The role of African universities in the intellectualisation of African languages

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Why African languages of tuition? The development argument.

At the outset, it is essential to raise the crucial question that is only now beginning to be discussed openly in South Africa: “Why bother to develop African languages as media of instruction or languages of tuition at tertiary educational institutions, given that we have English (and, decreasingly, Afrikaans) as perfectly usable formal academic languages?”

For many, including specialists in African linguistics, the demand that we do so is nothing less than a quixotic waste of money in the cause of an anachronistic and even embarrassing African nationalism. If we are unable to give a compelling answer to this question, therefore, we are unlikely to persuade anyone, least of all those whom we expect to put money on the table in order to get things moving forward; that this is one of the central questions that have to be addressed – especially by the university – if President Mbeki’s “Africa century” is ever to become a meaningful nation.

Ironically, the nationalist reflex is the simplest but certainly not the only place to look for the answer, in view of the fact that for more than three hundred years, ethno-nationalist movements have played the leading role in the establishment of modern universities and of national standard languages. The history of the epoch of capitalist democracies clearly shows that it is the combination of the imperative of economic development and political class struggle that explains the genesis of modern university education in all but a few exceptional cases. The first consideration is, therefore, quite simply that the dialectic of capitalist development will not bypass the continent of Africa, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding.

If it may be allowed to focus on the language issue, specifically on the language of tuition, a regular pattern can be discerned. Usually, what came to the university begins in the image and likeness of a descending political or cultural authority. Or, to put it differently, in most cases it is the language of the imperial or colonial power that prevails as both the medium of instruction and the standard for the subsequent development and use of one or more languages of the enlarged national state. In the European context we can trace this pattern from the time of the Roman Empire, when Latin became the lingua franca of the intellectual elite. Beginning in the 12th century, when the first formal universities were founded, Latin was the language of tuition in virtually all disciplines. This practice only began to change gradually after the Thirty Years War (the Treaty of Westphalia) as the result of the rise of national monarchies and the intellectual ferment occasioned by the Lutheran and Calvinist Reformation.

Already in 1517, John Reuel had written the following telling lines:

The graces the romans with many mo
In their mother tongue wrote works excellent
Then if dukes in this realm would take pain so
Considering that our tongue is now sufficient
To expound any hard sentence evident
They might if they would in our English tongue
Write works of gravity sometime among
For divers woman wise in this kind
As well of noble men as of mean estate
Which nothing but English can understand
Then if cunning Latin books were translated
In to English well correct and approbate
All subtle science in English might be learned
As well as other people in their own tongues did.

During the various industrial revolutions experienced in Western and central Europe, it was the languages of the dominant powers, first French and subsequently German, that were the languages of tuition in the emerging nations, whose own languages were in the process of standardisation and modernisation. In Eastern Europe, Russian played a similar role, especially after the establishment of the USSR. In Estonia, for example, during the 19th and early 20th centuries, the higher education of the middle classes was conducted through the medium of German and subsequently of Russian, until the Estonian language itself fell to be sufficiently “developed” to be used in this high-status function (See Kurnan 1988:55).

The evolution of the university in Europe shows that in virtually all cases, “higher” education was initially conducted in the language of the relevant imperial or other dominant power. Once the elite in any given territory began to turn its back on the imperial or international interests that had sustained it and oriented itself to national interests as the result of capitalist development in the relevant territories, the question of the national language(s) inevitably became politicised and the universities became hotbeds of agitation for the displacement of the imperial (“foreign”) languages by the local varieties. Whereas this process became ever faster as one moved from western to eastern Europe during the 19th and 20th centuries, it has been an exceptionally slow one in the overseas colonies of modern Europe, specifically in the colonies of Great Britain and France. With the exception of those territories where the native population was systematically exterminated, to a much of the “old colonial empires” (Canada, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, the Caribbean islands and parts of the Cape colony), where English “naturally” became the dominant and mostly the only language, the languages of the native population were never considered worthy or even capable of being used in prestigious functions such as languages of tuition in higher education.

Examples of this are legion. A short digression on the Philippines will demonstrate the issues since, fortunately, a cluster of applied linguists, sociolinguists and other scholars have written widely on the subject. In consonance with the history of colonial conquest of the territory, university education in the Philippines began in Spanish, continued in Spanish and English and subsequently became virtually an English-only domain. In the late 1960s, for the first time, Filipino, the national standard language, began to be used at the state University of the Philippines to teach certain subjects. Bonifacio Silayan’s magisterial work, The Intellectualization of Filipino, published in 1999, especially the 1991 essay from which the title of the book is derived, is a virtual manual for those who wish to, or have to, set out on the difficult road that might take them to the point where their local national language(s) can be used in all domains of life, including that of higher education. It discusses frankly and in detail the many obstacles that derive from the colonial legacy, the demographic complexity of the territory and the fact of the hegemony of English as a global language in which most of the elite are proficient. He also warns against the mirages that can mask naïve and impetuous or short-term approaches to the difficult task of language planning. Indeed, as we approach our subject, it would be well to bear in mind his view, arrived at after more than 25 years of promoting the use of Filipino as a language of tuition:

I soon realized two things: one, that there is practically no recorded past knowledge in Filipino (except in creative literature), for example in Linguistics, one had to depend on English for references; second, that making knowledge and information in Filipino is an extremely slow and exhausting and expensive process (Silayan 1990:203).
The diversity argument

There is, however, a second fundamental reason why the popular as well as the academic intellectualisation of the African languages have to be promoted and advanced, and that is what I shall merely mention this argument for our present purposes, since I have already dealt with it in some of my recent publications (see Alexander 2003). Put simply, the diversity argument refers to the fact that is becoming increasingly accepted among social science as well as natural scientists that cultural diversity is as essential to the survival of the human species on planet earth as is biodiversity. “Sociocultural diversity” is one of the great discoveries of the late 20th and it is a self-evident truth that linguistic diversity is one of the cornerstones of sociocultural diversity, as I have argued in this paper, and also in other publications (see Alexander 2000). UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) has for a long time now funded a programme dedicated to the preservation of endangered languages and, more controversially perhaps, to the “restoration” of extinct languages. We know that on the continent of Africa, 2,000 extinct “languages”, however defined, are subject to the same pressures that are rending one such language extinct somewhere in the world every two weeks or so.11

An important dimension of the diversity argument relates to the question of individual and social identity. Although language is neither the only nor for many people the main element in the formation of individual and social identities, there is no doubt at all that for most people it seems to be the defining element of their identities, that which makes them feel both unique and at home in the company of people, usually a specific group, that speak their language. This is the essential reason why language rights such as the right to mother-language education or the right to be treated in a language that one understands well, are now considered to be human rights, even though universal agreement on all aspects of such rights is extremely difficult to attain, precisely because of the situation, or contextual roots of the value of “language” for specific communities.

The democracy argument

The most immediate argument for the urgent and active intellectualisation of the African languages can be dubbed the democracy argument. I use this term in order to point both to the direction of language as a human right and, more particularly, to language as a sociopolitical and socio-economic resource. In the words of Cohnbus (1988:71), written with reference to Meij Japans:

It was imperative that the new knowledge and enlightenment were spread as widely as possible throughout society. This could only be achieved if Western theories and technologies could be made available for mass consumption in the native language of the land.1,2

This statement goes to the heart of the matter. The elites who inherited the political kingdom from the externally departing colonial overlords, with hardly any exceptions (Tanzania, Mozambique), continued to govern within the parameters set by the ancient regime, largely because they had no alternative and because it suited their immediate interests. The colonial state was not fundamentally alien even if the colour (or religion, language, etc.) of those who now seemed to make the decisions differed from those who had passed on the baton of rule. What was true of other policy domains was equally applicable in the domain of language policy.3 A gratifying distinction was made between “official”, i.e. European, and “national”, i.e. African, languages, since some concession had to be made to anti-colonial sentiment among the masses of the people. In an unadorned manner, this distinction has captured descriptively the social, economic and political distance that separated the African citizens (workers, peasants and traditional petty bourgeoisie) from the elite, outwardly-oriented middle classes.

Again, there is no need to belabour the point. Profound and insidious analyses of the post-colonial sociolinguistics in Africa have been made by numerous scholars.4

The hegemonic status of English and French in particular occasioned was already a salient maintenance syndrome and although I am not aware of any African intellectual having gone as far as some Meij Japans, who wanted to replace Japanese with English, there can be no doubt that most members of the post- and neo-colonial elites, in spite of all protestations to the contrary, believed, and, sadly, continue to believe, that this would be the best option.5

This ideology clearly, reflects the dependency relationship that characterises the African elites to their former colonial and imperial overlords. It cannot, and does not reflect the interests of the masses of the African people, for whom English, French and Portugaluese, in whatever variety they attempt to speak them, remain essentially foreign languages. The democracy argument, which is also an argument for social equity, as opposed to the deep inequalities that characterises the neo-colonial state, demands, as I have written elsewhere, that the African middle classes commit class solidarity, in terms of language policy; this means that policy has to be viewed from the perspectives of the urban and the rural poor, it implies a shift from the dominance of the languages of the former colonial powers to the indigenous languages of Africa.6

Last, there be any misunderstanding, let me state clearly that the democracy argument is based on the assumption that the political and cultural leadership of Africa are genuinely committed to the eradication of poverty, disease, ignorance and all forms of discriminations. If that is the case, then the development of the languages of the people is a precondition; it is, in fact, no less than the litmus test for determining the democratic credentials of the regime or government in question. At the moment, sadly, most African governments fail this elementary test.

A programme of action: advocacy

This brief discussion of the 30s frames of reference for the examination of and motivation for the intellectualisation of African languages must suffice. Let us consider next what has to and can be done practicably.

On the occasion of the second World Congress of African Languages, held in Leipzig, Germany, in 1997, Professor Mohamed Abdoltazf of the University of Nairobi stated in a nutshell what the African universities have to do in respect of the promotion and development of African languages. I take the liberty of citing him in his own words at length:

[Sohlarz] in the linguistics of African languages have a great task in securing and preserving the linguistic heritage of Africa. Special attention needs to be focused on small-group and dying languages that have so far not been described. Equity structures to develop to the maximum number of all languages that could be used as vehicles of communication and knowledge in all social and economic fields. These include the languages that are now functioning very well as national or official languages at the national and regional levels. For there is no need to reduce and where possible eliminate the diglossia prevailing with the use of European languages as languages of education, technology and modernisation. If efforts are not directed towards achieving this goal, then African languages will remain forever underdeveloped. The present European languages could be taught well to serve as second and foreign languages since they are languages in which there is an enormous literature in all spheres of human endeavour (Abdoltazf 2000:15).

In a nutshell, we need to develop the African languages to the highest possible levels in all sectors of society. We need to eliminate the existing diglossia, and English or French, for example, should become a universal second language in most parts of Africa, not unlike the situation with English in some of the Scandinavian countries. They should not only be languages of the elite, which are at the moment, the means by which the rest of the population is cut off from the modern sector; virtually completely.

It is essential that we begin advocating in all our countries the rehabilitation of mother-tongue education within the context of a bilingual educational system where the other language in most cases will be English or French. In other words, mother-tongue education from the pre-school right through to the university with English or French as a supportive medium, or in some cases, certainly at university level for a long time probably also as a formative medium. This is the fundamental conclusion that we have to come to. Every African language department at any university or college has to propagate and support this particular demand. Everywhere in the world people use the mother tongue to teach their children. It is only in post-colonial Africa and a few other countries in south-east Asia and eastern Europe that people use a foreign language to teach their children, and as a result we have the terrible drop-out rates, repeater rates and failure rates that we know so well. This paralyzing practice, more than any other, explains the fundamental mediocrity of intellectual production on the continent of Africa. We have to persuade our communities
about the potential of African languages as languages of power and languages of high status. It is our task as language activists and professionals to do this, it is the task of the political, educational and cultural leadership of the country to do this and to be role models in this regard. We know that it will take time. We know that people have intimidating, because of oppression, because of apartheid and racism, the idea that all good things come through English (or French) and that African languages are fine for the family and the church and for the immediate community, but otherwise they are not worth it. We also know that this is wrong. Let us not forget that we are not involved in stable one-to-one sexual relationships to refuse to use condoms or other suitable prophylactics, because of the danger of becoming HIV-positive.

We also know that we can change people’s behaviour. Let us stick to AIDS as an example. Consider Lusaka today: because of a particular approach, which allowed people to go from door to door to explain frankly, candidly and honestly to those who did not know how AIDS is spread and where it comes from, people’s sexual behaviour in that country has changed. We can do the same with mother-tongue-based bilingual education. We have got to persuade people to understand that mother-tongue education is, in fact, the doorway to success, not only in general terms but also in the doorway to the learning of English, French, or any other language as a second language. Everybody who has studied language education knows that this is true, that the sooner your foundation in a mother tongue, the more easily you learn a foreign language or a second language.

Political will, leadership and vision

That the argument about lack of resources is a cover for lack of commitment can be shown very clearly in many different ways. The best example in Africa is Somalia, a country, admittedly under the authoritarian government of Siad Baré, marred by the constant conflict and of training from the outside to the university notwithstanding to English or to any other foreign language. We had the same situation, and it is still the case to a very large extent, in a country like Ethiopia, where Amharic used to play a similar role in some disciplines. Of course, there are other problems in Ethiopia, but that it is not necessarily the case that we must use English or, for that matter, French, is very clear from these, and other, examples.

Ultimately, it is a question of commitment, of the willingness to view things from the perspective of the urban and the rural poor rather than from the convenient vantage point of the middle classes.

Language planning strategy

There is no need to reinvent the wheel. We have many predecessors in Asia, Europe and Africa itself. Without going into unnecessary detail here, I should like to summarise the relevant elements of a continental language planning strategy that will push forward our agenda on the basis of the very same and carefully considered suggestions formulated by Sibayan (1990:446-445) for the intellectualisation of Filipino.

- A core of strong ‘but not offensive’ advocates for the use of the local language(s) as L1 at all levels of education. These men and women should preferably be well-known and respected scholars in their fields, researchers and, if possible, people ‘capable of translating and writing original research’ in the relevant language(s). Some of them should be ‘balanced bilinguals’ in the LWC (mostly English) and the local language(s). Most important, these advocates must have a group that will write, publish, and teach in Filipino (and local language(s) – NA) not only from university but also from a network of universities. This requires collective belief and effort and good organisation. In other words, there should be a society or an association that will do translation backed up by university administrators such as university rectors/principals, deans, heads of departments – single individuals may not succeed (Sibayan 1990:446).
- Some employers, including the state, that will insist on using the interface.
- Publishers prepared to take the initial risk of publishing and marketing books and other texts written in the local languages.
- Funding sources willing to sustain the production of these texts in the languages they become self-sustaining.
- The cultural, political and economic leadership must accept and propagate among the people the acceptance of a scientific culture in the local language(s).
- An understanding that the process of intellectualisation will take a long time, although, as I intimated earlier, there may be contexts – such as that of Meji, Japan – in which the change can be effected within a single generation.
- Textbooks and other texts in the intellectualising language(s), even if we have to begin with photocopies.

It should be noted that, according to Sibayan (1990:449), a popularly modernised language (used, for example, in the electronic media and tabloid papers) is not intellectualised. In order for it to become intellectually modernised, such that it can be used in the controlling domains of language, including higher education, much work (cross-development) has to be done by the universities and colleges, he suggests that it is easier to begin with mother-tongue-medium education in the primary schools, since the young in the schools are the most receptive, whereas adults who, in the controlling domains, already use the former colonial language more or less proficiently tend to be extremely resistant to a changeover towards the local language(s).

The schools and universities play a very crucial role in the process of popular and intellectual modernisation: the primary and lower secondary schools for PML development, the upper secondary schools for beginning IM development and the colleges and universities for IM development (Sibayan 1990:455).

It ought to be obvious that some, or all, of these conditions already exist in organised and institutionalised form in some, but not all, African states. One of the main tests of the African continent (AFLAN) is precisely to bring into the discussion of affairs in all African states. In South Africa we are very fortunate in that there are the beginnings of an adequate language infrastructure, enabling legislation, some budgetary provision for the programme of modernisation of the indigenous African languages and for related purposes. Much more can and should be done in respect of the financing of indispensable programmes and of the training of the necessary language professionals that have to run the multilingual system. In so far as South Africa is seen by many, including some of the best known, African linguists and applied linguists, as an evolving model in respect of language planning and language policy formulation and policy realisation, these are important starting points, even if too many of them are as yet of no more than symbolic importance.

Immediate steps: ACALAN and ILPAA

Under the joint auspices of ACALAN, the Association of African Universities (AAU) and CODEFIRA, detailed implementation plans should be drawn up.

- These should see as their point of departure the attempts at language planning, especially of the Cape development, in the relevant South African states. In this regard Somalia, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Tanzania and, most recently, South Africa, among others, have much by way of invaluable data. Postgraduate students in the area of applied language studies could be mobilised to collect, analyse and render useful all of this information within a period of two years or shorter. The guiding document should be the updated version of the 1986 DAU Language Plan for Action for Africa, which Professors Maurice Tappan Cameron and Sadiq Dikko, (DAU) revised in late 2004 at the request of ACALAN and of the Steering Committee of its project for the Implementation of the Language Plan of Action for Africa (ILPAA).

Outside of the immediate purview of any specific university community, the five core projects of ACALAN/ILPAA have to be promoted aggressively and with the full support of the relevant administrations. This is essentially the call for the language planning, calculated in principle to enhance the status, expand the corpus and facilitate the acquisition of all African languages. These core projects are the Year of African Languages (2000), the Translation programme, the closely-related Terminology Development project, the Pan-African Joint Masters and Doctoral programmes in Applied Linguistics and last, but not least, the Studies Across Africa project. The promotion and gradual realisation of these projects will assist in creating a climate favourable to the micro-planning and implementation of specific language development projects at specific universities in given countries. The synergies and economies of scale that can be anticipated will have both an exciting and an accelerating effect and those who have to do the actual work of translating, developing specialised registers, creating innovative furnitures, training language professionals, and so forth, for each of these constellations, the means, sufficiency of what they will be, and are already, during will be amplified in ways that very few of them can at present anticipate. Pan-Africanism, in the context of the cultural-revolutionary dimension of the African Renaissance, will assume a new meaning and a new significance.

The importance of translation

Scholars who have focused on the issue of intellectualisation or modernisation of local languages are agreed that one of the main mechanisms for bringing about and driving this process is the translation of major works of literary and scientific creation that exist in the more "developed"
Translation of important publications now available in English (the chief source language of intellectualization) is the single most important way of intellectualizing Filipino for a long time to come.

Nedwell (1990-4), in an epigrammatic reference to this complex, states that the German historians of the 15th and 16th centuries were forced through the contamination of class-ally-numerous Latin and Greek languages to reflect on the German language and this facilitated the development of German grammar. Most recently, Umberto Eco (2003) has written what is going to become an indispensable text of translation studies, in which he shows by means of examples how "translation as philosophical machine" refers to the strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, according to which one’s native language determines one’s perspectival and connotative possibilities, but points out that Schleiermacher himself accepted that thinking people "play their part in shaping their language" (Eco 2003:81) and that Voltaire von Humboldt had been the first to remark on the fact that translations "can augment the significance and the expressivity of the native language" (Eco 2003:81-82).

It is precisely what Eco (2003:82) calls "this dynamic capacity of languages to evoke when exposed to a foreign challenge" that African university professors of the first batch of ACALAN for the Year of African Languages need to reflect on how best to reflect on and use innovative ways in order to initiate and facilitate the rapid translation of certain – in principle, all – languages of the people by agreement in the appropriate forums and constituencies. Just how difficult this task can be, and can be inferred from the tremendous effort that the Japanese intellectuals were called upon to make over many generations like the Japanese and the followers of Kamesaia Tik in the 1950s and 1960s, we will see in the sequel to point out in the sequel to this that some of the difficulties and the trials and twists might have been over the past ten years, but we will have to keep a closer eye on those for the next few years. We will see, for instance, how the displacement and the twists and turns might have been over the past ten years, but we can plan a further development of the South African languages for the next ten years. We have been the first to remark on the fact that translations "can augment the significance and the expressivity of the native language" (Eco 2003:81-82).

The practical implementation of this crucial strategic move is completely manageable. Essentially, we need a few groups of people consisting of translators, instructors and subject specialists in each of the relevant languages to encode whether the document is an acceptable translation. However, above all, we need people who have the vision, the courage and the energy to do it. In this regard, the stated intention of ACALAN to launch a large-scale translation programme in tandem with the appropriate terminology development project(s) is of utmost significance, since it will serve as a compass for the individual institutions and translators of texts.

Inferences from the South African case

It is essential at this point to repeat that we cannot have an African renaissance without the development and intellectualization of African languages. For the first time in the history of the first African-language conferences of all university departments of African languages and related disciplines such as linguistics, applied linguistics, sociology of language and education, at such a gathering, the defining principles of, and the guidelines for, the practical implementation of the Language Plan of Action for South Africa will be debated and determined for the next five to ten years. It will be a vital step in the movement for the next few years. Where we will have to determine the South African languages for the next ten years, we will see, for instance, how the displacement and the twists and turns might have been over the past ten years, but we can plan for the next ten years. We have been the first to remark on the fact that translations "can augment the significance and the expressivity of the native language" (Eco 2003:81-82).

Let us, therefore, consider the November 2002 Language Policy for Higher Education, based on the recommendations of the working group of the Department of Education on language policy for higher education in South Africa.

First of all, all higher education institutions should participate in facilitating and promoting the goal of the National Language Policy to develop all South African languages in such a manner that they can be used in all high status functions, including especially as formal academic languages of higher education level. In the same way that English and Afrikaans are used as formal academic languages at higher education institutions, every official language of this country should be developed towards that position.

Secondly, in terms of this policy framework, the research and development work required in the case of each of the marginalised official and endangered South African languages will be concentrated in centres for language development which will be located in designated higher education institutions. The basic idea is that a university or group of universities would be given the task of developing languages of social importance such as Xitsonga, or IsiXhosa, or Sesotho, or Setswana, and over a period of 10 to 15 years, attempts would be taken to ensure that each of the languages concerned is developed in that particular manner. A step-by-step development and implementation plan should be formulated for each of the relevant languages such that, among other things, it will be clear when they will be able to be used as languages of tuition in specific disciplines.

The decision, however, about when to begin using the languages for specific functions will be the prerogative of the relevant institutional community. In other words, if we take the University of Cape Town as an example, the university authorities will retain the autonomy to decide when exactly, for example, to use IsiXhosa. Let us say, to teach history or to teach geography in tutorials or in lectures.

Each higher education institution has to formulate and publish its language policy so that the extent to which they are in compliance with the legislation can be determined at a glance. Of course, much subsequent sparring and gesturing in this area has been of a different character and although this is a disappointing element, the economic needs of the majority of the people have rendered these inhibiting factors irrelevant. ACALAN, the Afri and CODESRIA, acting in concert, could, within a short space of time, get every single African university to undertake this task as a necessary precursor to everything else.

The other important task is the standardisation of orthography in all the languages so that we have the same orthographic convention for all the languages, especially for cross-border languages. We still have the situation in Sesotho, for example, where spelling in South Africa is very different from that in Lesotho itself. Very often, people are unable to read text emanating from the neighbouring country. I have been impressed by the beginnings of a very important project undertaken by Professor Kaso Plaatjies of the Centre for the Advanced Study of African Societies (CASAS) at Randafrika, Cape Town. An excellent example of the Centre’s work is a little book called A Unified Standard Orthography for South-Central African Languages with Seswaa Reference to Mswati, Mozambique and Zambia. Beyond the harmonisation of orthographies lies the "controversial" issue of language harmonisation itself. Whether we like it or not, this is an African issue, the time for which will come sooner rather than later.

The promotion of print and electronic media in African languages on a large scale, as happens in some parts of West and East African countries, is urgently necessary. At this level of popular modernisation of the languages, the culture of reading can be effectively established, and thus the basis for the intellectual modernization of the relevant languages. As a more general rule of language planning, all these strategic moves are in integrity realted and it is important that initiatives in the various fields are not only communicated with the language professionals and scholars concerning for the intellectualisation process.

In South Africa, universities and other higher education institutions have been formulating their language policies in respect of which languages are taught as subjects, which are used as languages of tuition, which of the African languages should be "adopted" for modernisation purposes, which languages should be encouraged among the youth because of investment and tourism considerations, and so forth. Some universities, Stellenbosch being one of the foremost, are taking these tasks very seriously andhave designed hands-on mechanisms for addressing or implementing the plans that have been formulated and agreed upon by all the stakeholders. On the other hand, the Ministerial Committee (2004:4) underscores refers to the "crisis" of African languages in the universities and the schools, deriving from the pressure for English. Involvement in both first- and second-language courses, with some exceptions, have dropped catastrophically over the past ten years, and whilst matters can be expected to stabilize and improve, there is no doubt that aggressive and concerted counter-measures have to be backed out. In the words of the Ministerial Committee (2004:5), with reference to the threat posed by globalisation and the hegemony of English, (it is) incumbent on South Africa to do its best to ensure, in terms of our Constitution, the continued existence of all the languages that form part and parcel of our cultural heritage. The committee members would like to reiterate that, unless urgent measures are taken, South Africa’s indigenous languages are under serious threat. In this regard, recent policy advances in South Africa present the historic opportunity to restore enduring legitimacy and dignity to our indigenous languages, Sustained commitment to sound policy implementation over the next two to three decades should ensure success.
I have no doubt at all that if this kind of split can become generalised among the intelligentsia of the continent, specifically among language professionals and university academics, the secular project of intellectualising the languages of Africa can be initiated successfully and, in the case of at least some of the languages, taken to its logical conclusion. Professor Paul Hountondji of Benin, one of the most incisive philosophical minds on the continent, has spoken up for the increasing number of intellectuals who realise that the present situation is untenable:

This is the only continent or subcontinent where all the teaching and research are done in non-indigenous languages. No doubt something also has to be done here (Hountondji 2002:34).

Writing about the achievements of the Mba generation in Japan, Coulthard (1990:70) states with enviable realism:

It is kept in mind that in many parts of the world a foreign language is used for purposes of higher communication such as commerce, administration, and higher education. The fact that the Japanese language can fulfill all functions of modern communication emerges as an essential part of this achievement. Like modernisation of society, the adaptation of language could, however, not be accomplished without much effort and hardship.

Viewed against this backdrop, the initiative by ACALAN of the Pan African Joint Masters and Doctoral Programme in Applied Linguistics (MAPAL) represents a bold attempt to begin the process of intellectualising the languages of the African continent. If we bear in mind the caveat implicit in Coulthard’s words, I believe it will be possible to tap into the sources of determination and creative passion which alone can guarantee the success of such a vast project.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me state clearly that the choice we face is one between illusory and middle-class convenience (with the corollary of a probable state of permanent mediocrity as our destiny) and a democratic language policy which, among other things, might uncover the hidden layers of creativity and self-confidence which are the real basis of entrepreneurial and scientific achievement. We have to consider all the hype about “modern” US-style discourses and fashions from within this perspective and reflect on the fact that we are in the midst of what can be said to be a global context between increasing homogenisation and hegemonisation on the one hand, and cultural diversity and multilingualism on the other hand. As African language scholars who are willfully caught up in this global context, we have very strong reasons for wanting to promote the African languages as languages of empowerment and as languages of high status. If we look at the African continent in this global context, one realises that because of the history of our countries and of the continent, we naturally fall on the side of the multilingual perspective. Our societies are multilingual, the states that were formed as a result of colonial conquest were necessarily multilingual, and therefore we have every reason to want to promote the continuation of our own languages, not against, but alongside, English. Because of the much greater degree of self-understanding and the human beings have acquired at the beginning of the 21st century, it would be nothing less than machiavellian to want to promote and facilitate the disappearance of the languages of Africa, assuming this was possible. Under the guidance of ACALAN, the promotion, and intellectualising of the languages of the continent will keep in step with the progressive realisation of another Africa where all people will have the real chance of developing their potential to the full extent.

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References


End Notes


2 In medieval West Africa, Arabic, because of the expansion of Islam from the north, had a similar status. One of the most celebrated examples is, of course, Timbuktu. (See K-Jaffa, 1979:152-153.)

3 Newell (1961:3) has a nuanced analysis of this process.


5 It could be, and is sometimes, argued that the reverse process is now taking place because of "globalization", but this is a superficial view of the matter. The comprehensive integration of national and regional economies into the global capitalist system sets up a course of hegemonic forces that are resistant to cultural and other dimensions of homogenization. The AU and the "African Renaissance" are indeed direct evidence of this tendency. (See Castells 1997.)

6 Colonial powers have ever followed the dictum: "The natives should learn our languages, rather than we theirs." (See Wilson and Thompson 1989:85.)

7 Similar cultures are available for the history of Sarusa Islam (Malaysia), Africans, Hebrew and Kawandis. The best insted reference for these studies is still Weinblatt 1990. David Storoz of Berkeley University first drew my attention to the wealth of sociolinguistic analyses of the Philippine academy.


9 As tempting as it is to discuss in some detail the special cases of China and Japan, the specificities of these two great nations make any direct comparisons very difficult. Much can be learned from the history of the evolution (mainly development) of the Japanese language, especially the need for political will and passionate engagement on the part of the intelligentsia. (See Coullas 1999.) India falls somewhere between China and Japan as special cases and the typical non-European colonies of Africa, and Asia.

10 One of his essays is entitled "Language and policy: caution on Filipino-only as language of instruction."


12 He adds significantly: "There was a great demand, in other words, for translation", a proposition to which I shall return in detail presently.

13 There is a wealth of literature on this subject. See, among others, Bamgbose 2000; Heine 1989; Latkin 1989; Alexander 2000.

14 See, for example, Alexander 1972; Heine 1999; Prath 1995; Bamgbose 2000.

15 Coullas (1999:77) refers to "Martin Anson's rather startling suggestion to abolish the Japanese language and adopt English instead because he believed, among other things, that our native language, which can never be of any use outside of our islands, is doomed to yield to the domination of the English language. Our intelligent race, eager in the pursuit of knowledge, cannot depend upon a weak and uncertain medium of communication in its endeavor to grasp the principal truths from the precious treasury of Western sciences and art and religion."

16 I refrain here from discussing the intimidating argument that some language scholars make at this point about what we understand when we use the word language because "the people on the ground" do not speak any of the "languages" we refer to in our writings. Suffice it to say that I am unapologetically using the term to mean those languages initially standardized by missionaries in the main, which constituted and language legislation, generally speaking, intend when the terms appear in these government documents. This is an important but in the present context irrelevant discussion.

17 Prath 1995 examines this argument in some detail from the point of view of development theory.

18 These projects are dealt with in some detail in a forthcoming publication (see Alexander 2005).

19 For a more detailed discussion of this train of thought, see Alexander 2004.

20 Ecol (2002:85) refers to the fact that Martin Luther used the verb "to translate" and "to Germanize" as synonyms, thereby "making evident the importance of translation as cultural assimilation" and that he answered the critics of his Bible translation by asserting that "they are learning to speak and write German from my translation, and so in a sense stealing my language, which they hardly knew a word of before."

21 The most recent, and an excellent, manifestation of this statement is the Report compiled by the Ministerial Committee appointed by the Ministry of Education in September 2003.

22 Since this policy framework was published, nine Language Research and Development Centres have been set up by the Department of Arts and Culture, one in each of the provinces of the country.

23 Also see Samassekou 2002.