

LANGUAGE POLICY AND THE COMMON LANGUAGE CONTROVERSY IN GHANA

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Introduction

Ghana, like most African countries, is a multilingual nation. Various studies have revealed that Ghana has between 45 and 60 indigenous languages.¹ This considerable linguistic and ethnic diversity potentially creates problems for effective national communication and integration. Faced with a multilingual situation like this, the government of Ghana has to lay down policy guidelines that should bring about not only effective intranational communication but also a feasible international communication. In this paper, language policy over the years will be reviewed and the debate on a common language for Ghana will also be outlined. In addition, suggestions will be made with the hope of helping to arrive at an acceptable language policy for Ghana.

The Importance of Language Policy

The issue of an appropriate language policy has received prominent attention not only from professional linguists and educationists but also from national governments. In Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, North America and Australia, language policy issues have attracted keen interest from governments and their peoples. This issue has attracted so much interest because language is intrinsically an important part of man. It serves as a vehicle of communication as well as a 'means of establishing and maintaining relationships with other people' (Trudgill 1985: 13). Through language, 'social groups are delimited, and the individual is reinforced, since by enabling him to interact with others, language also serves in the expression and development of his own personality'.² It can be seen that language is important not only for interpersonal communication, but also for promoting group identity. Thus, ethnic as well as national solidarity and cohesion can be fostered by a judicious language policy.

Language Policy in Ghana

Whatever guidelines a government lays down concerning language use in the country constitute the language policy for that nation. In Ghana, language policies have an interesting history, especially in the field of education. Under the current policy, English is the language for official government communication. However, government statements, announcements and even laws may

be communicated to the people in some selected Ghanaian languages like Akan, Ga, Ewe, Nzema and Dagbani in a simplified version. In government offices and places of official business, local languages may be freely used for easy and clear communication.

In order to encourage and promote the use of indigenous languages, the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC), which is a government owned corporation, runs programmes in Hausa, Nzema, Dagbani, Ewe, Ga and Akan each week in addition to programmes in English.

In the same vein, the government set up an agency, the Bureau of Ghana Languages, to promote literature in the following Ghanaian languages and dialects: Ga, Nzema, Ewe, Fante, Asante-Twi, Akuapem-Twi, Dagbani and Kasem. In addition, the bureau also "caters for the development of the ... languages especially with regard to the integration of foreign concepts, the systematisation of chaotic grammatical issues and the standardisation of usages and orthographies."³ From the foregoing, it can be seen that while the government uses English as its official language of national communication, it accords some official recognition to at least some major local languages. No single Ghanaian language has however, been selected as the language of national communication.

The History of Language Policy in Education

More often than not, language usage in a given nation in general and the patterns of national communication are greatly influenced by the type of policy that operates in the field of education. This observation is true of Ghana. The fact that today, English is the language of government, administration and official communication, with Ghanaian languages being freely used in various situations, is a reflection of the policies that have been followed in education over the years. A good policy in education for any nation must answer some basic and crucial questions: what should be the language(s) of instruction at various levels of the education ladder; what languages should be taught in schools as compulsory or optional subjects; what proportion of the school curriculum should be devoted to a particular language or languages; and what standards of quality should be attained and sustained in the teaching of these languages? (Smock and Bentsi-Enchill eds. 1976: 162-163). The history of language policy in education in Ghana reveals in a rather interesting way, various attempts made by different governments to answer these crucial questions, especially the question of the medium of education.

Different practices and a series of policy modifications characterised language policy in Ghana. Before independence, education in Ghana was controlled by colonial powers and

Christian missionary bodies. The focus and direction of the policies pursued reflected the needs and aspirations of these authorities. For example, the colonial powers needed to train local people who could serve as interpreters, clerks, administrators and merchants. They therefore, used their own languages as the media of instruction. For example, the medium of instruction in the colonial school at Cape Coast was English.⁴

Most of the missionary bodies on the other hand held a different view about language use in education. The Basel and Bremen missionaries for instance, 'considered our indigenous languages as the most effective medium through which they could propagate their religious doctrines' and therefore encouraged the use of the local languages in their schools.⁵ The Bremen missionaries for example, 'preached or interpreted German sermons and lessons in Ewe effectively in all their schools.'⁶

It must be noted however, that not all the missionary bodies were committed to the policy of encouraging the use of the local languages in education. The Wesleyan Mission for example, emphasized the use of English as the medium of instruction in their schools. From the foregoing, it can be seen that there was no uniform policy regarding the use of local languages and the foreign ones as media of instruction and as subjects of study. But when the British colonial power became well established by the turn of this century, and education was controlled by the ruling colonial government, a systematic and uniform language policy began to emerge, especially under Governor Gordon Guggisberg. His conviction was that in trying to educate the African, his national identity must be preserved if he was to function meaningfully in his own society. He asserted:

... our aim must not be to denationalize them, but to graft skillfully on to their national characteristics the best attributes of modern civilization. For without preserving his national characteristics and sympathy and touch with the great illiterate masses of his own people no man can ever become a leader in progress, whatever other sort of leader he may become.⁷

Guggisberg must certainly have had in mind the native languages as important ingredients of the national identities of the African. His convictions were echoed in the report of the Educationists' Committee which he appointed in 1920 to make recommendations for effective formal education in Ghana. Among other things, the committee advised that 'English should be introduced as early as possible as a subject of instruction, but that the Vernacular should be the medium of instruction.'⁸ The government accepted the recommendations and implemented them as the policy in the entire school system. The recognition of the crucial importance of the mother tongue in native education

became a guiding principle in the formulation of language policy in education throughout the era of British colonial rule.

The Influence of Nationalist Politics on Language Policy in Education

The nationalist agitators who appeared on the political scene soon after World War II had reservations about the use of the local languages in education in the country. Gbedeman (1975 :45) describes their feelings and ideas vividly:

... nationalist agitation in Ghana... made people begin to cast doubts on the quality of education derivable from the use of the 'vernacular'. There were people who suspected that the encouragement of the vernaculars was a deliberate attempt on the part of the British administration to give Africans an inferior type of education... [they thought that] the use of the Vernacular... was likely to hold back advancement in secondary or university education.⁹

Even though the nationalists urged more use of English in the schools they could not recommend the total exclusion of the vernaculars from the school curriculum since they were aware of the value of the local languages as the means by which the Ghanaian child could develop and maintain his social contact with his people. It is in this light that the nationalist government of Nkrumah, for example, endorsed the use of both English and the native languages in the schools. The nationalists realized that English and the vernaculars were 'mutually supportive in giving the African child an all-round education which makes him not just a citizen of Ghana but a citizen of the world' (Gbedemah 1975: 45). This realization was reflected in the official policy adopted under the Accelerated Development Plan of 1951 which stated in part that 'the aim of the (Primary School) course will be to provide sound foundation for citizenship with permanent literacy in both English and the Vernacular'.¹⁰ The local languages were to be used as the media of instruction in all subjects from classes 1 to 3 with English being introduced as a medium of instruction in class 4; all lessons were, however, to be taught in English in class.

Reports of various committees, public comments and subsequent government decisions led to revisions of this policy in the years that followed. For example, by 1960 the medium of instruction in all classes except primary one was English.

There was no significant change in language policy in education when the N.L.C. Government took over from Nkrumah. Partially neglecting the recommendations of the Education Review Committee of 1967, the then government in a White Paper stated:

... Government considers, therefore, that a Ghanaian language should be used in the first year, and that a gradual change to English as the medium of instruction

should begin in the second year... In the cosmopolitan areas, however, English may be used as the medium of instruction as early as the first year of school.¹¹

In 1970, however, the new government sought to encourage more use of the local languages. It became government policy that the mother tongue should be employed as the medium of instruction from classes 1 to 3, allowing a transition to English as the medium in class four.¹²

This emphasis on the use of the mother tongue is also evident in the language policy adopted in 1974 which is still in operation today. A school child is expected to learn his mother tongue and one other Ghanaian language (GL) in addition. English is to be studied as a subject from the first year at school and 'shall gradually become the medium of instruction as from primary IV.'¹³ It may be deduced from the latter statement that the local languages are to serve as the media of instruction in the first three years of the primary school course.

Under the present policy, the study of GLs continues in the Junior as well as the Senior Secondary schools in addition to English, French and other modern languages. It is worthy to note that today, some GLs are studied at the University of Ghana in the Department of Linguistics and at the Language Centre as well as in the Department of Ghanaian Languages at the University of Cape Coast.

In the midst of all the shifts and modifications in language policy over the years one thing stands out clearly: the policy has always been non-monolingual, i.e. the policy always allows the use of more than one language in the school system even though emphasis differed from time to time. This approach indicates the awareness of the policy makers of the multilingual nature of the language situation in Ghana. The most important effect of their approach has been the development of a multilingual pattern of national communication. English continues to be the official language (OL) of Ghana and GLs are used in other ways and circumstances. No single GL has been selected as the language for national communication.

The Common Language Controversy in Ghana

This pattern of language use in which English (a foreign language) serves as the official language has been questioned by many people. The desire has been expressed that one indigenous language should be chosen and used as the common language for intranational communication. A review of the various opinions expressed on the common language issue now follows.

The Nationalist View

One school of thought holds the view that English should be replaced by an indigenous GL as the national official language

(NOL). This view is based on two reasons. One writer sums them up neatly as he writes:

Their position is based on the nationalist sentiment that an African state needs to throw off its European legacy and adopt an African language and on the conviction that English will never be widely enough spoken in these [African] countries to constitute an effective medium of national communication.¹⁴

People who hold this view, argue that the use of English as the sole OL is evidence of 'linguistic imperialism' and that 'no truly developed nation ever uses a foreign language... for running the affairs of state.'¹⁵ In a recent survey (October 1987) conducted by this author on the national language (NL) issue in Ghana, questionnaires were administered to a cross-section of people in the University of Ghana. To the question, 'Do we need to choose one GL as our NOL?' 57% of the respondents gave an affirmative answer, 42% said 'NO' while 1% advocated the choice of two or three GLs as official languages. Asked why we need a GL as the NOL, some of the respondents said, "we need to liberate ourselves from linguistic imperialism".

This issue of selecting one GL to replace English was also debated in Parliament. For example, in October 1961, a member of the then national Assembly (Mr. D.E. Asafo-Agyei), advocating the selection of Akan as the lingua franca (LF) for Ghana, put forward a motion to that effect. The seconder of the motion made the issue involved clearer when he said, *inter alia*:

Let us by one language demonstrate that we are working together with the fullest understanding. This can be done if we have a **national language** of our own... Fortunately for us in Ghana, there are no tribal differences and so it should be easy for us to come together and devise a **lingua franca** of our own.¹⁶

And by 'a lingua franca of our own' he was thinking of selecting Akan as the LF. In the stormy debate that followed the motion, it became clear that it was not wise for the Government to adopt such a motion. The then Deputy Minister of Education (Mrs. Susana Al-Hassan) said among other things that:

The question of a national language bristles with difficulties and must therefore be handled with considerable tact and judgement.¹⁷

In the end the motion was not carried.

The Status Quo View

The second view is that Ghana should retain its present language policy (LP) but with some modifications. With the aim of improving the level of proficiency in English so as to make it an effective means of communication, efforts should be made to improve its teaching in the schools. One way to accomplish

this is the 'adoption of English as the medium of instruction as early as is educationally feasible and desirable' (Smock and Bentsi-Enchill, 1976: 179-180). What all this means is that Ghana should retain English as the sole official language. In the recent survey conducted by this author, 32% of the respondents expressed the desire that English should remain as the sole OL of Ghana. In the same survey, 42% of the people said there was no need to choose one GL as the national language (NL). A similar view was expressed by some parliamentarians in the debate on the NL issue in 1971. They argued that:

The English language now served to bind together all the tribes and cultures which constitute Ghana as a nation and to impose a Ghanaian language, in place of English, might provoke resentment and violent reaction from speakers of other languages as happened in India and Ceylon.¹⁸

The point being made is that English 'is the best medium that transcends the tribal language barriers' in Ghana.¹⁹

The Compromise View

Another school of thought believes that in order to attain effective national communication, Ghana should select one GL to be used together with English as the two OLs. A good majority (64%) of the respondents in the author's survey hold this view. Giving reasons, most of the respondents indicated that Ghana needs English for external, i.e. international communication while the selected GL will serve as the means of national communication.

The Multilingual View

Some other people hold the view that Ghana should adopt a multilingual approach. For example, in May 1971 an M.P., putting forward a motion in Parliament urging efforts to find a common language, suggested 'a kind of planned multilingualism comprising a limited number of (possibly four) literary languages ... leading ultimately to the creation of a national language...'²⁰

The Natural Selection View

Another opinion is that Ghana should maintain its current LP as an interim measure while giving equal chances to all GLs to develop until one of them, through the natural process of selection, becomes the lingua franca (LF) without any deliberate official promotion by government. This *laissez-faire* approach is meant to obviate any tensions and strife that might be engendered by direct government promotion of a particular language. The stormy debates that followed motions tabled in parliament in the first two Republics on the national language issue are clear indications of how high and deep emotions can

run on language issues. For example, in the 1971 Parliamentary debate, one speaker opposing the motion on choosing a common GL stated *inter alia*:

To attempt to adopt one particular language as a national language is trying to elevate one tribal group above the others.²¹

The feeling of deep intertribal hostility that characterised the debates in Parliament on the NL issue led the government to adopt a *laissez-faire* approach. For example, in 1961, the then Deputy Minister of Education (Mrs. Susana Al-Hassan) stated:

It is the intention of the Government to encourage the development of all our major national languages so that each of them may have an equal opportunity of attaining a standard which would increase its chances of being chosen as the national language when the time comes for such a decision to be taken.²²

In the recent survey by this author, the respondents were asked to state some possible problems that Ghana is likely to face if one GL were chosen as the NOL. One respondent stated: 'Some tribes might not like the idea that their language is not chosen. This can bring about conflicts ... In extreme cases secession might result ultimately.'

Towards an Acceptable Language Policy for Ghana

An acceptable LP must fulfil two twin functions: the state must run efficiently and the citizens must have a feeling of oneness.²³ Such a policy must produce the appropriate 'national' and 'official' language. A 'national' language refers to the language chosen for the achievement of the goal of national solidarity or sociocultural integration. An 'official' language, on the other hand, is one that is used for achieving the goal of operational efficiency.

Determining an Appropriate Language Policy

Following Fishman, it can be stated that there are three major types of LP from which a given nation may choose its own appropriate one. These policies centre around the notion of a 'Great Tradition' (GT) and its relationship to the needs of operational efficiency and national solidarity. A GT refers to 'the assumed existence of a set of cultural features - law, government, religion, history - which is shared by the nation and can serve to integrate the members of the state into a cohesive body' (Bell 1976: 171-172). Invariably, a GT manifests itself in a language through which it finds expression. Such a language easily lends itself as a suitable NL, OL or NOL.

The three LPs that hinge on the GT concept are as follows. First, where the language planners recognize the presence of a GT with a related language that language is chosen as the NOL -

a policy which simultaneously ensures both operational efficiency and sociocultural cohesion. Israel, Ethiopia and the U.K. are examples of nations with this type of policy.

The second type of policy is one that involves the choice of an external or foreign language (usually the language of the ex-rulers) as the OL. This LP is adopted in a nation where there is no GT. Thus, it is appropriate for 'newly created multilingual or multitribal states in areas of great linguistic diversity...' (Bell 1976: 172). Ghana is an example of a nation with this type of policy.

The third type results from a sociocultural situation in which there are several competing GTs each with its linguistic, religious and sociocultural distinctions. India provides an example of this.

An Appropriate Language Policy for Ghana

If these are the three policy types available, which one is suitable for Ghana? It would seem that Ghana has already made the appropriate choice with regard to an OL. In the absence of a GT and in a situation where there is a multiplicity of languages none of which commands 50% or more of the total population, it would seem that retaining English as the OL is the wisest thing to do at least in the interim.

Specifically, what I am advocating is the natural selection approach to evolving an effective national communication pattern. The present policy under which English is the OL and both English and GLs are used as media of instruction in various ways and at different levels should be continued. Also, the teaching of GLs should be vigorously promoted throughout the educational system. Eventually, it should be possible for one of the GLs to emerge as a truly dominant language and thus become a common language that can be used for inter-ethnic communication. It must be pointed out that it is practically more feasible to use that language as the national language and retain English as the OL. Such an arrangement will ensure that the twin needs of national solidarity and operational efficiency are fulfilled.

What are the reasons why the natural selection approach is the best way of evolving a common language for Ghana? One reason is political. This approach, it appears, is about the only one that will prevent virulent inter-ethnic conflicts. It will be one of the saddest and most unfortunate blunders that any government can commit if one GL is chosen now as the national language. One of the respondents in my recent survey said 'I may not want us to rush into taking a decision [i.e. the decision to adopt a GL as the NOL] until the social climate is ripe for it...'. In the same survey, the respondents were asked to indicate how soon they would want Ghana to adopt one GL as the NOL for the country. 32% of them cautioned that such a decision should not

be implemented earlier than in five year's time. One of the respondents wrote: '... not until we have done our homework, found a suitable and an acceptable GL and educated the nation on the issue'. These and other respondents point to the fact that the sociopolitical climate is not ripe for adopting one GL as the NOL.

Another reason why the natural approach seems more favourable is economic. If a decision were taken now to replace English with a GL as the NOL it would call for a lot of expenditure that the economy of Ghana cannot afford now or in the near future. If the chosen GL becomes the medium of instruction throughout the educational system and is used for government, law, administration, business and other purposes, it will become imperative to produce new textbooks in the selected GL, translate important textbooks and other materials written in English into the chosen GL. One respondent on the issue in the recent survey advised: 'We must not forget that [many] books which will help us develop are written in English... Getting information is vital for national development and if the language [i.e. English] which will help us get this information is given less attention then where are we going?' This respondent added that a lot of the money that can be used in other areas will be used in implementing the NOL policy. But if the natural selection approach is adopted, there will not be any need to make extra expenses now on implementing the NOL policy.

A third reason that argues for the policy being advocated here relates to the educational sector. If Ghana abruptly adopts a GL as the NOL, there will be problems in this area. Most Ghanaian teachers can use only English and perhaps their own mother tongue very effectively in teaching. If one GL becomes the medium of instruction in all schools, this will mean that teachers who cannot speak/understand that GL will have to learn the language well enough to be able to use it and also use it as the medium of instruction. The problem is obvious: there will be too few competent teachers to start with. Moreover, there will be the problem of inadequate textbooks because of financial problems.

Another important reason why the natural selection approach is suggested is that it will allow ample time for one GL or another to become an effective organ of education and communication. One natural way in which a language develops is through the borrowing of concepts and the necessary vocabulary items from other languages. The English language, for example, developed by extensive borrowing from various languages like French, German, Latin, etc. Given the time, languages borrow and expand in various ways and thus become adequate means of communication. It is not impossible that the natural selection approach will allow one of the major GLs to attain this level of adequacy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one can say that the complexity of the language problem in Ghana is such that its solution should be approached with a mature and an objective sense of judgement and tact. In the light of the present sociopolitical climate, it is wise to hold onto the current language policy as an interim arrangement while cautiously allowing one GL, through the process of natural selection, to emerge eventually as the national language with English continuing as the official language of Ghana.

NOTES

1. See **Drum Beat** of July-September, 1987, published by Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation, p.3, and also J.H. Birnie and G. Ansre (eds.), 1969, **Proceedings of the Conference on the Study of Ghanaian Languages**, p.5.
2. Halliday, 1970, in Lyons (ed.), p.143 quoted by Bell, 1976, p.85.
3. S.K. Otoo, "The Bureau of Ghana Languages - its operations and difficulties", in J.H. Birnie and G. Ansre (eds.), 1969, **Proceedings of the Conference on the Study of Ghanaian Languages**, p.43.
4. See H.O.A. McWilliam, 1959, pp.8-10, acknowledged in a footnote by F.F.K. Gbedemah, 1975, p.40.
5. See S. Addo's pamphlet, **Educational Policy regarding the teaching of Ghanaian Languages**, 1970, p.1.
6. F.F.K. Gbedemah, 1975, p.42.
7. Part of Guggisberg's pronouncements quoted in F.F.K. Gbedemah, 1975, p.43.
8. Gbedemah, F.F.K., op. cit., p.44.
9. Gbedemah, F.F.K., op. cit., p.45.
10. Ibid., p.46.
11. Ibid., p.175.
12. See S. Addo, op. cit., pp.3-4 and Smock and Bentsi-Enchill, op. cit., 175.
13. Refer **The New Structure and Content of Education for Ghana**, Ministry of Education, 1974, p.4.
14. See D.R. Smock and K. Bentsi-Enchill, op. cit., p.165.
15. This is contained in an address delivered by G. Ansre on 12th September, 1987 on the occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the work of the Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation on the topic, "The Importance of Mother Tongue Literacy", pp. 2, 4.
16. See I.K. Chinebuah, 1977, **The National Language Issue in Africa: The Case for Akan in Ghana**, in **African Languages/Langues Africaines** Vol.3, p.62.

17. Ibid., p.63.
18. Ibid., p.66.
19. A statement by Dr. John Haggai in a personal letter to this author in November 1987.
20. Chinebuah, I.K., op. cit., p.65.
21. R.F. Amonoo, in his lecture on the topic, "Towards a National Policy on Languages in Ghana" in the 1986 Danquah Memorial Lectures.
22. Ibid., p.181.
23. See R.T. Bell, 1976, *Sociolinguistics*, p.168

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