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The Official Language Controversy:
Indigenous versus Colonial

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1. Introduction

I shall argue in favor of the choice of African languages as official languages in Africa. I do not have any illusions that my position is a most unpopular one. Nor do I have any illusions that my views may be easily implemented. I firmly believe though that since the choice of an official language involves political, social, economic, and linguistic considerations, if efforts are made at this time to plan now, and if we do not aim at seeing results in the next few years, it is possible to change the status quo. Unlike other changes, I envision a non-violent and a very slow process with results to be achieved not necessarily in our life times. After all, it has taken a long time for the linguistic policies currently in effect to reach the present state of maturity. I believe that this linguistic revolution would have to be based on strong nationalistic and Pan-Africanist sentiments. Let us not forget that political considerations gave rise to the linguistic policies of the colonial era, and that such policies have, to a large extent, been continued in Africa. Although I will not attempt to propose solutions for the replacement of the colonial languages as official languages in individual countries, the general views that I shall present here may serve as general guidelines for the choice of indigenous languages on the continent.

History tells us that the famous or rather infamous Berlin conference of the 19th century which carved up Africa for the benefit of some European nations did not include any African delegates. As history also tells us, it was this very conference which gave the participating powers the right to impose their wishes on the colonies. It was of course most convenient to impose the languages of those powers on their newly acquired possessions. In retrospect, one can excuse the cultural imperialism and cultural superiority which led to the imposition of the colonial languages as the official languages in Africa. After all, the "uncivilized" and "savage" Africans could only be "civilized" if they emulated the life styles of their colonial masters. As we know, the French, for example, believed in the teaching of only French to the natives of the colonies and although efforts were made to teach the colonizers some African languages, these efforts were haphazard at best. The obvious result of the French (and also the Spanish and Portuguese) linguistic policy was that the indigenous African languages were to a large extent

neglected in the formal educational process. The British (and Germans) allowed a select group of African languages to be taught while emphasis was placed on the colonial language. By the time of independence, African nations were using colonial languages as their official languages. In a set up where many languages co-exist, the colonial language, after all the emphasis placed on it, seemed the only reasonable language to use as the official language.

2. The Case for colonial languages

I shall now state some of the reasons for keeping the colonial language as the official language in various African countries. Probably the commonest argument that may be raised is that the colonial language serves as a unifying factor. It has been argued that since most of the African nations comprise more than one ethnic group, and since these "tribesmen" are generally at each other's throats, members of "Tribe" X would not like to learn the language of people of "Tribe" Y. Furthermore since the "tribes" do not understand each other's language, the only way that they can communicate effectively is through the colonial language. The colonial language, the argument goes, is therefore an important unifying factor in that it not only serves as the medium of communication among the "tribes", but it is also the only language that the "tribesmen" are willing to learn. On the surface, this argument seems very true. After all, history tells us about wars among various ethnic groups on the continent and, in our life time, we have witnessed civil wars or near out-breaks of such wars. It may therefore be reasonable to assume that as long as ethnic groups or the so-called tribes do exist, the potential for civil wars does exist.

Another argument that may be advanced for keeping the colonial language as the official language is that the indigenous languages are supposed to be deficient in scientific terminology. The argument goes that in a world where technology rules supreme, the "backward African languages" should not replace the colonial languages which are replenished with the appropriate technological terminology.

One is also reminded in this official language controversy that the various colonial languages are universally accepted and hence it is best to stick to them. Again, on the surface, this looks like a good argument. Why, it may be argued, should one open a linguistic Pandora's box? If the current state of affairs is accepted, then there is nothing to worry about. Every now and then, one is also reminded that no Western peoples would be interested in learning an African language so that they can communicate with a "bunch of uncouth and ungrateful Africans".

Another reason which may be given for keeping the colonial languages is that even if it were possible to select an African language to replace the colonial language, so much money would have to be spent to convert material in the colonial languages to the indigenous languages. In addition to this conversion of legal, religious, instructional, commercial and other types of documents, money would have to be spent in writing all future documents in an African language. The argument leads one to ask if in these

days of inflation, and at a time when independent African nations are economically dependent on one country or another, Africans can afford the money and manpower for such a change over. It is needless to observe that this argument is an attractive one indeed because it stipulates that national economic priorities should be ordered before national linguistic priorities.

It is a fact that at present a good knowledge of the official language of a nation is accompanied by economic benefits. For example in several African countries one usually gets a good job if one has had a good education. A good education implies passing various examinations and more often than not, the examinations include a crucial paper on the colonial language. As we know, until recently in Anglophone West Africa, one failed the School Certificate Examination if one failed the English part of that examination. The same situation was true of the Elementary School Leaving Certificate Examination of the 1940s. In most cases, the educational advancement of students was sealed off if they could not pass the English examinations. It is true that some people were given second and third chances to re-take those exams. But often the spectre of the English examination still followed them. Even when students passed their examinations, more often than not their ability to use the English language was regarded as measure of their education. But while so much emphasis was placed on the colonial language, the indigenous languages were often neglected. As we know, very few African languages are offered as examination subjects--even in the former British territories. And until recently, African languages were not taught in African universities. The type of scorn that was associated with the indigenous African languages may be partially observed in the fact that some people carelessly refer to others as illiterates solely because the so called illiterates cannot read and write a colonial language--although they may read and write an indigenous African language with ease.

It is not uncommon to hear that some Africans prefer a colonial language to their own. It is also not uncommon to hear that some Africans are ashamed to use their own languages. When such statements are made, we tend to forget the social, political and economic environments that have created the type of African who is ashamed to speak his own language. No economic incentives were attached by the colonial masters to the use of the African languages and as economists tell us, man makes decisions based on economic factors. Some proponents for the preservation of the colonial language as the official language have argued that since Africans would rather learn a colonial language than their own language, it is not a good idea to pick an African language as the official language.

Another argument that may be advanced for keeping the colonial language is that many African languages have not yet been reduced to a written form. The consequence of this is that there are no written grammars for those languages. The argument goes that maybe one of such unwritten languages may be the best one to be chosen as the official language. But since economic considerations would make it impossible to reduce all these languages to writing,

the colonial language should be kept as the official one. Like other arguments, this sounds like a good one.

A further reason that may be advanced for keeping the colonial language as the official language is that any African language which replaces the colonial language would be a foreign language to some people of that nation, just as the colonial language is foreign to Africa. The implication is that if an African language replaces the colonial language, one form of linguistic imperialism is substituted for another. This is also a good point indeed.

As I have shown so far, there are strong and compelling reasons for keeping the colonial language as the official language. Before we consider the reasons for replacing the colonial language as the official language, I would like to say a few words about the linguistic situation in Tanzania where, as we know, Swahili is the official language. The rather unique position of Swahili definitely facilitated its choice as the official language. Swahili has been spread on different trade routes for centuries and although comparatively speaking there are very few native speakers of Swahili, the language has had a large number of non-native speakers. Although the Tanzanian situation is comparable to the Kenyan situation but not comparable to the rest of Black Africa, Tanzania adopted Swahili as the official language a long time ago, while Kenya made the switch only last year. Although the change from English to Swahili has not been economically rosy for Tanzania, there is no indication that Tanzania is economically collapsing because of this linguistic policy. On the contrary, TANU's dedication makes the government provide economic incentives for the change. The Tanzanian Swahili Research Institute is basically responsible for the coordination of the introduction of new vocabulary into the language.

Non-Swahili speakers who now visit Tanzania find that although English is still used, one is better off with a knowledge of Swahili. As President Nyerere has often said, Tanzania is for Tanzanians. By implication, foreigners would just have to get used to the Tanzanian way of doing things.

Although I have not made any effort to discuss the details involved in the choice of Swahili as the official language in Tanzania, I have mentioned the Tanzanian situation because it exemplifies the desire, dedication and willingness of a nation to forge ahead with her own policies when such policies have displeased foreign nations.

3. The Case of indigenous languages.

Now to the big question. Granted that the situation which led to the choice of Swahili as the official language in Tanzania may not exist in other African nations: why should an African language not be chosen as the official language of an independent African nation? As I observed in my introductory remarks, I think a strong sense of both nationalism and Pan-Africanism should be the reason for the choice of an indigenous African language to replace the colonial one. I believe that as long as independent African nations continue to be either economically,

politically, or linguistically dependent, those nations are not really independent. Cooperation among nations is vital for human survival but I do not advocate the dependence of one nation on another. Linguistic independence, at the very least, implies the selection of an African language to replace the colonial one where the latter is the official language. Among the more serious problems to be considered in this choice are the following: (1) Since many African nations have many languages, which of the languages should be chosen? (2) What should be the criteria for such a choice? (3) Since the selection of one language automatically implies the rejection and maybe the neglect of the others, how is national unity to be maintained? (4) How can the nations cope with all the economic problems that are associated with such a choice?

The first step in choosing an indigenous language, in my opinion, is a re-education of the citizens. It is important that the elite as well as the "masses" be made to understand that languages "from the land" are as important as any colonial language. People should be educated so that they can realize that there is nothing shameful about their own languages. An educational program (formal and non-formal) in national pride will facilitate the de-emphasizing of the colonial language. This education for national pride is very crucial if the choice of an African language is to be a success. Note that a great deal of pride is involved here--but then, what good are a people, any people at all, if they do not, or cannot take pride in their own achievements and their own natural endowments? I have no doubts that one of the qualities of a strong nation is national pride.

I do not think the sort of education that is envisioned here is beyond the reach of any nation. Nor do I think that given the current forces at work, the projected education will be easily achieved within only a couple of years because some people would resist it. There is no doubt that some people are so comfortable with the present state of affairs that they will not like to break away from it. Persistence and perseverance should therefore be the cue words in the type of education advocated here. I know that comments on any form of Black pride is usually regarded as a fad. Time will of course tell whether the continent of Africa would forever play a nondescript role in world affairs.

The next stage, that is if the prescription that I have is given any serious thought, is the teaching of a select number of African languages at all levels in the academic system. The selected languages should be compulsorily taught in elementary and secondary schools. I believe that at least the two, or maybe the three languages with the most speakers should be the selected languages. Note that children are better at learning languages than adults. Hence if the emphasis on learning the selected languages is placed on the formative years in schools, it is only reasonable to expect that a high degree of proficiency and acceptance of the selected language would be achieved. As is common knowledge, the linguistic situation in Africa tends to make people multilingual. My suggestion is therefore based on the utilization of a common tendency among Africans.

As was pointed out earlier, the choice of one language implies the rejection, though not necessarily the neglect, of other languages. Life, as economists tell us, constantly involves making choices based on opportunity costs. The important thing is that a nation is bold enough to think about making a critical choice and that the choice is based on a careful consideration of the opportunity costs involved. I feel that the long term benefits to be reaped by utilizing national pride to build a strong nation, far outweigh any immediate economic hardships. No matter what language is chosen, there will be some discontents. But then would anyone volunteer to name one single nation with the perfect system--the system which does not breed discontents? Freud expressed the view that because an individual has to interact with other members of the society, and because this interaction may result in a conflict between what is best for the society on the one hand, and the individual's basic desires (i.e. the attainment of pleasure), the civilization that man has created becomes the source of human discontent. If Freud is right, and I am convinced that he is, then discontent exists in every human society. But then Freud also notes that the success of human civilization involves the subjugation and the submergence of the individual's desires through various checks that civilization has created. Armed with this knowledge about human nature, the linguistic change that I am proposing now may create discontent among some circles just as the current linguistic situation creates discontent among some people.

The next stage in the linguistic revolution is probably the most uncomfortable one--this stage is the choice of one of the two or three selected indigenous languages as the official language. My suggestion is that the language with the largest number of speakers should be chosen as the official language. Note that the second stage of the revolution assures the acceptance of at least the two or three selected languages. Hence the choice of one of these should not be an unsurmountable problem, *if ethnic pride is played down at the expense of national pride*. For example, if in country X the ruling group is dominated by members of ethnic group Y, but the language of that ethnic group is spoken by a comparatively small number of people, then I feel that the language of that ethnic group (Y) should not be chosen as the official language. I am sure there are people who wonder if it would ever be possible to suppress ethnic feelings entirely. This question is similar to asking if it is possible for all human beings to have the same skin color. Not only is this not possible, but I do not even think it is desirable. But note that it is possible for the different races to live in harmony. This answer is applicable to the ethnic group situation in Africa. I am not sure it is desirable to neutralize the different ethnic groups in Africa but there is no reason why the various ethnic groups should not live in peace.

Many of my students feel that English should be used all over the world. One can always detect a sense of pride in such students, especially since they are quick to point out that English

is their language. What prevents African students from a similar pride in their languages? I believe that if the type of subtle linguistic orientation that was fostered during the colonial era is destroyed through a carefully planned and coordinated program, there is no reason why Africans should not be as proud of their languages as for examples Americans are of English. President Nyerere has introduced Education for Self-Reliance. Maybe what African nations need now more than anything else is a carefully planned program in Education for National Pride. Of course I am aware of the fact that Education for Self-Reliance involves a Education for National Pride. When I talk about Education for National Pride, I would like to see the emphasis placed on the nation as a whole first, and then the ethnic group second. As linguists, our primary concern in this Education for National Pride is that the program should commit itself to the choice of an African language to replace the colonial language as the official language.

The Berlin Conference which partitioned Africa is a fact. It is also a fact that the Conference forced and divided ethnic groups into new territorial units. Since I do not think it is wise to redivide the continent up, it is only reasonable to expect that efforts are made internally to de-emphasize ethnicity and emphasize national and Pan-African unity and pride. I would be very naive to think that this will be an easy task because even with the best of efforts being made internally, external forces may be at work to disrupt the type of unity that I am talking about.

Now that I have established the framework within which I believe the choice of an African language should be selected to replace the colonial language as the official language, I shall answer some of the specific arguments that have been raised for keeping the colonial language. The argument that any African language which is chosen will be a foreign language to some people is a silly one. National pride makes every nation protect her own trade by imposing limitations on exports at different times in a nation's history. A fairly common proverb that one hears in Ghana tells us in effect that "No one points to his father's farm with his left hand". An "X" rated proverb also tells us in effect that "However dead one's penis is, one still urinates through that penis". I shall assume that as Africanists, the import of these proverbs is very clear. The point that I would like to emphasize here though is that after the type of education I have spoken about, I see no reason why the argument for replacing one foreign language with another cannot be rejected.

As far as the economic feasibility of the type of linguistic change that I have been talking about is concerned, I feel that the long term benefits will far outweigh any short term costs. In fact if the feeling of national pride and national survival is sufficiently infused into people, the chances are that those people will increase economic productivity which would be of great benefit to their nations.

On the question of African languages lacking technological terminology: I am sure that every enlightened linguist knows that

every human language is capable of creating any type of terminology. Every language therefore has the potential to expand and enrich its vocabulary.

It is true that not every African language has been reduced to a written form. My contention is that while efforts should be made to write grammars for such languages, the emphasis should be placed on those languages for which grammars already exist. Thus there is no need to wait until all African languages have been reduced to writing before a choice is made.

Since not all African languages can be taught in schools, the predominant language of a region should be taught in that region. I therefore do not foresee the neglect of the non-chosen indigenous African languages. People would no doubt use such languages at home and they should not be discouraged from doing so. Those indigenous non-official languages would not have as high a price placed on them--they do not enjoy such a privilege now anyway.

What would be the role of the colonial language in the set up that I have outlined? I see the eventual phasing out of the colonial language as the medium of instruction in schools. The colonial language would be taught like any other subject in the academic curricula. People would therefore have an opportunity to study it. But economic and social incentives would be shifted from the colonial language to the chosen African language.

As we know, English has been de-emphasized in Tanzania and now Tanzanians have to learn Swahili because that is what carries the premium.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to stress that I do realize that the suggestions I have made here may meet with opposition. I am also aware that as of now, my suggestions may be more easily implemented in some countries (for example in Ghana) than in others (for example in Nigeria). It should not be forgotten that I am not advocating immediate change. On the contrary, I am advocating a change which may take time to be fully implemented and which, as I have observed, requires a carefully planned program of education. I am confident though that if African nations begin to plan now, then one day, all colonial languages would be replaced by indigenous African languages as official languages. As the saying goes, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step". I think that step should be taken now.

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