

**ISSUES IN LANGUAGE POLICY AND PLANNING:  
THE CASE OF NAMIBIA**

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The use of indigenous languages as alternatives for development is now accepted in principle throughout Africa, although it is not stated in most constitutions. In Southern and East Africa, in particular, local languages share, with English, the role of official languages. In Tanzania, for example, English has even been disinstitutionalized altogether and is now taught in the Department of Foreign Languages at the University of Dar-es-Salaam. However, some countries, like Namibia, can make no such claim. In the last three decades, politicians and language planners in these countries have claimed language agendas to be interventions into perceived obstacles to modernization and to unity, such as ethnicity, regionalism, ethnic group loyalty. Thus language has been viewed as an intervening variable related to two striking features about Africa. One of these features is the Continent's heterogeneity, and the other is the fact that the official language in most African states is English, French, or some other European language. These policies are evident in educational systems that impose disadvantages on the masses, restricting multilingualism and biculturalism. Generally, the problem in many countries is to work out concretely a policy incorporating indigenous languages more systematically into the various domains of life.

**0. Introduction**

Traditionally, language planning is understood as being aimed at influencing the behavior of others. This influence, although exerted through language, is intended to bring about a diversity of behaviors that extend far beyond linguistic outcomes. This is illustrated by the fact that in the last four decades, planners and politicians in many African states have claimed that national unity and modernization are some of the main aims of language planning. They have thus demonstrated that their language agendas have really been devised as interventions into perceived obstacles to unity and development. For this reason, language has been viewed as an intervening variable related to two striking features about Africa: heterogeneity and the use of a European official language.

The usual pattern is for the foreign language to be designated official and the language of education. African languages tend to have little or no official status. However, the adoption of a single official European language, in multilingual societies like the African states, depoliticizes other languages, which are de-

clared to be the symbols of the nations. Resistance to the official language is seen as opposition to national unity and modernization, yet participation is always limited to individuals speaking the official language. In this way, language is a factor in restricting access to political and economic power, thus creating and sustaining socio-economic disparities. For this reason, the use of languages such as English, and others that restrict access to decision making, economic advantage, and mass education to those who have command of them, in the name of nationhood, are inherently ideological.

A remarkable observation is that many scholars of language planning in modern Africa have accepted the claims of the politician-planners at face value, thus collaborating to put these plans into effect (Tollefson 1991). People who are unrepresentative of the polity on whose behalf they speak do the planning. However, for the past four decades, these language policies have not been subjected to much rigorous criticism. Some (e.g., Harlech-Jones 1997) have suggested that the major reasons for this lack are to be found in inadequate facilities and funds for scholarly research and the emphasis on economic and social deficiencies that are considered to be more pressing.

To examine the ideology of language policy, a critical social theory constructed from various disciplines is necessary, since it would be the analytically most powerful studying of the impact of language policy on society. The strength of an interdisciplinary approach lies in the fact that there really is no single axis or single theory that can adequately account for social problems, because they are complex. Thus, recent postcultural and postmodern language-policy studies are guided by a diversity of issues drawing on narratives, life histories, critical ethnographies, critical race theories, historical-structural as opposed to neoclassical approaches, evaluative case studies, and so on. Like all kinds of social planning, language planning cannot ignore the correlation between sociocultural trends, on the one hand, and political power development and relationships, on the other. In today's emerging nation-states, such as those in Africa, language planning and policy-making face realities that are not present in the West, and often are not comparable from region to region or country to country. This is why no a priori value judgment about either the primacy of the national interest in having one official or national language, or the basic collective right of cultural communities to preserve their own languages, can become the sole basis of linguistic planning. The linguistic policies of the emerging nations should therefore be based on sufficient sociolinguistic information on the minority languages, on the national/official ones, as well as on education and its implications for social and economic development.

### 1. Basic questions

The crux of the language problem in Africa has been the pursuit of solutions to language choice in different spheres. In education, in keeping with the *Cultural Charter for Africa*, Article 6 (2) (UNESCO 1953), it has been to ensure that as many children as possible are given a meaningful education, and that illiteracy is eradicated among both children and adults. Although education itself must be

seen in the context of a country's language policy, linguistic and political interests in these African nation-states are in conflict, and Namibia is no exception. Much to the disadvantage of the masses, this language plan of action, which covers the promotion of and encouragement of African languages as media of instruction and mass literacy, has not yet led to any wider use of ethnic languages. Two questions come to mind:

- (1) what is the role of language in the unequal allocation of societal power and its legitimization? and
- (2) what capacity do dominant groups have to set this hegemonic agenda?

With respect to question (1), it can be said, that the dominance of English, especially as the language of modern technology, contributes to the unequal relations between 'developed' and 'developing' countries, because access to technological information depends upon institutional structures and relationships. To gain that access, new nations must develop the necessary linking institutions to serve as conveyors of the information that comes with ties to those who control it. For this reason, from the perspective of 'modernizing' countries, modernizing entails opening themselves to the direct control by the nations that control the sought-after information (Tollefson 1991). Since this process is not reciprocal, it results in unequal power relationships between developed and developing nations, on the one hand, and on the other, between speakers of a foreign official language and those who have no command of it within the developing countries. This inequality is marked by dual systems as discussed below.

Regarding question (2), the unequal spread of English can be deemed responsible for the inequality within developing nations. Most post-colonial societies are characterized by a dual system in which two different worlds, the industrialized, westernized sector and the pre-industrialized, exist side by side, separate from one another, yet linked in important ways. Although differences in wealth and income between the sectors trigger migrations from rural (underdeveloped) to urban (developed) areas, this mobility, however, does not diminish the dualism. Therefore, the disparities between the slums and the westernized areas are glaringly visible.

A plausible explanation for this state of affairs, which I consider principal, lies in the fact that new governments, and this is proving to be true of Namibia, tend to not only retain colonial languages in current education practices, but also marginalize African languages. The answer to the questions posed therefore lies in the myths of 'national unity' and 'modernization'. In language-planning literature, these myths have been directly linked to the penetration of English into major political and economic institutions on every continent of the globe, where in the name of modernization, it dominates the global economic markets. The economic and military power of English-speaking African countries like Namibia makes it possible, through language plans, to set this hegemonic agenda against the masses.

## 2. The theory of modernization

First of all, the central idea of the modernization theory is that 'underdeveloped' societies must break free of traditional structures that limit economic development. The theory rests on the claim that Western societies provide the most effective model for 'underdeveloped' societies attempting to reproduce the achievements of industrialization. Second, multilingualism, so typical of African states, is seen as a negative feature that co-occurs with being 'unmodernized'; and monolingualism, preferably in English or French, is seen as a practical advantage for modern social organization. However, this modernization theory has come under serious criticism centered on its key ideological assumption, namely that all societies are involved in a linear historical process, with Western industrial societies further along, and the others lagging behind. Critics of the modernization theory argue instead that all societies exist in the same historical period, with differences in development due to their relationships of inequality and exploitation (Tollefson 1991). This economic and geographical separation between the modern and the traditional is also often accompanied by linguistic separation since the spread of English is never equal.

In conclusion to this section, it is in order to mention two observations, that (a) language policy in independent Namibia is a repeat case of most of sub-Saharan-type planning; and that (b) as with most of Africa, language policy in Namibia fosters the belief that English is a useful tool in facilitating 'modernization'. It is idealistic in its failure to connect the spread of English to inequality and exploitation. This is to say that the spread of English and the 'tool' metaphor, which justifies it, is inherently ideological. This policy raises a number of issues and implications that need to be addressed in order to assess how cost-beneficial this choice of English will prove to be for the people of Namibia; whether, indeed, this policy has the capacity to succeed in achieving the goals of education set by the government, or whether English will become an elitist language consistent with the pattern observed in sub-Saharan Africa, defeating the goals for which it was intended, remains to be seen.

## 3. The case of Namibia

In Namibia, a land of 1.6 million inhabitants (Fourie 1997), where only 0.8% of the total population speak English natively (Putz 1995), even before independence in 1990, language has always been inseparable from political conflict. The ideology of apartheid was associated with racially-based systems marked by disparities in funding, facilities, student retention and qualification of teachers. The language agenda, with the declaration of English as the sole official language, seen as a victory over apartheid, was clearly devised as an intervention towards the attainment of other substantive goals. Purely linguistic matters such as lexicalization, orthographical standardization, literary-style development and support materials were not part of the agenda of the conflict discourse. The policy is not only vague about the use of African languages in education and other domains (Sukumane 1998), it also has not been translated into law and practice (Harlech-Jones 1997). The general belief, therefore, is that Namibia does not have a lan-

guage policy, if by that we mean a codified statement of intentions, means and desired outcomes and a plan of implementation. Instead there is a language agenda, implemented through the constitution, by an unelected, unrepresentative military government possessing economic power. In this they are supported by the view that language policy should have a leveling effect in reducing the effects of inequalities and inequities of the past. English is ostensibly used as that 'neutral language' that would provide disadvantage to all. According to this view, equal disadvantages will prevent the privileging of groups that are in a position to capitalize on former positions of strength.

A closer examination of the policy (Language Policy for Schools, Ministry of Education and Culture 1993), however, leads us to believe that the rationale for this policy can be summarized as follows:

(a) The educational system should be a major implementation sector for strengthening the position of English as mandated in the national constitution;

(b) it should strengthen 'nation-building' through the unifying force of one official language which should benefit all as a 'leveling' policy;

(c) it should promote inter-cultural understanding;

(d) it should enhance national cohesion through a modernizing educational system that will invariably lead to economic advancement on a wide front. The latter would be assisted by the nation-state ideology; and

(e) the means by which official nationalism, the ideology of the nation-state, is inculcated. One of the means is by effecting administrative monopoly over a territory with demarcated boundaries, and by providing the basis for the affiliation of individuals to a set of symbols and beliefs emphasizing communality amongst members of a political order;

(f) There should be consensus in the direction of bilinguality and multilinguality, but not so substantial as to endanger the dominant position of English.

(g) The undisputed place of the ethnic languages is in the lower elementary school and adult education, as media for initial and adult literacy, but beyond this point, these may or may not be taken as school subjects.

(h) Efficiency and economy are key criteria.

The idea of efficiency revolves around the myth that only European languages are efficient in imparting knowledge, particularly in higher education. It is also believed that it is more economical to import curricula and ready-made instructional materials than to develop them from scratch in the various ethnic lan-

guages. However, without going into detail, suffice it to say that these myths have been dispelled in many cases discussed in language-planning literature.

#### 4. The implications of these issues for Namibian education

The most significant implication of the English-only policy lies in the provision of equal opportunities to Namibian children. Some intended reforms by the Namibian government in this respect have been: (a) abolishing the diversity of racially-based education authorities by incorporating them under the centralized control of one ministry; (b) expansion of educational facilities to increase school enrollments; (c) curriculum reform, a significant feature of which has been the requirement that all pupils should study mathematics and the sciences, in contrast to the pre-independence period, when hardly any black pupils took these subjects; (d) improvement of facilities at teacher-training colleges, the implementation of a common teacher-training curriculum, and expansion of enrollments at these colleges; (e) the reform of curricula and syllabi and the abolition of the South African school leaving certificate, to be replaced by the Cambridge-based IGCE (International General Certificate in Education) (Report, National Development Plan 1996).

The question is: have these goals been attained? Reports indicate that in many Namibian schools there has been a lack of discipline, a lack of motivation among both teachers and students, corruption in administration, and examination scams or leaks; and of course shortage of trained teachers (Harlech-Jones 1997). A second question is what is the cause of this apparent disorder? A possible explanation lies in the modernization theory, within which motivations for policies derive from a vision of the attainment of a utopian, rather than research-based, formulation of language planning and policy. Unfortunately, the ideological promotion of English as the language of pose and power (Kachru 1990) creates native enthusiasm in the speakers of ethnic languages, who would otherwise benefit from the official recognition of indigenous languages for education. It is common knowledge that parents in developing countries prefer their children to be educated in a foreign tongue. They prefer it to their own languages. Many begin to believe that their own languages have no prestige, that the foreign tongue is not only efficient, but it is the only language of creativity. Das Gupta 1968 has demonstrated in the case of India that language policy can indeed serve an agenda to transform societies and states.

The restrictive, rather than inclusive, nature of the English-only plan in Namibia, in so far as it seeks to afford speakers of English potential mobility and meaningful participation in government and the economy, determines the mobile élite. Myers-Scotton 1990 observes that in Africa, while the élite generally have high facility in the foreign, official language, this language is still known by a small percentage of the general population, even 20 or more years after independence. Significantly, she remarks that 'Educational systems are the major promulgators of these languages ... rarely learned informally ... But education beyond primary school is still not the rule in most of Africa' (Myers-Scotton 1990: 29). Bokamba, quoted in Myers-Scotton 1990, estimates that in Francophone Af-

rica, only 20 percent can speak French, and that in the Anglophone areas, it appears that only 40 per cent speak any English at all, with percentages over 50 per cent in some urban areas. (At best these statistics are controversial because there is literature that shows a much higher rate of literacy in French in Francophone Africa than in English in Anglophone Africa. Furthermore, UN documents show that the British were often accused of a lack of serious involvement in education in Africa.) These statistics show that access to high-status participation by the masses is limited, yet there is evidence, as has already been mentioned, that people are reluctant to endorse alternative language plans, such as those that would promote the use of ethnic languages in education.

In his book *Ideology and Curriculum*, Apple (1990:61) claims that, in general, 'one of the ways schools are used for hegemonic purposes is in their teaching of cultural and economic values and dispositions that are supposedly "shared" by all', while at the same time 'guaranteeing that only a special number of students are selected for higher levels of education because of their ability to contribute to the maximization of the production of the technical knowledge ... needed by the economy'.

According to Apple, although this hegemonic role of the intellectual has its roots in history, it still dominates the very core of education today. He demonstrates in this book that the social and economic interests that serve as the foundation upon which the most influential curricula are built, are neither neutral nor random. Instead they embody commitments to specific economic structures and educational policies which, when put into practice, contribute to inequality. These policies, and the vision of how communities should operate and who should have power in them, serve as mechanisms of social control.

In the light of Apple's view, my criticism is directed at the ideals that the Namibian language policy represents, as well as at the assumption that the use of English only is a sufficient and necessary measure in effecting a reform agenda in education. For instance, if the aim is to popularize the study and use of scientific and technological knowledge, it seems useful to focus on this question itself, and to attempt to determine how and where reform is to be fostered. Time and again, educators have been reminded about the one most fundamental question that should be asked, and that is 'What knowledge is of most worth?' There may not be a simple answer to this question, but it is a way to start planning and establishing policy for language education, particularly in the African context, where Western models of education may not readily apply. However, this is not only an educational issue, but one that is inherently ideological and political. Pertinently, the next question is: 'Whose knowledge is of most worth?' The immense pressure on the African educational system, in so many countries, to make the goals of Western business and industry their own, if not the only primary goals of schooling, needs to be addressed in the light of the last question. Problems of school-dropouts, illiteracy, unemployment, hence crime, and the ever-increasing need for international economic competitiveness are observed in most post-independence African states. Instead of linking the area of concern to a utopian plan for the

universal propagation of English, there seems to be need for an alternative to an English-only plan for all people.

### 5. Toward a language policy for Namibia

Two commonly accepted features of the definition of language planning in the neoclassical literature of language planning are that (a) language planning refers to all conscious efforts to affect the structure or function of language varieties, including the creation of orthographies, standardization, modernization programs, and allocation of functions to particular languages within multilingual societies; and (b) governments do the language planning. The distinction between governmental and non-governmental activities reflects an uncritical social-theory perspective that ignores the close relationship between 'public' and 'private' sectors. According to Tollefson 1991, the traditional definition of planning/policy expresses an implicit belief in ahistorical, unconstrained action and choice, but this conception provides no insight into the ideological or structural basis of language planning/policy, nor its connection with power, hegemony, and dominance, struggle and exploitation. An alternative conception of language policy (both governmental and non-governmental seeks to locate that policy within a general social theory. This brings us to the issue of language planning and policy models.

Cooper 1989, advocating language planning, has said that if policy makers do not conform to a rational paradigm of policy making, it should come as no surprise that the expected results are not realized. This observation, we might add, holds true for vague and arbitrary plans like those encountered in Sub-Saharan Africa. It is generally the cry of many researchers that more sociolinguistic variables be taken into consideration when planning for language. In this regard, Cooper suggests that a descriptively adequate account of any case of language planning ought to tell us, at the minimum, what planners attempted to influence what behaviors, of which people, for what ends, by what means, and with what results, under what conditions and through what policy-making process. These rubrics illustrate the range of variables which might be usefully investigated in a balanced way. Drawing upon various descriptive frameworks, namely innovation management, language planning as marketing, as decision making, and as accounting, Cooper 1989 arrives at what he considers to be an effective interdisciplinary framework for language planning. He discusses each of the three foci of language planning that he arrives at: (a) status planning (the allocation of a community's language to various functions or uses), (b) corpus planning (graphization or reduction of a language to writing; standardization and codification (writing rules) and modernization where a language is permitted to fulfill new communicative functions by expanding the vocabulary, developing new styles, genres, and registers through the processes of elaboration and cultivation; and (c) acquisition planning (planning how to promote and facilitate acquisition of the new language). This dimension of clarity in planning is generally missing in the African type of planning. According to Fishman (1983:15), successful planning requires a sensitivity to what the target population will 'like, learn, and use. Ef-

forts should be made therefore to lead target populations to like models of goodness ... the public must be told why what is being offered to them is desirable, admirable, and exemplary'. One way to achieve this would be to help people understand the motivation for setting particular status, corpus, and acquisition goals, and for choosing particular means to effect the goals within economic equality instead of pushing hegemonic agendas to maintain elite structures.

## 6. Conclusion

The conception of language policy described above implies that there is a dynamic relationship between social relations and language policy, where hierarchical social structures are associated with exploitative language policies. These policies are evident in educational systems that impose disadvantages on the masses, restricting mass participation in economic advantage, decision-making, and biculturalism among subordinate populations. The case of Namibia, being replicative of sub-Saharan Africa as we have seen, demonstrates that the hegemony of English is seen as a legitimate model for African societies within modernization theory. A tiny English-speaking elite controls policy-making, excluding the people they represent. We perceive colonial language policies in the African context as a threat to true independence and as fundamental to exploitation, and therefore suggest alternative approaches to language planning.

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