

## Language Attitudes and Policy:

### Reassessing the Case of Language and Education in Eritrea

One important problem facing contemporary African states is the rapid rate at which indigenous languages are being eradicated. Many theorists, such as Skutnabb-Kangas, have analyzed the phenomenon and described it as one of linguistic genocide. While responses to this problem are varied, there is near universal recognition that to irrevocably lose the linguistic diversity of the African continent would be detrimental not only for humanity writ large, but studies of linguistic genocide have shown the deleterious effects that are experienced by speakers of moribund languages. Given the strength of the constructed link between language, culture and identity, such linkages often result in the actual marginalization of speakers of languages that are ideologically constructed as marginal or inferior languages. Given that, what is at stake as linguistic diversity is diminished is not merely a reduction of the number of languages spoken, but a narrowing of the discourses in which power may be exercised and legitimate knowledge created. When the linguistic means through which the world may be given meaning is eradicated, there is a loss in the concomitant discourse in which such meanings function for social purposes. Thus, the reduction in linguistic diversity is symptomatic of the increased hegemonic control of fewer and fewer empowered persons over an ever increasing world population. Maintaining linguistic diversity is about empowering speakers of those languages, speakers who are being alienated from their linguistic capital as their languages are depreciated.

Crucial to any program that seeks to curtail the loss of linguistic diversity in Africa is an understanding of the language attitudes or language ideology, which is employed by speakers of any language. Linguistic anthropologists have undertaken studies of language attitudes in a variety of locations, although there is an overwhelming focus on minority European language varieties (Gal, Woolard, Rampton, Kulick). To date, however, no such study has been conducted in Eritrea, although a recent sociolinguistic study of *Language and Education in Eritrea*, which included “a sociolinguistic survey, a writing task administered to primary school pupils, and guided interviews with their parents” (Hailemariam, 112), provides valuable insights into the language ideology operative in Eritrean school situations. This paper will explore the importance of language attitudes in shaping responses to language policies.

The language policy of Eritrea guarantees that children have a right to be educated in their mother tongue. Such guarantees are often couched in the discourse of linguistic human rights. One of the key advocates of the linguistic human rights paradigm argues that preservation of a particular culture “can only be achieved through the particular language of that society” (Mateene, 164). Although such arguments, and any that rely on a universalist notion of rights risks a reification of language as the soul of the people, the goal of such a position is to provide a framework within which the displacement of minority languages by hegemonic forces may be opposed. Mateene recognizes that what is needed “is a change of emphasis and status in favour of a truly African education” (Mateene, 168), that is to say an education that is situationally relevant to the needs of African children, not the perceived and imposed desires of former colonial or dominant

African powers. Such statements are consonant with the current language policy of Eritrea.

Critical of such proposals, however, Blommaert argues that “granting a member of a minority group the right to speak his or her mother tongue in the public arena does not in itself empower him or her” (Blommaert, 6), a position which allows him to assert that what is needed is a more thoroughgoing analysis of the way in which “linguistic inequality [is] indexing social inequality” (Blommaert, 8). Only through the empowerment of *speakers*, not languages in and of themselves, can languages become power languages. Blommaert acknowledges that the language-as-right paradigm makes important moves towards the recognition of the importance of the problem facing African languages, however, he sees issues of language as casually subsequent to and dependant upon achievement of political parity of *persons*.

Striking a sober balance between these two seemingly opposed paradigms, Bamgbose argues that providing the opportunity for individuals to use their mother language as a resource, and not as a right, is important. He is careful to point out, however, that decisions regarding the resourcefulness of a language can never be understood without reference to the wider socioeconomic contexts determining individuals’ understanding of how a particular language may benefit them. In other words, the choice as to which language one would prefer to use is always based on the specific instrumental ends one hopes to achieve through the use of a given language. In order to solve the problem of language death facing contemporary African states, Bamgbose urges researches to study language attitudes and practices for inclusion in language policies. Contrary to Blommaert’s understanding of language exclusively as a resource, individual choices

about language use cannot be made without relying on language attitudes that have been created and promulgated by elites, such that language policy needs to address the “attitudes of the those for whom the policies are intended” (Bamgbose, 47). Language policy cannot pretend that people simply choose a language from the linguistic marketplace (Bourdieu), as if all languages are valued the same. Before parity between speakers may be created, an ideology must be fostered whereby people will cease thinking of their languages and themselves as inferior to what are presently prestige languages and the elites who speak such languages.

Crystal introduces an understanding of the sentimental attachment individuals form to their languages, in contrast to the “purely” instrumental attachment to language espoused by Blommaert. In a similar vein as Bahktin’s voicing, Crystal clearly expresses the way in which spoken discourse seems always to recall the world of those from whom one first heard such speech. Bahktin has been understood as having argued that one’s words are never their own and always recall and relate to others. Through our voicing of others, whether in parallel or at variance with them, we are using their words. This is how identity may be understood to be constructed through language use; it is through this social process that “language is [created as] the primary index, or symbol, or register of identity” (Crystal, 40). Crystal’s understanding of language as the cultural and historical repository of a people is connected to this issue of identity through voicing the other with whom one feels oneself to be continuous and thus allows the performer to creatively perform and thus recreate their identity. This provides a challenge to any view of language as a natural process as well as problematizing any understanding of language as simply a resource that may be rationally deployed free of any emotional constraints.

In a final critique of an understanding of language as simply a resource to be pragmatically deployed, Skutnabb-Kangas critiques formal educational systems for propagating the misrecognition of the basis of such minority status on the part of speakers of minority languages (Bourdieu). Contrary to common understanding of education as providing the tools for empowering an ever larger number of people, Skutnabb-Kanags indicts educational policies of being intentionally linguicist and racist, in an attempt to procure and maintain a source for exploitative labor practices upon which the ‘development’ of the West has and remains dependant. The true source of minority groups’ marginal status is the desire by those in positions in power to maintain their superior position, but it is perceived by the oppressed to be due to some inherent or natural quality, such as underdevelopment. While ensuring linguistic human rights is not a sufficient condition for bringing about an end to such institutionalized and structural inequality, reclamation of one’s language and thus recognition of one’s oppressed position may serve as a tool to challenge such reprehensible power dynamics. Skutnabb-Kanagas’ recognition that the combination of *both* language-as-right and language-as-resource paradigms is critical for the success of maintaining minority languages (Skutnabb-Kangas, 610-611) is important to build on when examining language policies in Eritrea. Skutnabb-Kangas insists that language cannot *only* be understood as a resource, given the radical imbalances in power that are replicated in the non-conscious attitudes speakers hold toward certain language varieties, including their cooperation in the maintenance of the stigmatization of their own variety.

Given this theoretical background that has been used to address the threat to African languages, we can turn now and address the concrete situation in Eritrea, addressing the

role of language ideology in shaping responses to language policies. Although the study by Hailemariam *et al.* could have been improved by using the widely accepted sociolinguistic instrument of the matched guise test, it is still possible to extract from the data presented by Hailemariam aspects of the language ideologies held by students and parents in Eritrea. For the most part, there is an overwhelming preference for prestige languages, especially Arabic, expressed by both pupils and parents in many of the areas. Hailemariam attributes this to the “fact that the Arabic language maintains a high official status both in Eritrea and the neighbouring countries” (Hailemariam, 120). Despite the stated preference for Arabic and English as languages both to be taught as a subject and as a medium of instruction, this was not seen by either the parents or the pupils as necessitating the replacement of their mother tongue. In fact, parents have the belief that because their children already speak their mother tongue that there is no need for further or formal education in such languages. Although Hailemariam observes “there is no perfect match between self-ascribed ethnicity, the most frequently used home language, and the language which is spoken best,” (Hailemariam, 125) as indicated by several examples, especially those from the urban environs, the retention of ethnic identity is observed even if a language other than that associated with the ethnic identity was most used. Hailemariam is ascribing to the parents and children an instrumental usage of language, seeing language as a resource for social mobility, but not at the expense of their sentimental or identity aspects of their language. In the case of Saho speakers who were immersed in a world dominated by Arabic, “the mother tongue, however limited its domain of use may be, is the language which a great majority claim to speak best” (Hailemariam, 138). I would argue, however, that this situation is not stable and that

evidence of diglossia from other places, including macroscopic analyses of the usage of Guarani and Spanish in Paraguay, as well as the microscopic analysis by Gal of Hungarian and German in Austrian villages, suggests that so long as a subordinate and stigmatized position is accorded to students' mother tongues, such languages will fail to be sustained for any length of time. Kulick has provided evidence of a similar situation from Papua New Guinea, where parents articulated a desire to preserve the Gapun language, however, their practices showed evidence to the contrary and was seen by Kulick as responsible for the rapid language shift from Gapun to Tok Pisin among children.

In all of the instances examined by Hailemariam, there is a strong presence of bilingualism in all the school environments. Some of this was to be found in the homes of the children, where more than one language was routinely spoken. In addition, parents often supported the addition of second or third languages, arguing that their children's mother tongue was already known to them and did not need to be learned. Although this understanding of language seems erroneous, the language ideology of multilingualism is a strong corrective to the dominant monolingualism about which many are rightly concerned. Confusion, however, seems to beset parents who do not differentiate between learning a language as a subject in order to speak it, namely, to possess it as a resource, and using a particular language as a medium of instruction. Pupils, however, are clearer about this distinction and tend to want to *know* important state languages, such as Trigrinya, but be able to *use* prestige languages, such as English and Arabic. These desires on the part of parents and students alike express the language ideology that is operative. Importantly, although a matched-guise test was not conducted, it can be

discerned that prestige languages are being used to index elites. Individual persons, regardless of their empirical status, are seen to be more prestigious when speaking prestige languages such as English or Arabic. It should not then be surprising that children and parents desire to know and use such prestige languages, aware as they are of the way in which they index and may even come to be seen as an icon of high prestige. “The ordering of language status by this group of pupils reflects their aspirations based on the awareness of the advantages associated with exogenous or supranational languages” (Hailemariam, 270).

Although parents’ concerns for the future of their children were common to all of the areas, only the “Kunama are highly conscious of their cultural survival through language maintenance” (Hailemariam, 156) and therefore ascribe to a language-as-right paradigm. As a result of this positive disposition *on the part of speakers* towards their own language, “the Kunama appear to maintain their ethnic group language regardless of the school they attend” (Hailemariam, 161), which Hailemariam describes as high ethnolinguistic vitality. For Hailemariam, however, the Kunama are an exception, a problem needing to be explained, as they do not follow the predicted outcome of the language as resource paradigm, which would suggest that the Kunama, knowing the advantages to be potentially gained through learning Arabic, would opt for Arabic as the medium of instruction. However, rather than explaining the Kunama as the normal case of individuals having more than an instrumental attachment to language, Hailemariam only suggests that the Kunama have been impacted by linguists and argues that the Kunama are “beyond scope of sociolinguistics.” He further suggests that “sociolinguistic findings alone may not explain such a unique case” (Hailemariam, 272). It seems rather

that sociolinguistics, or perhaps more directly linguistic anthropology with the incredible amount of work done on language ideology, does possess tools to explain this phenomenon. Such an explanation, however, is at variance with a paradigm that understands language as merely an economic resource and denies additional factors in explaining individuals' attachments to languages (Brock-Utne, 155-156).

In order to maintain a feigned objectivity, a sense that his study is only empirical in nature, Hailemariam has rendered the important Kunama data outside the scope of explanation, rather than suggesting that perhaps for the experience of the Kunama the understanding of language as resource is not sufficient, in which case some reference to the importance of seeing language as a right ought to have been invoked. While I share Hailemariam's wariness in espousing a paradigm of universalistic human rights derived from a highly particular Enlightenment notion of personhood, the importance of the accomplishments of human rights in bringing into focus certain empirical problems ought to be respected if only on pragmatic grounds for what it has and may continue to accomplish. The same must be said of linguistic human rights, which in this case is resulting in the high ethnolinguistic vitality of an otherwise marginalized group. Rather than arguing that the Kunama are an exception that cannot or need not be explained, it should rather be argued that the other groups examined in the study need to be explained for their comparative inability to maintain their own languages to the same extent as the Kunama. However, to do so would entail suggesting that language policy could or should intervene in what Hailemariam argues is the "natural course of sociolinguistic dynamics" (Hailemariam, 276).

As has been noted several times in this paper, language does not develop in any natural fashion, but is rather always subjected to the political will of those who purvey language ideology and impose misrecognition of the cause of subordinate status on those who have come to find themselves in subjugated positions. Therefore it cannot be argued that language should be allowed to develop naturally any more than anything that is cultured—drawing upon the metaphor of a tended or cultured garden—can be considered to follow some natural course of events. Hailemariam’s support of the status quo may be seen as an endorsement of the language ideology found to be dominant in the language attitudes reported by the majority of non-Kunama informants in his study, namely that indigenous languages are somehow inferior to prestige languages. While acknowledging that “it is true that macro forces encourage or constrain the discursive practices in an over-arching social formation [Hailemariam suggests that] actors use their autonomy to shape these practices” (Hailemariam, 276). Indeed this is the case, but how can agents be expected to express their agency in a genuinely free manner unless they possess the knowledge (which, as Foucault has reminded us is power) to make an informed decision. Simply stating that agents may act freely does not empower them to do; providing them with an understanding of the consequences of their actions comes closer to opening up the possibility of discourse outside of that of the dominant language ideology.

Thus, I can argue that by the very fact that Hailemariam sees the Kunama case as one which is an exception, he is betraying his own language ideology, wherein language decisions ought to be made according to supposedly disengaged rational principles, rather than recognizing the multiple reasons, including identity and sentimental attachment to a particular language that may be employed by speakers of that language. By arguing that

the Kunama case is outside the purview of sociolinguistics, Hailemariam is rejecting the possibility to explain phenomena simply because the language as resource theory of language policy to which he desires to ascribe does not fit the empirical observation. This situation of being confronted with empirical data that cannot be fit into one's models ought rather to provoke a reworking of the theory to fit the data, rather than the reverse. It has been suggested that by widening the theoretical apparatus used to explain language decisions to include the language as right paradigm, combined with the language as resource paradigm, that more effective language planning and more successful preservation of linguistic diversity may be obtained.

It is the position of the present author that language attitudes, which can only be ascertained through engaging with speakers of a given language, are the crucial element often neglected in the discourse of language planning. Without turning to the actual practices of language socialization, that locus at which children are incorporated into the linguistic community and where language preservation can most easily fail, proposals for language planning are not only meaningless, but run the great risk of creating a situation whose consequences may be counter to their intended results. Hailemariam has provided a valuable set of data to begin to fill this lacuna, however, in so doing, he has failed to take seriously the importance of language attitudes in relation to the maintenance of indigenous languages. Therefore, in order to arrest the eradication of languages presently taking place on the African continent, language attitudes must not only be studied, but must form an important target of language policies. So long as individuals are misrecognizing the basis of the subordinate position imposed on the language they speak, they will not be able to act as the free agents Hailemariam rightly asserts they are in order

to both utilize languages as a resource and to voice or perform their identity in relation to linguistic marketplace where they are active participants, not predetermined in their (non)choices.

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