some notable examples are Bangladesh, Germany, Japan, South Korea, etc. An opposite situation is encountered in many of the African states where there is a high degree of linguistic heterogeneity (Marácz, 2016). In the modern world, multilingualism is a common phenomenon. This term, by broad definition, is the use of two or more languages, spoken either by an individual speaker or by a community of speakers (Pilipenko, 2019).

All countries in general and multilingual countries need to have a well-defined language policy. It is necessary for regulating language use in various situations and institutional arrangements. The basic objectives of any successful language policy would be communication for the country, which brings in the concept of link languages. It is often agreed that multilingualism can be both a problem and a resource, even though there have appeared countless studies and debates along with the prevalence of multilingualism. Problems caused by multilingualism can easily be seen at both the individual and societal level. People living in multilingual societies who are not monolingual are daily faced with the question of which language to use. Also, multilingualism can cause a crisis of identity, resulting in a mixture of languages, which usually makes it hard for observers to understand. Therefore, it tends to be considered a bastardized blend of languages. This is especially true of multilingual societies where there exists a plurality of languages. Also, several works of literature have averred that religion, race, tribe, common history, etc., have no doubt had their share in the generation of conflict - language has held the center stage on many occasions. Due to this reason above, this research tends to investigate multilingualism on the question of unity and conflict.

2 OVERVIEW OF MULTILINGUAL STATES

Many questions have been posed as to whether multilingualism is a resource or a hindrance to the unity and integrity of a nation as also its administrative functioning and socio-economic life. Whatever the answers, it has to be accepted that multilingualism is a fact in the life of most nations and a state which is likely to prevail for years to come. Strictly speaking, there is no unilingual state; only the degree of linguistic heterogeneity of the population may vary. To get an accurate picture, especially as regards territorial spread and hierarchical relations, is perhaps next to impossible. Belgium has discontinued including questions on language after the Census of 1947 as it raises hostile reactions, especially among the Dutch. Pakistan, too, avoids it for political reasons (Carter & Sealey, 2015). Canada is perhaps the only country that sets a great store by the language question and takes care during the sensual counts to record exact details (Dewaele, 2015). Many African states do not have the administrative machinery to undertake such precision.

Laponce has taken three categories to delineate differences, as observed in different multilingual states across the world. States which are linguistically unified (90%-100%) are encountered in Europe and America. In the second type (50%-90%) the examples from Europe are Spain and erstwhile Russia, Paraguay, and Peru from South America, Somalia and Sudan from Africa and Thailand and Kampuchea from Asia. These represent incomplete dominance by an indigenous language (Jessner-Schmid, 2015). Through multilingual, only the dominant language is recognized, and used for official purposes. It plays the role of *lingua franca*, that the subordinate languages are found in the peripheries. The third category

takes care of those states with less than 50 percent linguistic homogeneity. Many of the African states which have an international language as official language come in this category. In some countries, a language like Wolof in Senegal, Nyarawanda in Rwanda etc.-are sufficiently distinguishable from the other local languages and may someday become the national language. In a subgroup of the third category come states like Luxembourg before 1984, Haiti, Taiwan, Indonesia etc. (Romaine, 2008).

Although officially unilingual, Luxembourg is trilingual. French is the language of law and administration, German of press and business, and Luxembourgian of daily life. In Haiti, the official language is of the international type French, the language of its colonial masters has been indigenized and split into creole and classical French. In Taiwan, the official language, Mandarin, was imposed by the rulers, the Nationalists who had fled China in the 1940s. However, more than 80 percent of the Taiwanese speak *Fukienes* (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011). In Ethiopia, *Amharic* is spoken only by one-third of the population, yet it is the official language. This was done for reasons of political expediency (Gibson, 2007). A classification of multilingual states according to their official languages, can prove interesting. Only Cameroon and *Vanuatu* have two foreign languages as official languages, while countries like India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Swaziland, Lesotho, etc., have one foreign language and one indigenous language as official languages.

3 AFRICA AND MULTILINGUALISM

The processes of colonialism and neo-colonialism that have been active over the subcontinent, especially sub Saharan Africa, have given to the whole region, with minor variations, an outward uniformity, and homogeneity as far as language policies and prevalence of multilingualism is concerned. As most African states have only recently emerged from colonial status, the type of national consciousness, as is prevalent in Europe, is not generally encountered in Africa. Though a limited degree of resistance and armed struggle underlie any movement for independence, the struggle did not take shape encountered in India, Indonesia, and certain other Asian countries. It was more of a post-World War II phenomenon. Most African countries are thus not as averse to retaining the languages of their colonial masters (in most cases, English or French) for the transaction of official business as also the medium of education. Within the territory where it is understood, a tribal language or vernacular would be the usual medium for day to day nonspecific communication. The two other languages that have become very important are Arabic (especially in the countries of northern Africa) and Swahili in the southern part of Africa (Banda, 2012).

It has been said that more than a thousand languages are spoken in Africa, and often, they are mutually unintelligible. At different periods there have been large movements of population that had resulted in a "Tower of Babel" situation. In fact, many Africans are themselves multilingual, but divisiveness over language was generally a non-issue. When colonization of Africa took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there did exist well-organized tribes like the Masai, Katanga, Oyo, Ashanti Tule, etc. (Verhoef, 1998). There were extensive trade routes along the coasts and routes to religion - the interior. Another pervasive entity was Islam, especially in the north and along the fast coast. Before full-scale colonization, the primary contact with Europeans was through the medium of trade, especially with the Portuguese, English, Dutch, and French, and the area was most in contact were the coastal regions. For communication, thus, in this region, there developed several pidgins.

When the Europeans decided to carve up Africa amongst themselves, most of the new colonies were arbitrary creation. The colonial administration had to consider a workable language policy thus first. In most cases, the European language was introduced in varying degrees, at least for administrative work. When too large measure independence was achieved in the latter half of the twentieth century, certain features such as a European language and a rudimentary infrastructure for the administrative purpose was generally encountered.

In Africa today, a variety of linguistic characteristics may be observed. According to Alexandre, there are four linguistically homogeneous states; all are rather small, Rwanda, Burundi, Botswana, and Lesotho. There are states which are linguistically heterogeneous but have one or several dominant languages. Nigeria has Yoruba, Ibo, and Hausa, which could serve well for educational purposes if only on a regional basis. Swahili is spoken extensively in Tanzania and, to a lesser extent, in Kenya and Uganda, Nyanja in Malawi, etc. (Kamwangamalu, 2009). Individual states have no immediately useful language, e.g., Gabon, Mali, Burkino Faso, etc. States like Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Cameroon Ivory Coast, etc. have more considerable linguistic heterogeneity. Here it is not surprising that often the European language is the only form of communication amongst the native elite.

A study of the colonial language policies may help explain the linguistic scene prevailing on the continent at present. Different colonial powers had different attitudes towards the vernacular language and perception of the language of official communication. The British, German, and Belgian colonies often attempted to learn the vernacular language and conduct official business at least to a certain extent in that language. The French attitude was different. They looked with contempt at all native languages. France adopted similar language policies in its colonies as at home. The main aim of the colonizers as far as language policies were concerned was to create a resource of low-level functionaries for day to day administrative functioning.

In the British colonies, the English language was spread through a limited number of schools. It was a subject of instruction rather than the medium. It did not encourage a very high standard of English proficiency (Baka 2005). The few who graduated from secondary schools where English was the medium of instruction were better versed, and it is from their ranks that the local elite came to be constituted. The goal was the inculcation of values of the colonial society and training of personnel to serve the colonial state. The African subjects of the British generally wanted their children to be educated in English. This they got from some of the missionary schools, but the missionaries were keener to use the

vernacular as a medium of instruction. In the twentieth century, the colonial educational system developed, and English gained in importance.

On independence, the former British colonies had varying attitudes to the English language. Some felt that it was a useful language and possibly the most important in the world today and should be learned for its value without going into symbolic details. Others preferred to value vernacular education to reach many people. The Belgians, like the British favored a limited use of the vernacular in education (Juffermans & Abdelhay, 2017). Their goal was to keep the African subservient and allow only a few accesses to French. Thus, they encouraged the use of Lingala, Kikongo, Ciluba, Swahili, etc. in schools of the Belgian Congo. Belgians working there were encouraged to learn vernacular (Rooy, 2011).

Education was to be the same outside France as it was inside (Rooy, 2011). In French colonies, therefore, French was to be the language of instruction in whatever education was given to natives of Africa. Mother tongues could be used only in Koranic Schools for religions education etc. Though initially, a rarity, the ability to speak French soon became prestigious and the demand from parents for more French education for their words grew. Generally, it was spoken French and not real literacy that was given emphasis. Few speakers were encouraged to attain a high degree of proficiency in the language. However, unlike the English who never considered giving equal status even to any educated natives, the French with the concept of their civilizing missions envisaged awarding full French citizenship to any individual who could provide evidence of being “civilized”. French colonies were regarded as a part of France itself.

Countries that were colonized by Portugal did not have much contact with any European language. The German colonies also were not much interested in the languages of their colonial masters as the Germans carried out the bulk of their administrative work through Swahili (Prah, 2010). Many of the former colonies retain the languages of their colonial masters. The areas of law, administration, and education are still the preserves of the colonial Language. At times it takes care of ethnic conflict. Choosing a vernacular may often give rise to factionalism. A European language is generally a good neutral choice. The literature on science and technology is more easily available in these languages. English is winning many converts from French as it is considered the language of progress and prestige. English and French are learned at school, but languages such as Arabic, Swahili, Wolof, etc., are learned outside.

After achieving independence, the government of each sub-Saharan country had to make an immediate decision as to the language it would use in internal communication. The language was almost always English or French barring Tanzania. The government of Tanzania chose Swahili as the official language. Even countries like Burundi, Lesotho, and Rwanda chose a European language, and Kirundi, Lesotho, and Nyarwanda, respectively (Brand, 2011). The European language is generally declared as an official language rather than the national language. The movement to designate more indigenous languages as national languages proceeds slowly. Botswana designated Setswana, Central African Republic - Sango, Ethiopia, and Kenya substituted Amharic and Swahili respectively for English and Nigeria adopted English and Hausa, the latter only in the northern region. Any move to promote the use of vernacular languages must consider the fact many countries may have a dozen or more of such languages. The potential for interethnic conflict must be realized.

In Africa, several languages have a wide spatial distribution. Swahili is spoken in Rwanda, Burundi, Zaire, Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda. Lingala is spoken in Zaire and Congo, Kikongo is spoken in Zaire, Congo, and Angola, Peul is spoken in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Benin, and Cameroon. Other names may be added to this list. After the UNESCO Report of 1953, the use of vernacular languages in education was published there has been considerable pressure to promote vernacular languages in different states of Africa, but till date, the progress has been slow and haphazard chiefly due to the multiplicity of languages and their different stages of development (Edwards, 2008).

4 ISSUES WITH MULTILINGUALISM

In analyzing instances of multilingualism from continents, specifically for Africa, it is seen that spatial and demographic complexities have given rise to conflict situations all over the world, irrespective of country size or level of development. The causal factors may be different, and the magnitude may vary, but their existence cannot be denied. In Europe, the course of history, break-up of large empires comprised of various nationalities, arbitrary awards of territory following major wars, etc., have all been responsible for a complex linguistic and social mosaic which holds within itself the seeds of conflict. In Belgium, the precarious balance between the Dutch-speaking Flemish in the northern part and the French-speaking Walloons' in the southern part is painstakingly maintained. They have almost divided the country into two halves. Brussels is a French-dominated city in the Dutch region. Whereas the French has pride in linguistic and cultural superiority, the Dutch have the strength of numbers. The fact that these linguistic groups have affinities across the border complicates the situation. In Spain, the conflict is between the speakers of Catalan, Castilian, and militant Basque. The break-up of the erstwhile Soviet Union has been attributed at least in part of the existence of numerous language-based nationalities, who had been clubbed together without any homogeneous feeling. The professed Soviet policy of equal status to all languages petered out in the face of administrative difficulties.

In Asia, history and the colonial legacy have, in many cases, resulted in the forced co-existence of different linguistic and ethnic groups. This is observed in India, Pakistan, and some of the countries of southeast Asia. The separation resulted when the Bengali speaking Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan) refused to acknowledge the overlordship of their Urdu speaking masters in Islamabad. India has witnessed intense linguistic tensions in the pre- and post-independence periods. Lack of dominance of a language in it specified territory has also generated tensions.

In Nigeria in West Africa, the language an individual speaks (his mother tongue) and consequently the state to which he belongs, become markers of his identity. The linguistic identification is considered more legitimate to any racial, caste or ethnic identification. This aspect was understood by the policymakers in Nigeria who adopted the English language as the country's major language of communication. However, the use of a foreign language for communication has caused some ethnic and violent clashes in the country. Many persons within the country often feel “the nearer, the closer, the

better”; this implies that many persons often feel safer to interact and deal with the people of their ethnic group or closer to their home town. In most of the African countries which have attained independence at a comparatively recent date, the conflict derives from the idealistic aims of promoting the native language (which often suffers from lack of standardization) and the pragmatic benefits of continuing the colonial language for wider communication. In this case, the conflict is in the sphere of policy formulation.

Multilingualism is encouraged in Africa. Most of the middle-level government jobs in the governing administration require proficiency in at least two of the official languages, which often causes language riots. That is the blending of two or more languages, which often causes bastardization of languages, death of a language and language lost. The concepts of linguistic nationalism and ethnonationalism are direct offshoots of multilingualism. A group that is forced to coexist with other groups within a given territory may find the situation detrimental to the full expression of their selves and aspirations. Their discontent regarding non-possession of territory may find expression through various types of movements. The degree of discontent and the magnitude of its expression may vary from mild to violent. Whereas violent movements may demand separation and autonomy, a relative redistribution of status within the framework is mild and less liable to disrupt the existing equation.

5 CONCLUSION

Multilingualism is encountered throughout the world, yet its character differs. In certain areas, there is some sort of harmonic coexistence of the different languages; in others, violent conflicts may result. In most of the South East Asian and African countries, multilingualism has not resulted in separatist tendencies. In contrast, in some of the developed countries like Canada and Belgium, language tensions have threatened to break up the nation. Other countries like the USA prefer to ignore the societal multilingualism as far as policy matters go. While a country like Singapore and the Basques in Spain choose to look for other symbols of unity and identity, Canada and Belgium set a great store by linguistic identification.

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