

English in Africa: A Genocide for the Development of African Languages and Literatures

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ABSTRACT The aim of this paper is to discuss the idea that the more English rises in Africa, the more African languages and cultures die. Africans without their languages will be disconnected from their own histories and cultures. English as a foreign language is spoken by many people in Africa, mainly as a lingua franca, as a more practical alternative for both local and international communication. Others see English as a language that entrenches unequal power relations, that helps to enslave, colonize and continues to dominate and prevent millions of Africans from participating in the economic, social, political and educational development of their countries. As English becomes more dominant in Africa, other African languages become sidelined. Indigenous African languages are regarded as being less commercially viable in the publishing industry. Thus, English becomes a form of gatekeeper, depriving some people access to higher education and employment.

INTRODUCTION

Human language is considered to be a distinct attribute which distinguishes us from other beings, and it is characterized by principles such as duality, displacement, identity and productivity, among other attributes. By its nature, human language has a micro-system essentially of sounds, segmental and non-segmental, and paralinguistic signs. All human language also has a macro-system. It is predicated on facts and factors around the individual and special community as a society, emanating from history, folklore, legends and the language art forms such as metaphors, similes, proverbs, idioms, riddles and so on, and of course in large measure, culture, with which each language is intertwined. In other words, human language is very complex and complicated by nature.

However human beings need language for social and individual purposes in their life. The common functions of any language range from thinking and self-expression to communication. Language also perpetuates the values and history of people and symbolizes all that they stand for. In this respect, acquiring language in its macro-sense is a part of informal learning of the strategies and values of life within a particular community.

Some scholars propose the use of indigenous languages as medium of instruction. They

argue that language involves identity and will. For them learners who are constitutionally entitled to tuition in the medium of their choice are prejudiced when they are taught in another language.

For the purpose of this paper we would like to assert, together with Kishindo (2000: 15), when he observes that:

It is instructive to note that there is no other country anywhere in the world where the most important, most prestigious and the most powerful activities of the nation are conducted in what is for most of the citizens - a foreign language.

One cultural aspect which Kishindo (2000) talks about directly is the question of language. This researcher has a strong view on this subject because of the low-intensity cultural genocide which is under way in Africa, because of many schools which have declared war on African languages. The medium of instruction in them is English and what is offensive is the impression created that fluency in English is the best measure of one's level of intelligence. Why must we get into all this trouble in a country with an approximately eighty percent African population? Why must our languages be endangered in our own continent?

APPROACH AND THEORY

Language policy and language planning are important aspects for honing our analysis as

they provide a theory for the analysis of this article. South Africa is a multilingual nation which consists of a variety of ethnic groups and each ethnic group has its own language and dialects. The language policy of the new South Africa recognizes eleven languages in the country as official languages and regards the languages of South Africa as: Sesotho, Setswana, Sepedi, Isi-Zulu, isiXhosa, isiSwati, isiNdebele, tshiVenda, xiTshonga, English and Afrikaans. These languages receive full recognition as official languages. Bamgbose (2004: 26) maintains that the language policy of the new South Africa is sustained by the most progressive constitutional language provisions in Africa because it promotes multilingualism and multiculturalism.

Language policy and language planning are tasks to undertake especially in multilingual countries such as South Africa.

ENGLISH IN AFRICA

The question of the role of English in Africa is still an unanswerable one in the post-colonial era. Of the approximately six thousand languages in the world, a thousand are in Africa. African languages are the indigenous ones spoken by the people south of the Sahara. The situation of language in those people is noticeable by the propensity of indigenous languages, in the majority and the powerful presence of a European language, especially English. According to Maiti (2002) many scholars "educated under colonization recount how students were demoted, humiliated, or even beaten for speaking their native languages in colonial schools". Writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o have chosen to turn away from English. Ngugi "posits that through language people do not only describe the world but also understand themselves" (Ngugi 1986). Asante (2006:23) has this to say about African languages:

Europeans sought to force Africans to learn their languages as if something was wrong with African languages that had existed thousands of years before whites ever set foot on African soil.

According to Asante (2006), Afrocentricity seeks to criticize the way Europe has entered the African mind. When Europeans colonized the land, they also colonized the information about Africa. Asante further maintains that to be Afrocentric is to see Africans as owners of

knowledge, concepts, ideas, as well as owners of themselves.

At the moment Africans are in a constant search for a place which will fill their void, but they find only displacement and misplacement. They are made foreign; they are doubly alienated, on the one hand, through their formal education, which instils in them the superiority of European culture and the inferiority of their own, and on the other by their own families. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) terms such extreme dissociation from one's culture 'colonial alienation', which he defines as follows:

Colonial alienation takes two interlinked forms: an active (or passive) distancing of oneself from the reality around; an active (or passive) identification with that which is most external to one's environment. It starts with a deliberate dissociation of the language of conceptualisation, of thinking of formal education, of mental development, from the language of daily interaction in the home and in the community. It is like separating the mind from the body so that they are occupying two unrelated linguistic spheres in the same person. On a larger social scale it is like producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies (Ngugi 1986: 28)

The proponents of Afrocentricity see the problem of formal education "to be that African students are taught to perceive the world through the eyes of another culture, and unconsciously learn to see themselves as an insignificant part of their world" (Woodson 1933). This view is supported by Ngugi when stating that:

Since culture does not reflect the world in images but actually, through those very images, conditions a child to see that world in a certain way, the colonial child was made to see the world and where he stands in it as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition (Ngugi 1986: 17)

Africans are so alienated from their own culture that they no longer recognize themselves in their compatriots, and they no longer want to spend time with them. They desperately attempt to deny any identification with those who share their African identity, language and culture and project a foreign identity onto their disassociated images. They see their compatriots less and less and spend much time with people speaking English. All Africans have learned is their thoughts and their feelings. They think they are

having a fine time with them, but they are actually even more frustrated. Africans identify themselves in them; Whites do not identify themselves in them.

English took shape in the course of the 14th century as a hybrid of Norman French and Saxon English. It came to be the most dominant language in the world not because it is in any way better, but because of the domination of the world by the empire which was imposed on the conquered through force and Christian missionary penetration of the hearts and minds of our people. Our children are being turned into proud coconuts who despise their indigenous languages. One thing that our ancestors will never forgive us for is the handing over of this continent to a bunch of coconuts who despise their own culture and languages.

LANGUAGE AND INEQUALITY

In Africa, approximately:

Three hundred fifty (350) million people, or half the continent's population, live on less than US \$1 per day. The mortality rate of children under five years of age is 150 per 1000, and life expectancy at birth is only 54 years. Only 58 per cent of the population has access to safe water (Caplan 2008:37).

The depth of poverty on the African continent is a matter which informs reports of global institutions such as the World Bank and UNESCO, among others (Caplan 2008:37). The World Bank Report of 2000, quoted in Bamgbose (2004: 27), observes that "to be effective in fighting the depth of poverty, development strategies have to address inequality and exclusion". This report needs to be viewed against the backdrop of the relationship that exists between the language that this report is written in and access to resources, political and economic power. According to Okombo (2001:15) the discourse of human development includes the following themes: (a) participation (b) freedom of expression (c) taking control (d) inclusion as opposed to exclusion (e) equality as opposed to inequality (f) making choices (g) acquiring knowledge (h) and having access to the resources needed for a decent standard of living.

On 21st September 1998, Bokamba, from the Department of Linguistics, University of Illinois, presented a paper entitled: "*The Political Economy of Planning African Languages in the 21st*

Century", at the then Vista University, Central Campus in Pretoria. In his presentation, he highlighted the waste that is caused by privileging colonial linguistic legacies, such as English and French, and by sidelining the mother tongue in Africa. Bokamba further indicated the intimate connection between the mother tongue and the inner being. He said: "Language is not a cultural artifact which exists outside a person, but is a distinct piece of the biological make-up of our brains."

On the other hand, Wittenburg (1997:45) writes: "English is increasingly becoming the de facto official language of the country, thereby displacing all other languages."

In his address, Bokamba anticipated Wittenburg's (1997) statement. He pointed out that, without exception, countries in Africa, whose official or national language is one of the European languages are, regarding educational opportunities, form of government and economy, graded in the third, fourth and fifth world. Other ex-colonies such as Australia, where English is the national language and mother-tongue of the majority; Canada, where English and French are national languages and mother-tongue, and Japan where Japanese is the national language and mother-tongue, in a country which was defeated and occupied after the World War 2, are members as global economic leaders of the G-7 club (Bokamba 1998: 3-4).

If English is a tool that creates windows for opportunities, this means only a few would benefit and the majority who do not have a good grounding in English won't benefit. What is not acceptable is that those opportunities for getting to the resources use the same tool (English) to bar them from entering the realms that provide skills for human development and advancement.

THE RATE OF ILLITERACY IN AFRICA

There are certain factors in the African context that make an African language indispensable. These factors include illiteracy, poor enrolment in the school system, high drop-out and failure rates, culture and development. There is evidence that education is understandable and meaningful if it is presented in a language that learners know and understand. Bamgbose (2004:20) maintains that the: *attempts to carry out literacy in imported languages for example, in French, in Mali, in Portuguese in Mozam-*

bique and English for tobacco farmers in South-West Nigeria have been a dismal failure.

Bamgbose (2004) emphasizes the fact that adult learners have specific needs which are linked to the world of work. The learning will be meaningful to learners if teaching is presented in a language which the learner already uses in the course of everyday transaction or communication (Bamgbose 2004: 22).

According to UNESCO (1990: 14):

The use of African languages for literacy has helped in reducing the high rate of illiteracy in Africa. For example between 1985 and 1990 some African countries south of the Sahara recorded a fall in illiteracy between 4% in the case of Burkina Faso, Central African Republic and Rwanda and almost 10% in the case of Mali, Niger, Gambia and Burundi.

One should recall that for a long time English was not a scholarly language when the English people were colonized by the Romans. It must also be noted that languages have always been adequate to express the needs and thoughts of the speakers in a given context to expand the expressive power of a particular language, and that languages have been dynamic enough to borrow and nationalize new lexicons and phrases. Moto quotes Chienda when he writes that:

African languages can catch up with science and technology if work is undertaken to coin words that faithfully and unambiguously carry scientific meanings (Moto 2003:103).

Academically spineless arguments will not help the advancement of African languages whose promotion and use is an important developmental recipe for the African continent. The need for taking action was echoed in South Africa by the then Minister of Education, Kader Asmal who declared:

I will propose to the government that one of the institutions of higher learning move towards teaching in one of the nine indigenous languages (Asmal 2002: 5).

This former Minister of Education was saying this because all our universities in Africa were established according to European models. This Eurocentric system of education hampered African universities in releasing creativity and seeking their cultural roots. To address this state of affairs, we need a distinctively African knowledge system which would have the objec-

tive of recovering the humanist and ethnic principles embedded in African philosophy.

In Africa, English is the number one language although it has a minority of speakers. Certification is based on passing English and one cannot go to any institution of higher learning without achieving a credit in English. One has to prove one's competence in English in order to be a candidate for the legislature (Kishindo 2002: 26). The continued domination of English on the African continent perpetuates the:

(S)tory of people underperforming and underachieving because their creative energies were fettered by lack of thought and expression in languages of which they had a perfect mastery (Okombo 2001: 8).

From Okombo's view, the message for African development is clear and whoever gets serious about the African situation will have to give serious thought to the question of language and communication in Africa. Otherwise it will take a miracle to develop a continent in which the creative energies of the masses are currently arrested.

AFRICAN LANGUAGES VS ENGLISH

Frantz Fanon (1963) had already indicated that "(T)he use of language as a tool of assimilation and subsequent rebellion against linguistic integration and alienation have become familiar aspects of colonial life" (quoted in Gendzier 1973: 47). Ngugi (1997: 80) had this to say about English and African languages:

For most of Africa, English or French or Portuguese is the language of trade, of road signs, of freedom, of courts of law and all of that. For the majority, participation in the political and economic affairs of their own lands is only through interpreters. On the other hand, others see English as a language that entrenches unequal power – as a language that helps to enslave, colonize and continue to dominate and marginalize millions of Africans who would otherwise meaningfully participate in the economic, social, political and educational development of their country.

The position of Kishindo (2002), Okombo (2001), Fanon (1963) and Ngugi (1986) can be summed up in the contention that foreign languages in Africa are an imposition which must be rejected because they are a vehicle of a foreign culture which persists in the subjugation of African cultures and languages.

Even though some scholars and linguists maintain that English and French are killer languages, Mufwene claims this as a misconception:

Languages do not kill languages; speakers do. A language is transmitted and maintained in a community through continuous use. Languages die when their speakers give them up. It is like having a population whose members refuse to produce offspring. The only difference is that speakers do not deliberately refuse to use their languages but are often compelled to speak other languages that offer practical or material advantages (Mufwene 2008: 01).

The researchers agree with Mufwene because Africans do not use their languages regularly as they think and believe that knowing English in Africa is a great honour. Africans are compelled to speak English as this will open the doors of opportunity, such as finding a good job.

The rise of English in Africa will make African languages endangered languages. According to Bamgbose (2004: 23) "endangered languages are those languages which are not used in formal education and their communicative function is limited for such purposes as rituals, village affairs and informal contacts".

If a country's language policy does not give African languages a proper role, that will have a psychological effect on the African people and their cultures. One of the best ways of ensuring that the African languages are not endangered languages, is to transmit them to learners and students. The language policy of the country must provide for the use of African languages in education.

Ngugi (1986) maintains that the use of colonizer's language in Africa is like a "cultural bomb" that changes the psych of the victim. The "cultural bomb" makes victims distance themselves from their own culture and identity while desiring to identify with "other people's language rather than their own" (Ngugi, 1986:13). Vedder (1981: 275), as quoted in Ohly (1992:65), cites a good example of this kind of self-denigration in the case of David Christian, the Nama chief in Namibia, in response to the Dutch missionaries' attempt to open schools that would use Nama as the medium of instruction. It is reported that he shouted, "Only Dutch, Dutch only! I despise myself and I want to hide in the bush, when I am speaking my Hottentot language".

English in Africa, besides being used as a tool for communication, was also used as a tool for total social, political and economic disempowerment. It is necessary to dwell on the past descriptions of the Africans because the colonial legacy left a mark on the majority of African people which suggests that they are a fourth-rate group of human beings. Let us consider what Lamb, as quoted by Moto (2003:104), observes:

The colonists left behind some schools and roads, some post offices and bureaucrats. But their saddest legacy on the African continent was a lingering inferiority complex, a confused sense of identity. After all, when people are told for a century that they are not as clever or capable as their masters, they eventually start to believe it.

One is compelled to agree with the thoughts of Morania as quoted in Moto (2003: 104) when saying: "I believe in fact, there is no greater suffering for man than to feel his cultural foundations giving way beneath his feet".

The choice of English was not only for its use as a means for communication, it was also a tool for radiating and maintaining the political, social and cultural superiority of the colonizer.

THE STATE OF CREATIVE WRITING IN AFRICAN LANGUAGES

The reading standard for books written in African languages has declined since 1948, after the victory of the National Party. During apartheid, the National Party created a language board for each African language. These language boards had representatives from both the homelands and the Department of Education and Training. The major function of these language boards was to scrutinize books before they could be recommended to be prescribed for schools and educational colleges. Bantu education under the apartheid regime encouraged creative writers in African languages to write for the school market and this resulted in lowering the standard and the development of creative writing in African languages. Before a book could be published, the board would screen it to check if the theme was not around politics and this killed the talent of Black African writers writing in African languages.

The 2011 census results show that South African indigenous languages are in decline, namely IsiZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, IsiX-

hosa and IsiSwati. While these indigenous languages showed a decrease, English and Afrikaans recorded an increase in usage (Hosken 2012:13). Failure to teach in indigenous languages in South Africa is detrimental to the cultural identity of future generations. English is still a key to employment, but changes to the job market mean polyglots increasingly have better opportunities when looking for jobs as compared to those who can only speak one language. Getting by on just English is a thing of the past in business (Vollgraaf 2012: 1). Today, twenty-two years after the all-race South African democratic elections, change has not yet been seen. The raising of standards of the reading culture of books written in African languages has not yet been developed. The books prescribed for schools in African languages today are still those which were read in 2008. Africans look down upon themselves, they do not want to buy and read books written in African languages but they buy books written in English even though they are written by African writers. Today African writers are taking an advantage of expressing themselves in broader themes. For market purposes, they are writing in English and this results in downgrading the standard of African languages as well as the standard of writing in African languages. This is not only happening in South Africa but in the whole continent of Africa.

From the 1960s till today there are still debates about what medium of expression between English and the African languages should African creative writers adopt. In *African Memory: The Challenge of the Pan-Africanist Intellectual in an Era of Globalization* (2005), Ngugi maintains that creative writing as well as other intellectual productions of Africa should be expressed in African languages. Ngugi's suggestions are as follows:

We cannot afford to be intellectual outsiders in our own land. We must reconnect with the buried alluvium of African memory and use it as a base for the further planting of African memory on the continent and in the world. This can only result in the empowerment of African languages and culture and make them pillars of a more self-confident Africa... (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 2005: 164).

Ngugi (2005) seems to be asking us about the level of awareness of an altered global linguistic landscape. He is asking how prepared are we for a globalized world in which English is

the preferred means of communication if we don't start developing and reviving the African languages.

Singh (2008) issued a provocative statement about the use of European languages in Africa:

The continued use of European languages in postcolonial spaces suggest that European languages are, indeed, multinational commodities, supporting capitalist ideology and the upper and emergent middle class in many post-colonial nations (Singh 2008: 18).

The Nigerian critic Obi Wali once issued a provocative prophecy that:

...until [African] writers and their midwives accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African languages, they would merely be pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity and frustration (cited in Osundare 2004: 60).

Social and political developments of the moment permitted Wali and his ilk to propose and foresee a future in which linguistic engineering and cultural re-education would generate sufficient readers of African ethnic literatures who are fluent in the local languages.

Today we live in a world where remarkable changes have occurred in economic, political and cultural situations. Market factors have been invested with wide discretion to determine what gets published and what gets read. Therefore the ideals, assumptions and expectations on which the politics of language in African creative writing created a hot debate. The debate persists as to whether English or African languages should be used in African literary composition.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, in his book entitled *Decolonizing the Mind: The politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), is acting as the spokesperson for other writers and critics from a Marxist ideological angle. The book is important in the annals of the language debate in African creative writing and continues the debate beyond Wali. Ngugi is known to have kept his word, often writing in Gikuyu, his mother-tongue, and then applying himself to the task of translating the work into English. Here is Ngugi's position:

Each language, no matter how small, carries the memory of the world. Suppressing and diminishing the languages of the colonized also meant marginalizing the memory they carried and elevating to a desirable universality the

memory carried by the language of the conqueror. This obviously includes elevation of that language's conceptualization of the world, including that of self or otherness (Ngugi 1986: 158).

From another perspective there is the Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, who offers explanations, justifications and excuses for his continuous usage of English in his creative writing. Achebe's position stems from what is perceived as a realistic view of the utility value of European languages in the Babel of Africa:

A more serious examination of the situation would be to accept the reality of English in contemporary Africa or contemporary Nigeria and wait perhaps, for the day when English might, perhaps, be steadily pushed aside. All I have done is to look at the reality of present-day Africa. This reality may change as a result of deliberate, e.g. political, action. If it does, an entirely new situation will arise, and there would be plenty of time to examine it (Achebe 1975: 57).

Even though Ngugi and Achebe operate from different extremes of the issue, they sound united in the belief that colonizers have done some damage to African languages and African literature. Ngugi recommends a confrontation with history as a means of addressing what he considers as the distortion of Africa's political, cultural and linguistic structures. Achebe further says: "For me there is no other choice. I have been given this language and I intend to use it ... I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience" (Achebe 1975: 62).

Achebe urges less reflection on the painful history and places more emphasis on appropriating the benefits of its unintended linguistic endowments. Nwankwo has observed that "the difference between those two giants of the African novel – Achebe and Ngugi, remains in the ironic distance and calm contemplative posture of the former against the latter's deep immersion and very emotional involvement in his subject" (Nwankwo 1992: 4)

The language debate seems to have provided the platform for eloquent articulations of secondary issues of publishing. Such issues relate to what should be the appropriate function of literature in developing Africa, who should be the consumer of literature written by Africans. Osofisan had this to say about the language of literature:

The choice that the language problem boils down to finally, is thus, not an easy one. We will remain as we are - safe, self-deluding revolutionaries whose voices are heard in classrooms by a fraction of the petit bourgeoisie or we can choose to take our message out there to the people (Osofisan 1988: 49).

Osofisan maintains that the people 'out there' understand literature better when it is written in their indigenous language. This assumption overlooks the notion that English is the world language. If the African novel is written in English the theme won't be well portrayed. An instance is Osofisan's recent defence on Ngugi in the following terms:

For how long will the 'appropriation' of colonial languages continue while the 'mother tongue' withers away in culpable neglect? How full blooded, how comprehensive, is the integrity of a "nationalism" couched in an appropriated idiom? (Osofisan 2004: 70).

These questions, asked in 2004, are reminiscent of the 'revolutionary' prophecy and analysis of the language issue, already expressed in 1962 by Wali.

During colonization, the colonial power eradicated Africans' religions, educational structures, and languages. Even though the Africans adopted a Western identity through the colonizer, it was absurd, empty of meaning because the Africans' culture in all its complexity was not recognized by the colonizer. Essentially the Africans became imposters of themselves and their personal and cultural history destroyed by the colonizers. Singh (2008: 18) maintains that:

To continue to speak and write in the colonizer's language indicates that the postcolonial people are not yet liberated and continue to identify with the West's universalism leading to neocolonialism.

The enduring exploitation of Africans has been defined using the concept "neocolonialism". The concept means a nation with a "continued reliance upon the former imperial power" (Caplan 2008: 85). More specifically the term "neocolonialism", implies a persistent state of confusion of selfhood for the individual and for the formerly colonized nation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, one needs to stress the fact that English, of course, has positive and not

only negative aspects. Although this researcher has focused extensively on the negative impact of English on indigenous African cultures, English has nevertheless had a number of positive effects on African languages and cultures as well. In particular, it opens up people's lives to other cultures. Information and communication technology have eased the process of interaction between Africans and other countries. English became part of the heritage of the African countries. To cite a good example, African literature written in English has constituted an important contribution to English literature.

Aspects of the life of colonized people in Africa are a by-product of varied historical experiences. The present cultural, social, political, religious, economic, educational and linguistic realities on the African continent reflect a situation of populations who were forced under the domination of foreign powers into what today are referred to as independent nation states.

Our world today is driven and directed by issues of identity, culture, values and norms, among others. Therefore the revival of African languages is imperative in order to transform Africa into a normal society that would not have a permanent white upper class and a permanent black under class especially in this era of African renaissance and NEPAD.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Below are recommendations for ensuring the survival of indigenous African languages and cultures. Multinational enterprises that operate in Africa should not insist on imposing their Western dominated social, economic and ideological tenets. Multinational enterprises should be mindful of their operational practices in African society by appreciating indigenous African languages and cultures. The management of multinational enterprises should not operate from the Western worldview, but should incorporate the African worldview. If this can be achieved, indigenous African languages and cultures will not need to fear the cultural onus of English.

The predominant role of English as the language of technology, communication, information technology and its effect on other languages is not peculiar to African societies. Nevertheless, a crisis is looming in Africa regarding the preservation, maintenance and associated iden-

tity of African cultures and languages. Few books are published in African languages. Speakers of African languages are not keen to read literature written in African languages. If we Africans want to empower Africans culturally, we must take knowledge to the people in languages of their country. Unless this is done, there is no chance that the advancement of African cultures and languages will succeed. African leaders must be concerned about how to use African languages parallel with the use of English.

Leaders should illustrate to Africans and others that African languages play a functional and central role in the production and reproduction of knowledge essential for Africa's development. Africans should be proud of their languages; there are already lexicographic units in operation and a specialized terminology in African languages is being developed. All successful nations in the world are nations which view their languages as more important than other languages. We Africans should ask ourselves why for example there are so many Departments of African Studies in the USA and Europe.

The New Partnership for African's Development can be a vital medium for Africa's control of institutions, cultures and products manufactured in partnership between African countries and foreign countries.

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