

Multilingualism in Sub-Saharan Africa

by B. Rotimi Badejo*

Abstract

This study examines the issue of multilingualism in sub-Saharan Africa. It first gives an overview of the language situation in a select group of sub-Saharan African countries and then investigates the place of multilingualism in two vital aspects of the political life of the region, namely, education and communication. Finally it proposes a model for classifying sub-Saharan African countries according to their levels of commitment to the use of indigenous languages.

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Multilinguisme en Afrique subsaharienne

Résumé

Cette étude porte sur la question du multilinguisme en Afrique subsaharienne. Elle passe d'abord en revue la situation linguistique dans un certain nombre de pays de l'Afrique subsaharienne et analyse la place du multilinguisme dans deux domaines vitaux de la vie politique de la région, à savoir l'enseignement et les communications. En conclusion, l'auteur propose un modèle de classification des pays de la région selon le niveau de leur engagement vis-à-vis de l'utilisation des langues indigènes.

Introduction

Multilingualism may be defined as the ability of an individual to use more than one language. Since the mid-1950s, sociolinguistic literature has used a related but less precise term, bilingualism, to cover 'the use, not only of two precise languages, . . . (as the prefix 'bi' would suggest), but any number of languages' (Mackay 1957: 51). However, when referring to states/nations, multilingualism is the preferred term, except in particular cases in which only two languages are recognized within the same political entity (e.g. it is not uncommon to hear of 'bilingual Canada', where English and French are the two official languages).

Sub-Saharan Africa includes all countries located south of the Sahara Desert, excluding apartheid South Africa. This geographical entity presents such a complex political structure that only a detailed evolutionary overview can give a precise picture of its mechanisms. For heuristic purposes, it is usual to examine Africa in terms of three periods: pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial. Each period is distinct from the other. The pre-colonial period was characterized by simple but highly efficient political systems of organization. Most African communities were initially isolated and dispersed mainly along river valleys (Nzewunwa 1985). They were later organized into larger communities in form of clans, chiefdoms, tribes, etc. Although in most of these communities there was relative internal calm, externally there were often inter-tribal and inter-clan wars. This situation led to the formation of larger political units and the emergence of a few strong leaders who subdued many groups, bringing them under the same political umbrella (e.g. the Kingdoms of Ghana, Mali and Songhai in West Africa).

Then came the colonial period, starting from about the fifteenth century with the coming of the Portuguese traders. The Europeans promoted internal and external unrest in sub-Saharan Africa by supplying stronger fire-power (in form of guns, gun-powder etc.) to the coastal peoples who raided inland for slaves. Later, the anti-slavery campaign brought about a redefinition of Euro-Africa relationship; European powers now turned to seeking territories. However, each power had its own policy. Whereas the French were after mostly vast, thinly-inhabited lands (e.g. present-day Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, etc.), the English concentrated on river valleys which gave access to the interior (e.g. rivers Niger, Volta and Gambia). The struggle for Africa (by the Europeans) culminated in the historic partition of Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa (indeed, the whole of Africa) was thus carved into new political entities without regard for long-standing political, cultural and linguistic frontiers. The implication of this was that the emergent African states were not built on solid foundations;

divergent ethnic groups became compatriots (e.g. Nigeria), whilst hitherto unitary groups were dispersed into two or more nations (e.g. the Yoruba in Nigeria and Benin, the Ewe in Ghana, Togo and Benin).

Post-colonial sub-Saharan Africa had no power to redefine political boundaries. The states continued their colonial political heritage (except the Republic of Guinea which chose the road to complete independence from France (cf. 1958 plebiscite), but recall the disastrous consequences of this decision which forced the late President Sekou Toure to lead his country back to the Francophone fold two decades later.

Current Language Situation

It is a truism that sub-Saharan Africa is prohibitively multilingual. Except for Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, no state in the sub-region is linguistically homogenous. Based on Welmets (1971), there are approximately 1,270 languages spoken in Africa. Out of this, about 205 are shared by two countries, 38 by three countries, 11 by four countries and 9 by five countries. This leads one to conclude that within the same country, there are several languages, e.g. Nigeria alone has about 400 languages. (Tiffen 1968).

Since the wave of (political) independence swept through the sub-Saharan region in the 1960s, no substantial change in language policy has taken place (Bamgbose 1985; 29). In his words, 'apart from such shifts in policy as the one from initial mother tongue medium to 'straight for English', there is hardly any evidence of policy changes based on theoretical positions or experimentation'.

It is pertinent to raise the issue of 'neo-colonial language policy' in sub-Saharan Africa. Most of the states in the sub-region have continued to promote the colonial legacy, whereby the use of the language of the former colonial power is supreme and, more recently, three or four of the sometimes hundreds of indigenous languages are designated as 'languages of national importance' (e.g. Nigeria, Uganda and Zaire). We examine some representative cases, i.e. Tanzania, Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, Zaire, Niger, Sierra Leone and Botswana.

Tanzania is one of the few countries in sub-Saharan Africa which have evolved revolutionary language policies. Although it is not a monolingual country, it has adopted a single national language, namely, Kiswahili, which accounts for 88 per cent of its population. (Sukuma accounts for the remaining 12%). Kiswahili is, therefore, used as medium of instruction for all pre-university education. In broadcasting, Kiswahili and English are used at the national level. As in education, it is hoped that Kiswahili will eventually monopolize the airwaves, with English being reserved for external broadcasts only.

Nigeria is vastly multilingual. Hansford *et al.* (1976) lists 394 indigenous languages in Nigeria (there may be more). Many concerned linguists have regretted the fact that Nigeria does not have a well-articulated language policy (Badejo 1987). So, policy statements are deduced from relevant portions of the National Policy on Education (1977, revised 1981) and the 1989 Constitution.

In education, Nigeria has evolved a policy that takes cognizance of its multilingual nature. So, the National Policy on Education stipulates that every Nigerian child should be able to function in at least two out of the three major languages.

Now that the Babangida administration has officially recognized Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as the national languages of Nigeria, it is to be expected that, more than ever before, these languages will enjoy prominence, especially in the field of education. But ideas, however novel, are meaningless unless they can be translated into action. If we apply the 'litmus test' for national languages: efficiency in terms of properties, adequacy in terms of functions and acceptability in terms of attitude (Rufa'i 1977: 71), then the three-language formula faces problems. It is hoped that a proper national language policy will be formulated to take care of the anticipated problems, e.g. why three national languages when, at the regional level, each of the three still has a relatively weak supremacy? Is one of the three expected to subsequently supersede the others? In education, it is the issue of the language of instruction that may prove to be the most thorny. Before now, when the three languages in question were the recognized 'mother tongues' to be used as media of instruction in the early elementary school years, such problems as lack of materials, trained teachers, well-articulated curricula and inadequate funding plagued the system. Bamgbose (1985: 23), in summing up the reasons for the apparent failure of education in indigenous languages says that 'six types of barriers may be identified as militating against effective education in West African languages: socio-historical, linguistic/pedagogic, economic, theoretical, political and psychological/social. The first four may be regarded as *inherited barriers* . . . (and the) . . . last two are *attitudinal barriers*'. (Emphases in original text).

Also, in the field of communication, the use of indigenous languages has increased tremendously. From the colonial and early post-colonial days when television and radio broadcasts were limited to news translations and four or five weekly programmes which were often repeated, more and more programmes are now aired in indigenous languages. As Ugboaja (1987: 196) puts it, 'the thirty years since the mid-'50s have seen increased broadcasting time taken by Nigerian languages with corresponding diminishing time in English'. However, because of the ever-growing

number of indigenous languages used, the air-time allotted to each language has not significantly improved.

In Ghana, as in most former Belgian and British colonies, the use of indigenous languages was not discouraged even during the colonial period. In contrast to the French and Portuguese assimilationist philosophy, the British, through missionaries, encouraged the use of the mother tongue as 'the most effective medium of instruction in the preliminary stage of a child's education', a principle which has been re-echoed by UNESCO. So, until independence (in 1957), the use of indigenous Ghanaian languages as media of instruction during the first three years of primary education and their teaching as compulsory subjects in the primary and secondary schools and teacher training colleges continued. Ironically, it was at independence that the use of Ghanaian languages was progressively abandoned (Ansre 1969; Dowuona 1969). As reported in Ansre (1969: 8-9), by 1968, the language policy in force in Ghana restricted the use of Ghanaian languages as media of instruction to the first two grades, and imposed the use of English as the sole medium from grade three onwards. However, experiments in teacher training such as the one at Ajumako for teachers of Ghanaian languages (Boadi 1976), point to the fact that the use of indigenous languages in education is once more catching on in Ghana.

In the mass media, some Ghanaian languages are used in national broadcasts i.e. Akan, Mole-Dogbani, Hausa, Nzema, Ewe and Ga. Yet, none of them has been officially recognized as the national language of Ghana.

Uganda, like most countries of Central and East Africa (Zaire and Kenya, for example), has experienced a rapid Europeanization of its medium of instruction in education since independence. The language of the former colonial masters, English, has thus become the sole medium of instruction at all levels. The spectacular thing about Uganda, however, is that the government recognizes six official languages: Luganda, Ateso/Akaramojong, Lugbara, Lwo, Runyankore/Rukiga and Runyoro/Rutooro. According to Walusimbi (1972), although the government says that all these languages should be taught in elementary and secondary schools as well as teacher training colleges, in practice, only Luganda enjoys such a privilege. The others are only taught in primary schools and teacher training colleges.

In the mass media, apart from Kiswahili and Luganda which are spoken by 20 per cent and 30 per cent, respectively, of the population, 17 other 'vernaculars' are used in broadcasting at the national level.

In Zaire, the use of indigenous languages in education and the mass media has undergone several phases. During the pre-independence period, local languages such as Kikongo, Tetela, Tshiluba, etc., were extensively used as media of instruction almost throughout the elementary school

system and were taught at the secondary school level. However, in 1958, the local elite were offered the opportunity of having their children go through the Belgian school system which had hitherto been reserved for the children of the Belgian colonialists and those of other Europeans. This, of course, meant that French would be used as the sole medium of instruction throughout the school years. Although this condition was not strictly adhered to, it was, in fact, Congolese independence in 1960 that buttressed the position of French within the educational system. The government-appointed Educational Reform Commission (1962) decided to impose the use of French as the sole medium of instruction throughout the school years (Georis and Agbiano 1965, George 1966, Bokamba and Tlou 1977). Although the first congress of Zairean linguists (in 1974), could not agree on the choice of a national language for the country, it recommended to the government the use of regional languages as media of instruction in schools.

In the mass media, the use of Zairean languages has been encouraging. Lingala (25% of population) and Kiswahili (25%) are used for inter-African broadcasts, whereas Tsiluba (17%) and Kongo (30%) are used for national broadcasts only.

Niger, a former colony of France cannot be condemned along with most other Francophone countries for neglecting its indigenous languages. For the past nine years, Niger has been operating experimental schools (now four) in which indigenous languages are used as media of instruction. For this purpose, Hausa, Kanuri and Djerma have been used with considerable success. The only problem with the programme is that progress has been slow. This means that the vast majority of Niger's school children still receive their instruction in French. However, since Hausa accounts for 70 per cent of its population and Songhai 19 per cent, Niger does not appear to have a complex linguistic structure. There is every hope, therefore, that the situation will improve, especially since Hausa is a regional lingua franca.

In the mass media, Niger's indigenous languages have made more inroads. Hausa is used for both regional and national broadcasts. Other languages used for national broadcasts are Songhai, Kanuri, Tuareg and Peuhl.

Sierra Leone, with a population of about 3.7 million (1987 census), is credited with 18 indigenous languages. Of these, three play prominent roles, i.e. Mende, Themne and Krio (Johnson 1985: 57). But going by official documents — Government White Paper (1970), the University of Sierra Leone's Education Review (1976), and the Dably Report (1980) — only Mende, Themne and Limba have been promoted to the rank of national languages. In defending Krio, Johnson (1985: 68) says that

... parts of this (Dably) report deny and ignore the significant position of Krio in the linguistic and sociolinguistic situation which justifies its legitimate claims to official/national language status. It is not clear how the undefined 'special role in the Western Area' for Krio would complement the three official languages, but this seems more like a tacit recognition of the official/national language status of Krio ... and an unwillingness to acknowledge it.

Although English is the recognized official language of Sierra Leone, indigenous languages still play a prominent, though unofficial role in the education system; they are used as 'languages of instruction in early primary, subject for study in late primary and secondary levels, and both subjects for study and objects of research as well as vehicles for adult education at tertiary level' (Johnson 1985: 62).

The position of the indigenous languages in education has been buttressed by the launching of the Indigenous Languages Education Project (ILEP) and the presentation of a Consultant's Report on National Languages in Education. Hence, Themne, Mende, Limba and, more recently, Krio have been used as languages of instruction in schools. So, in the southern and eastern provinces, Mende is the national language used as medium of instruction, whereas in the north, it is Temne, and in the western areas (Greater Freetown and certain urban provincial centres), it is Krio. It is not clear which one is expected to supersede the others, but Sierra Leone seems to have adopted a 'gradualist approach' to the utilization of indigenous languages in education.

In the mass media, Sierra Leone has had to distribute airtime equitably among its national languages. A justification for this is given by Johnson (1985: 60) who says that 'because the three major Sierra Leone languages do not reach the entire population, Sierra Leone operates a de facto multilingual model with Mende, Themne, Krio and Limba being described as 'national languages' and treated as equal in the media'.

Botswana is one of the very few sub-Saharan African countries that are monolingual (apart from Lesotho and Swaziland). 99 per cent of its population speak Tswana which is the unchallenged lingua franca of the country. Nevertheless, Tswana has to be content with sharing official language status with English. Although Bokamba and Tlou (1977: 40) report that only English is used as the language of instruction, Tadadjeu (1977: 22) says Tswana is used in early and higher primary school years. The situation is the same in the mass media; both languages (Tswana and English) are used for national broadcasts.

Categorization Based on Language Policy

Based on the above review of language policy situations in selected countries of sub-Saharan Africa, it is possible to identify certain traits that tend to differentiate some from others. The situation in these countries

with respect to their language policies shows that there are some that have not only formulated laudable policies that give pride of place to their indigenous languages but have carefully executed these policies with a high degree of success. These may be tagged the 'advanced states' (AS). The second category of states comprise those that have formulated good policies, but have either failed to execute them or have executed them badly. These are the 'less advanced states' (LAS). The third category consists of those countries that are still in the process of formulating or devising policies. We shall refer to these as the 'developing states' (DS). And, finally, there are the 'least developed states' (LDS) which have neither formulated nor articulated any viable language policies that could promote African language and culture.

From our review, it is quite tempting to guess which group (AS, LAS, DS or LDS) a particular country belongs to. However, there are two reasons why we hesitate to do this. First, our list is only representative of the countries that make up the entire sub-Saharan Africa. Second, we have not quantified the various determining factors in order to objectively decide the fate of each state. It is especially because of the latter that we decided to statistically determine the group of which the 30 states in the sub-region (for which we are able to gather data) really belongs.

Statistical Measurement of Language Policy

A ten-point instrument was designed to cover the main aspects of education and communication that a language policy is supposed to regulate. (For example, language in education — language of instruction at early primary, higher primary, secondary and tertiary levels; language in broadcasting — at the regional/provincial, national and international levels, etc.). For each point, each state was scored 1 (if it had provision for such an item, or 0 if it did not). The total score for each country was converted to percentage score by using the formula:

$$\frac{\text{Obtained Score}}{\text{Maximum Possible Score}} \times 100$$

After computing the percentage, a categorization of the scores was done using the key in Table 1.

Table 1. Key for Statistical Measurement of Language Policy

Range (%)	Category
100-80	Advanced State (AS)
79-60	Less Advanced State (LAS)
59-50	Developing State (DS)
49-0	Least Developed State (LDS)

The 30 sub-Saharan African countries chosen for this study were thus ranked according to their percentage scores.

Research Questions

This study addressed itself to the following questions:

- (i) Do the language policies of sub-Saharan countries differ significantly?
- (ii) Is there a correlation between the language of instruction in schools and media language in sub-Saharan Africa?

Results and Discussion

In order to respond to the first question, the score for each state was computed as discussed above. Table 2 presents the results obtained. The table shows the ten-point scale on which the 30 selected countries were scored. We note that the scores are in relation to the positive use of indigenous languages. For instance, a state is scored 'zero' under 'official language' if its choice is foreign (e.g. English or French).

The coefficient of concordance, W , was calculated to determine the degree of similarity among the language policies of the different states of the sub-region. Table 2 presents a W value of 0.00067. This shows a very insignificant level of similarity. This is, in fact, confirmed by the equally low figure of the chi-square test of significance of W (0.194). Question 1 is, therefore, answered in the affirmative.

Table 2. Similarity of Language Policies in Sub-Saharan Africa

	States ($n= 30$)
W	0.00067
df	29
χ^2 test of significance of W 0.194*	

* $p < 0.001$

This justifies our categorization of sub-Saharan states AS, LAS, DS and LDS. Tanzania with a percentage score of 90 is a candidate for the AS group. Nigeria, too, with a score of 80 per cent is in this group. Ghana (50%) and Uganda (also 50%) belong to the DS, whereas Zaire (40%), Sierra Leone (20%) and Botswana (10%) all represent various shades of the LDS group. Table 3 gives the distribution pattern of the 30 states selected for this study.

Table 3: Grading of Language Policies

Country	Lg. Status		Education		Mass Comm.Total			Int-Afr.	Nat.	Prov.
	Off.	Nat.	Pry 1	Pry 2	Sec.	Tery.	Reg.			
Botswana	1									1
Burundi					1		1		1	3
Cameroon		1	1		1		1		1	7
Central Afr. Rep.		1							1	2
Chad (Tchad)							1		1	2
Congo									1	1
Benin							1	1	1	3
Equatorial Guinea							1		1	2
Ethiopia	1		1	1	1	1			1	6
Gabon							1		1	2
Gambia							1		1	2
Ghana			1	1			1	1	1	5
Guinea							1		1	2
Ivory Coast							1		1	2
Kenya		1	1	1	1	1			1	7
Lesotho			1	1			1		1	4
Liberia							1		1	2
Malawi			1						1	2
Mali							1		1	2
Mauritania							1		1	2
Niger							1		1	2
Nigeria		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	8
Rwanda			1				1	1	1	4
Senegal							1		1	2
Sierra Leone							1		1	2
Somalia	1						1		1	3
Tanzania	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	9
Togo							1		1	2
Uganda		1	1				1	1	1	5
Zaire		1					1	1	1	4

Key:

Lg. Off.	Language Official	Tery. Comm. Reg.	Tertiary Communication Regional
Nat. Pry 1	National Lower Primary	Int. Afri.	Inter-African
Pry 2	Higher Primary	Nat. Prov.	National Provincial

In view of the fact that the LDS form 76.66 per cent of all the countries in our sample (Table 4), there is an urgent need for improvement.

Table 4. Distribution Pattern of Sub-Saharan Countries

Group	No. of States (n = 30)	Percentage of Total
AS	2	6.66
LAS	2	6.66
DS	3	10.00
LDS	23	76.66

In responding to question 2, figures obtained for education were computed against those obtained for mass communication in each state. The Spearman Rank Correlation (r_s) was computed and tested for significance. As Table 5 shows, there is a positive significant correlation between education and mass communication as reflected in the language policies of sub-Saharan African countries. Question 2 is, therefore, also answered in the affirmative. This suggests that a well-articulated language policy should be able to strike a balance between the two such that one is not developed at the expense of the other.

Table 5. Correlation between Education and Mass Communication

N	n	=	30
r	n	=	73
t		=	5.69
df		=	28
p		=	0.001

Unfortunately, records show that in most countries of sub-Saharan Africa the government, for instance, publicly declares its intention to involve the entire population in its development programmes, but then forbids the use of indigenous languages in schools allegedly because they cannot express modern scientific concepts. Yet, the vast majority of the population can only function in these 'condemned' languages.

The classification of states adopted in this paper, (AS, LAS, DS and LDS), is intended to show the performance (in language policies) of each country in relation to the others. However, the composition of each group is fluid. That is, a country could move up or down the ladder depending on

the type of changes that are brought into its language policy. For instance, Tanzania, the AS per excellence according to this study, could easily fall to the LAS group if it re-introduced English as its official language and language of instruction in schools. Similarly, a member of the LDS group could move up the ladder to the DS group if it adopted an indigenous language as the medium of instruction in schools. Niger, for example, now has four experimental schools (Jarrett 1988) which use an indigenous language each for purposes of instruction. If this model is eventually adopted nationwide, then Niger's rating is bound to improve.

Conclusion

This paper posits a classification of sub-Saharan countries based on the perceived realities and not on their age-old colonial legacies. For instance, it is common in the literature on African languages to say that Anglophone states, because of their colonial past, promote indigenous languages, whereas the Francophone ones do not because of the assimilationist philosophy of the French during the colonial period.

In the words of Ugboajah (1987: 195), 'certainly in recent times, Francophone countries responded to the wide use and popularization of indigenous languages may be said to be better than those of some previously. In this respect they are striving hard to catch up with Anglophone Africans'.

However, this study has shown that if all the states in the sub-region were viewed as a continuum, then a dichotomy would not hold; there are some Francophone countries (e.g. Zaire) that have made such rapid progress in recent times that their overall performance with respect to indigenous languages may be said to be better than that of some Anglophone countries (e.g. Sierra Leone). This paper, therefore, proposes a categorization of sub-Saharan countries into groups, namely, AS, LAS, DS and LDS. This categorization is based on a ten-point instrument. A practical demonstration of this categorization was done and its results were used to elucidate multilingual issues in the sub-region. It is believed that this comparative approach will sensitize the various governments of the sub-region on the need to promote indigenous language(s) because language is the quintessence of human dignity. The *laissez-faire* attitude of most sub-Saharan African governments must change 'if Africa is to liberate itself from cultural imperialism and shape its own destiny' (Bokamba and Tlou 1977: 49)..

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