

LANGUAGE AND BROAD-BASED SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA: AUTHENTICITY AND SCALE

by

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Abstract

The place of one's first language in contributing towards authentic scholarship cannot be over-emphasised as attested to by countless studies in this area¹. Africa has numerous first languages and while this diversity is colourful and must be celebrated and preserved, on its own it is not really working for Africans. In "communication-for-development" circles scale matters – a language is as useful, important and effective as a tool for development as the number of people who use it. The question that arises is: how can we scale up these indigenous languages so that they work for broad-based development on the continent?

Key words: broad-based development, first languages, authenticity, languages of scale

Ayi Kweyi Armah, the sagacious Ghanaian writer and scholar, opens his brief essay entitled "Solving our Language Problem", which is part of his extensive collection of essays entitled *Remembering the Dismembered Continent* (1985), with the following insightful and incisive observation:

African writers are born to an impressive legacy of problems, from dependence on foreign publishers to a parallel dependence on imperial languages. Our themes, images, symbols and narrative patterns may be African, but the languages we use outside our little ethnic homelands are mainly European.

¹ One only needs to read the numerous publications that came out following conferences organized by GTZ in collaboration with the Centre for Language Studies (CLS) of The University of Malawi between the years 2000 to 2010 to appreciate the strength of the arguments in support of mother-tongue education – these documents can be accessed at the University of Malawi's Centre for Language Studies (CLS).

We react variously to our language problem. Some of us, with the bravado born of desperation, pretend the problem is in fact a solution, and that our use of alien languages to address our people is no anomaly. Some, in a gesture of symbolic autonomy, plant the left foot proudly in a severely devalued ethnic language, hoping no one notices, perhaps, that the right foot remains caught in the imperial language trap.

Behind the clumsy compromise the wish is pure, and even though it is now frustrated by the inescapable force of reality, it is both immediately sensible and ultimately achievable: [which is] to reach all Africa in an African language. (1985: 125)

This was in 1985, over thirty-two years ago. A year later, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the world famous Kenyan writer and scholar, published a full length study of the language problem in Africa in which he made his own diagnosis and prescription. The diagnosis was that languages carry with them their generative context, namely their culture and the physical environment, which, in the case of colonial languages in Africa, were alien to the African context and so only succeeded in compounding the problem of alienation which colonialism had ignited. The African was robbed of authentic living due to being alienated from his and her indigenous self through foreign languages. And the prescription for the African (and all peoples similarly positioned), of which he was its first recipient, was a return to writing and communicating in their native languages (1986).

Indeed, the fact of the matter is that, with so many extant indigenous languages on the African continent, it can be taken as a given that, to use a variant of the Achebean quip, Africans did not hear of language for the first time from people coming, or returning, from outside Africa. Yet although that is the case, the language policies across the continent seem to suggest otherwise: national languages may be indigenous while *official* languages remain foreign.

What needs considering – and this is very crucial, a point that Achebe sadly missed - is that language is not constituted by empty signifiers radically divorced from the social, political or, indeed, geographical environments which give rise to and sustain them. If the process of language generation were as arbitrary as post-structuralist theories² suggest, there would be no

² There is a deep irony here: insightful man that Achebe was, he anticipates the kind of criticism that will be directed at those who downplay the place of language in authentic human ontology - he acknowledges that it might come across as a betrayal of one's own heritage - but he then goes on to rationalize this very correct diagnosis by prescribing a placebo as its cure. This he does by marshaling a cursory and peremptory dismissal of the

significant differences among languages – why, one could grasp a language even in a vacuum!

But we know that there are significant differences among languages – lexical (vocabulary), phonological, socio-linguistic, etc. What do these differences then point towards? One of the things they point to is that languages are context-bound and they are context-loaded, and so to a language and its users' context, then, is important and indispensable. From context arise a whole range of implications of how a language functions and contributes, first, to grasping the context that gave rise to a particular language and the peoples involved in that process. Subsequent to that, on context depends how a language contributes towards the further development of a people who use it.

Being a system of signification, hence of representation, language is necessarily a mediated “entity”. Nevertheless, to the speaker of any language his or her first language is less mediated, far highly productive/creative than any subsequent languages that that speaker comes to acquire along the way. This is because language is a deeply experiential and positivistic phenomenon. As such, reductive though this may at first sight seem, one's first language, closely and intimately connected as it is with the entire environment that gave rise to and sustains it, carries within it a certain deep intimacy (the kind that approximates a sort of ‘equivalence’) between “word” and “thing”, or between word and state or situation and, indeed, between word and action, or the actions following from its utterance. A foreign language, abstracted from its generating context, and learnt long after the first language, results into an ontological disjuncture between words and what is signified in both state and actionable terms.

In this regard, you will often hear that “Africans tend to swallow their words”, or that they are “policy rich but implementation poor”³ - it's not their words

anticipated criticism and claiming that he will only “twist” the foreign language and, ostensibly borrowing a leaf from Caliban, that he will do untold things with it so that it carries his African experience.

³ Post-structuralism has been misconstrued. In fact, contrary to the hype that is associated with Jacques Derrida's brand of post-structuralism as adumbrated in *Sign, Structure and Play* (1966) and his other writings, there is nothing earth-shatteringly new about this worldview –the pre-Socratic Heraclitus is widely recognized to have first posited it in his insightful observation that being is unstable and in a state of perpetual flux. In the twentieth century, instead of this post-structuralism being viewed as an aspect or, indeed, effect of the positionality of the human Subject and the instability and perpetual flux that being is constantly being exposed to at its “seams” (but all of it occurring within systems or structures, albeit contingent ones), post-structuralism postures itself as a replacement of, or

they swallow but *foreign* words that don't mean much to their lived experiences hence the disjuncture between what is said and what eventually ends up being done or, more often than not, what ends up not being done. It is not about a racially ingrained brand of moral turpitude at all, rather it is something that arguably results from a linguistically induced schism between what needs to be done and what is said in order for the said thing to be done.⁴ This point is argued at length, from the point of view of Peircean linguistics, and the physicalist branch of the philosophy of mind (itself drawing heavily from the neurosciences), in a previous article by this writer where it's ontological basis is outlined⁵ (see D. Mfuné-Mwanjakwa, 2016).

There is a simple but deeply instructive experiment to conduct in this regard – the experiment is simple and quite positivistic but it requires absolute honesty. Here's what to do: try to say to yourself any sentence in a foreign language and then say the same in your indigenous language and work out if they carry the same weight and feel. Chances are that in the former the sense is somewhat truncated and fuzzy while in the latter it is holistic, all-encompassing and evinces clarity of thought. Try it for action words, too. My bet: you will more likely feel bound by and act on the actions expressed in your indigenous language than those expressed in the foreign language – and there is the reason

a dispensing with structure altogether and this is not only preposterous, it is also scientifically deeply suspect. This suspect status also manifests in Post-structuralism's babies such as certain brands of Post-Modernism. In short, the nature and magnitude of the *play* within the structure have been vastly misconstrued, exaggerated and manipulated. Further, not all meaning is based on the difference between and among signifiers as Derrida posits – indeed, some meaning is based on similarities among and between signifiers.

⁴ During Nation Publications reporter Fatsani Gunya's special farewell interview with the outgoing UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative to Malawi between the years 2013-2017, Mia Seppo, she observes that "Malawi is policy rich but implementation poor" (see *Weekend Nation Saturday 9 September, 2017 pages 1 and 4 of the Opinion and Analysis Supplement*) What she means is that officials and the elite in Malawi will make flowery promises or say things which they, sadly, end up not delivering on – and, curiously, but not unexpectedly, this is a common enough observation across Africa. However, the so-called common people, relying mostly on local languages, once they know what needs to be done, fare far better at doing whatever it is that needs doing than the elite. But, unfortunately, not all information is available to them in the local languages and that creates an information gap which also determines how far they themselves can go in terms of initiative beyond what they are asked to do by the elite.

⁵ In that article regional *lingua francas* were proposed for the African continent, a proposal which in the present article has been scaled up to reiterate the proposal made by Ayi Kwei Armah in 1985 for one, continent-wide language: KiSwahili.

for the underdevelopment of Africa first and foremost, long even before, if truth be said and admitted, the iniquitous and often patronizing political interference, the theft of its natural resources and the unequal economic exchange that have characterized the continent's relations with its others. The point is that that which is expressed in the indigenous language – if it is your first language, that is - carries with it a far stronger moral imperative and sense of obligation; the same cannot be said for those expressed in a foreign language – no matter how good intentioned.

Let me illustrate what I mean above with a personal example in this regard: I used my first language (Chitumbuka) consistently for only the first fifteen years of my life but this authentic experience associated with a first language remains true even now – what I say in my first language carries a deeper significance to, and sense of obligation on me, than what I say in the five other languages that I have been exposed to since - these being Chichewa, English, Latin, French and Mandarin. And this is not even a racial thing at all: if you are black but your first language is say English, or French, or Mandarin – that will be the language that will best define you, authentically. Indeed, that is what would qualify as your indigenous or native language!⁶

Now, as observed above, Africa has numerous first languages –including, perhaps the newest of them all, Afrikaans and West African *Pidgin*. While this diversity is colourful and must be celebrated and preserved, on its own it is not really working for Africans. In addition to the importance of being immersed in one's indigenous language, in “communication-for-development” circles *scale* matters – a language is as useful, important and effective as a tool for development as the number of people who use it. The question that arises is: how can we scale up these indigenous languages so that they work for broad-based development on the continent? After all, a lot of indigenous African languages are very closely related syntactically, phonologically and even semantically which phenomenon points to a continent-wide ontological linguistic unity.

Anta Diop and Ayi Kweyi Armah have noted this linguistic unity alluded to above in various of their studies (see, for example, Diop 1962, 1974&1981;

⁶ Rwanda and Botswana are touted as shining stars on the continent; we need to delve deep into their linguistic practices (not the policies but the practices) and examine the fundamentals of their development strategies and see if there might be a connection between the two. I visited Botswana in 2012 and for the entire week that I was in that country I rarely heard an English word being spoken among the Batswana themselves, not even in official circles.

Armah, 1985). In one of his many insightful books entitled *The African Origins of Civilisation: Myth or Reality?* (1974) Anta Diop intimates that there is not only a cultural unity in sub-Saharan Africa but a linguistic unity too. He lists a number of words that are the same, or sound the same, in almost all the languages of sub-Saharan Africa and even in the African diaspora⁷.

Lending further weight to these scholars' views, my paper, too, argues that Africa needs an indigenous language of scale if the continent is to register long-term and broad-based development – and most African languages are cognate, of course with some being more so than others. But, by and large, as Africans it is far easier for us to identify with an African language than with a foreign one. Armah (1985), mentioned earlier, has proposed two possible candidates to fill this position, namely *Kiswahili* and *Kemet*. Says Armah:

There is one African language admirably suited to function as our common ancillary language. That language is Kiswahili. It enjoys structural and lexical affinities with a lot of languages over large areas of the continent, east, south, central, and even the lower west. Flexible and highly absorptive, it can take inputs from practically every African language in its future development. Such a process will, incidentally, help correct the mistaken impression, based on the current frequency of loan words, that to a significant extent Kiswahili is an Arabic or an Iranian language, not principally an African one. (129-130)

I have never studied Kiswahili or lived in any close proximity to its speakers but I can understand a lot of the vocabulary of that language. That is a sizeable linguistic capital that we in Africa have there and we must put it to work so that we can realize a return on it. Again, drawing from my personal lived example, I learnt English and Chichewa simultaneously yet even between them Chichewa has a far greater hold on me than does English. What this points to is that the more cognate the languages the greater the affinity between them. I am more than willing, therefore, to make the sacrifice of promoting this African language called Kiswahili for use by the entire continent – and this paper is call to all my compatriots to be willing to make this very necessary sacrifice, not just for the present good but for the good of future generations –

⁷ One of these words is *kota* which refers to the cushion that women and sometimes men put between their heads or shoulder and the load they are carrying. Curiously, when I was in Rhodes University a good number of my digsmates in one of the years were from Namibia, mostly Oshivambo speakers, and I could understand entire chunks of their conversations in that language which is spoken close to three thousand kilometers away from Malawi: that truly astounded me!

and about thirty years will be enough for this language to take full hold on the continent.

Is it not surprising that for all these years nothing tangible seems to have been done by our linguists to operationalise this otherwise trenchant recommendation from Ayi Kwei Armah? Maybe it is to do with the very ontological disjuncture that I have alluded to above. Indeed, besides strong democratic governance structures in each country, what greater, more precious and lasting legacy can the present generation of Africans bequeath future generations than a language that will enable them to communicate with one another, authentically, across the entire continent! Where Africa's development in real terms is concerned, vain pride in our provincial languages leads us nowhere and such pride would make no sense where less ontologically alienating and less damaging indigenous alternatives are available. The present generations should stop asking: what's in it for me? Nor should they listen to those who want to perpetuate the futility that attends on holding on to foreign languages as official ones on the continent – those who promote this view fall into two categories: the first do so from a position of the privilege of power (and the childish fear of losing it); while those in the second category do so from a deeply ingrained inferiority complex that entices them to shameful capitulation.

Our continental politics, too, have not been conducive over the years since Armah put forward his suggestion. It is high time the African academy took its rightful place in directing different kinds of policies depending on expertise – and that calls for astuteness and boldness on the part of the African academy. In the present regard, our linguists need to do something about this from this point on because experience shows that doing nothing is not a viable option. Indeed, if Africa does not immediately operationalise this decades-old proposal it will remain forever a ground for the experimentation of other peoples' languages, experiments that are really doomed to failure where broad-based socio-economic developmental strides are concerned.

Looked at from the angle that this paper takes, for the continent to rely on foreign languages for its developmental needs is like enveloping its peoples in a perpetual haze or an eternal fog but which is deceptively touted as a feeling of linguistic and ontological polish, refinement and flair.⁸ The fact of the

⁸ I should know; I have used mostly English for the past twenty-seven years and have even attained almost native competence in that language - both spoken and written - but to me it nevertheless remains as foreign as they come. On the other hand, my Chitumbuka and Chichewa remain closer even though I rarely use them.

matter is that this nothing but a feeling of resignation and capitulation which is, as I observe above, born of a deeply engrained inferiority complex arising from the colonial experience. Rather than it being an aspect of the sublime this feeling is in fact a befuddlement and is as vapid, I can imagine, as a drug induced high. It is a consequence of the murderous mental violence that was inflicted upon the continent during colonial times but which has now become a suicidal (i.e. self-inflicted) violence in the post-colonial era.

Needless to say that this colonial and neo-colonial outlook as alluded to above is antiquated, certainly not suitable for the twenty-first century and it is against the human rights of Africans and of the peoples similarly positioned. Our linguists, therefore, through the African Union (AU) and its linguistic organs, should champion the cause of righting this very, very grave wrong – and the pun is intended because the foreign languages have only succeeded in consigning the continent and its peoples to the socio-economic and political graveyard that it currently largely is.

Conclusion

As Africans we need to do two things: let us learn as many foreign languages of scale as possible so that we get to know others better; but if we want to truly know and understand ourselves better, and develop socially and economically, we also need our own continent-wide indigenous language of scale: it is our birthright and our duty – to ourselves now and to future generations of Africans. We cannot expect others to respect us if we do not respect ourselves and do not do what is our duty. And we have a duty to respect ourselves first and foremost. As W.E.B. Dubois (1903) observed over a century ago, a people who do not respect themselves or who voluntarily throw away their self-respect, are not worth civilising. The English (and the English speaking peoples of America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand), the Italians, the Portuguese, the Spaniards, the Germans, the French, the Russians, the Japanese, and now the Chinese know this to be true – precisely the reason they each of them stick with their indigenous languages and even promote the expansion of the reach, and hence scale, of these languages.

As an example of what I allude to above, the 56 different nationalities of China all agreed in 1932 (a decision reconfirmed in the historic 1949) to have one central language to service their billion plus population. As would be expected anywhere language policies are being considered, accounts have it that the decision by the Chinese was arrived at after much disputation but it is a

decision which has clearly worked for them⁹. Although moves towards a single language in China pre-date the founding of the PRC by about two decades, their consolidation upon the founding of the PRC in 1949 was a bold move and one worth commemorating indeed. Although China has a long history of over four thousand years, the modern China that we know took the shape and character it now has from this event of 1949. What happened in that year and the years that followed proves to mankind again and again that there are at least two different types of people, namely those to whom history happens and those who make history happen – the Chinese people whom we talk about today belong to this second category, and, sure enough there is much to be learnt from those who make history happen – and, linguistically speaking, a single language was at the centre of this process. And so, at this point in the twenty-first century perhaps for Africa the question is no longer: do these kinds of approaches work? The question rather could be: how should we go about implementing this most important and bold of linguistic steps?

And, considering the role of indigenous languages in fostering authentic subjectivities, those who over the centuries have taught Africans their languages, or those who teach them now, or would try to do so in the future, without at the same time showing a corresponding interest to help promote indigenous African languages, quite frankly, cannot be described as good friends of Africa and of Africans – and I say this to their deep shame and to the deep shame of past and present generations of Africa who have been complicit in this ontological violence and violation: let us not beat about the bush in this matter¹⁰. It must be said in praise of modern-day Germans, in this regard, who in the previous decade, through the then GTZ, tried to revive in us this truth which we have always known and they must be very disappointed with us for not following through on what should have been an equally matched commitment along those lines. For purposes of the attainment of authentic livelihoods, and so register broad-based socio-economic development, Africa desperately needs its own indigenous language of scale and all those who have been responsible for the shameful acts of depriving Africans of this otherwise inalienable human right have a chance to redeem themselves by now paying equal attention to African indigenous languages and especially in the promotion of what is being proposed here as a continent-wide lingua franca – *KiSwahili*.

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandarin_Chinese

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