

Views from the Streets of Accra on Language Policy in Ghana

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Abstract

Issues of national language are very complex in Africa because of the multi-lingual situation on the continent. The situation is even more severe when a country attempts to choose one of the indigenous languages as its national language. Most African nations have peacefully chosen foreign languages as their official languages but there is always a controversy over which language to use as a national language in Africa. The paper investigates the views of Ghanaians on national language. The paper discusses the responses to questionnaire that were administered to respondents who were randomly selected on the street of Accra. The paper finds out that majority of the Ghanaian population, representing 81% want Ghana to adopt a national language. The paper argues that even though Ghanaians want a national language, intensive education on national language must be carried out by the government before any action is taken

Keywords: language policy, notational language, mother tongue, multilingual.

1.0 Introduction

It is a fact that the world of today is pluralistic and diverse in every aspect, and language is not an exception. At the same time, human beings need to preserve and value the diversity of their immaterial human heritage. Language has been a distinctive mark of the individual and of socialization. Unquestionably, relationship between language and society is either one of harmony or one of conflict, depending on the shifts of opinion. It is in this vein that language is considered as one of the topmost assert of the human race.

There are diverse views on the issue of national language: while some are in favor of adopting one of the local languages as the national language, others are of the view that choosing a particular language will lead to undermining the rest of the other languages. Depending on the ethnic composition of the population of a country, a variety of situations can be found in terms of languages use, especially language policy. In every case, at least two linguistic levels are apparent within the given national entity: corresponding to a person's mother tongue and the official language.

Ghana is a highly multilingual developing nation in West Africa. It has a population of over 25 million people with different ethnic groups. Ghana has about 50 indigenous languages (Dakubu, 1996), and the major ones are Akan, Ewe, Ga, Dagaare, and Dagbani, with English as the official language. Out of these languages, only 11 languages are taught in the schools and few of them are used on the radio and television. All the speakers of these languages may prefer to have their language taught in the schools and happily see their languages used on radio or on television. One can therefore imagine what would be the reaction of Ghanaians when it comes to the choice of a national language.

There are other non-Ghanaian languages like Hausa, which is spoken as a lingua franca among in the zongos, and in northern Ghana, and Arabic, which is learnt in Islamic schools across Ghana but mainly used for religious purposes, (Yankah, 2006). These languages play important roles in Ghana. The least talk about English the better because that is the official language. Talking about the significant role played by English and Hausa in Ghana, Anyidoho and Dakubu (2008:143) affirm that "besides the indigenous languages, two languages belonging to very different language families are used throughout the country: Hausa, a Chadic (Afro-Asiatic) language, and English, a Germanic (Indo-European) language". This paper seeks to find out the views of Ghanaians on adopting national language. The paper sought views of some Ghanaians on national language and its adoption.

2.0 National language

There are divergent views about the meaning of national language. Due to the nature of the term, it can be classified under essentially-contestable concepts¹ and therefore needs to be clarified. Abdulaziz (1972: 162) draws the dichotomy between national languages and official languages. In his opinion, the national language is normally the language that identifies the State and is the foundation of national culture and unity. It may or may not be used or only partly used in the administrative, legal, commercial, and educational systems of a country. Official languages are those that are used in the modern sectors of the state including legislative, judicial, commercial, and educational areas.

Moreover, Ouane (2003) argues that the term '*national*' has semantic dualism that arises from its usage: to express a geographical meaning (the extent of a nation) and a symbolic power (the unity of the nation). It

¹ Concepts that do not have a very clear definition

means that the term has two aspects and Fasold (1984) captures both aspects in his definition of the mother tongue. He is of the view that mother tongue has to meet the following criteria:

It must serve as a symbol of national unity and identity; it must be used in everyday life; it must be spoken fluently and with ease by a sizable proportion of the population; it must be the chief candidate for such a role because there is no alternative nationalist language in the country; it must be acceptable as a symbol of authenticity; it must be seen as a link with the glorious past.

(Fasold, 1984: 74).

It is therefore an indication that national language could be a mother tongue of some of the citizens. Just like the term national language, 'mother tongue' too has its semantic issues. There is not even unanimity among the various users about the meaning of 'mother tongue'. It is therefore prudent we keep to the neutral-looking expression of 'first language'. The term 'mother tongue' is considered as the language through which the socialization of the individual occurs within the smallest community, usually the family. Ouane (2003) confirms that the mother tongue is defined with reference to a particular linguistic community. It is therefore the first linguistic tool used by an ethnic community to which a person belongs to. National language is a mother tongue that has acquired a national status in the country. Normally, national language depends on the number of speakers, the functions, fields of use, and social status in the country. It is the language spoken and written by the majority of people in a country.

2.1 Argument against National Language

Stephen (2005) and Ouane (2003) put forward very strong points to buttress their stand as to why they hold the view against national language. They think that adopting a national language may lead to language shift which has an adverse effect on its speakers. Bodomo et al. (2010) are of the view that language shift occurs when successive generations of speakers gradually lose proficiency in their mother-tongues or the language of their speech community in favor of other languages. In order to function properly, speakers must learn the language chosen, and this may lead to language loss among individuals and subsequently language death.

Stephen (2005) is of the view that adopting a national language in multilingual setting goes against the language right of the minority languages. It means the speakers of the minority languages have to learn national language to the detriment of their languages. They have no option other than learning the chosen language. The notions of majority and minority languages are relative. In terms of numbers, the majority language in one country may be a minority language in another. Ouane (2003) confirmed that in absolute terms, any language may be a majority. Even if a country were to adopt just the number of speakers as a criterion for selection of national language, the importance of the number depends on proportion of the entire population.

There is clearly a significant difference between a linguistic minority in relation to the population of a given country and the speakers of a minority language (Bamgbose, 1984). In other words, the term 'linguistics minority' is relative. To support the relativity of the term, Bamgbose (1984) mentions that of the 410 languages found in Nigeria, about 390 are minority languages and their speakers number between 20 and 30 million. This number is almost like the total number of the entire population Ghana. Bamgbose (1984) added that attention of the Nigerian political authorities has been mostly concentrated on three languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba). Ouane (2003) is of the opinion that the word 'minority' should be avoided as because it has an adverse connotation on the languages. He highlights that there are stigmatization, marginalization, and discrimination that are shown towards these languages and reveals how negatively the effect would be.

More importantly, some concerns have been raised on the function of the African languages. In fact, very few African languages can function in most of the domains such as legislative, judicial, commercial, and educational areas. Another controversy about the 'national language' has to do with different view in relation to the number of languages. Ouane (2003) argues that some people are of the view that there can be only one national language whereas others feel that all the nation's languages should enjoy the status of national language. To buttress the latter point, Ouane asserts that no language is anti-national and that all languages are national. So the question is, which language should we choose and on what basis?

2.2 Argument for national language

Paauw (2009) is of the view that national language will serve as a symbol of unity among the citizenry. Language characterized a nation therefore, if a nation has a national language; it binds the people together as one people with common language and this will promote unity among the people. Again, once some countries were able to adopt a national language, Ghana too can do it despite the multilingual nature of the country. Several countries in the world have adopted one local language as a national language. Paauw (2009) observes that Indonesia has a significant number of distinct ethnic groups, speaking an estimated 600 languages. Despite all these challenges, Indonesia has been successful at promoting an indigenous language as its national language.¹

¹ The Indonesian language was developed as a national language from the Malay language. Even though, some critics say the

Kwesi (2013) suggests that in adopting a national language, Ghana should go for what he called ‘synthesis method’. According to him, this method combines some of the linguistics features of the various languages into a new language. In as much as I welcome his effort, the ‘synthesis method’ will have a weak argument. We cannot combine all the features of languages we have because of the incompatibilities in the structure of our languages . The suggestion of Kwesi (2013) is triggered by the way the Ghanaian languages are into contact with one another and language contact is a social phenomenon as claimed by Sankoff (2001:639) “language contact is not individual enterprise but it has always been the historical product of social forces.”

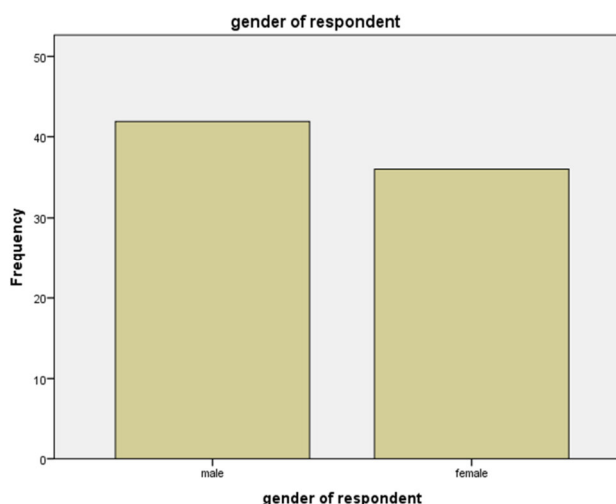
3. Methodology

This paper is an exploratory paper with the aim of finding the view of some section of Ghanaians on national language. A sample of seventy eight (78) responses were sought from some section of Ghanaians on the street of Accra. Questionnaires were used as major instrument for the research and the data was analysed with Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). It was used in the analysis and presentation functions, including statistical analysis and graphical presentation of data.

4.0 Analysis and discussions

4.1 Responses from gender

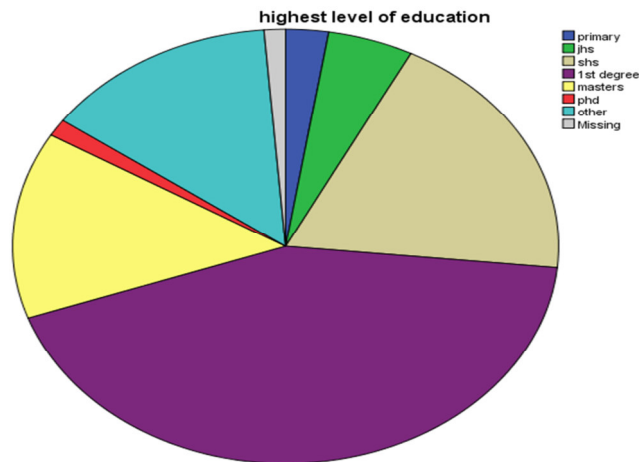
Out of 80 questionnaires distributed, 78 were received and only 2 were not returned. 42 of the respondents were male representing 53.8% and 36 were female representing 46.2%. Chart 1 below shows the responses on gender. Chart 1



4.2 Responses from level of education

On the level of education, 2.6% of the respondents are primary school graduates, 5.1 % have completed junior high school, 19.2 have senior secondary school certificate. Those with first degree are 43.6%, masters holders are 14.1 % while PhD has only 1%. This is to be expected because of the environment in which the study was conducted. It is normal to see in the Ghanaian universities both the public and the private ones admitting more undergraduate students than post graduate students. Below is the chart 2 representing the distribution on level of education.

Chart 2

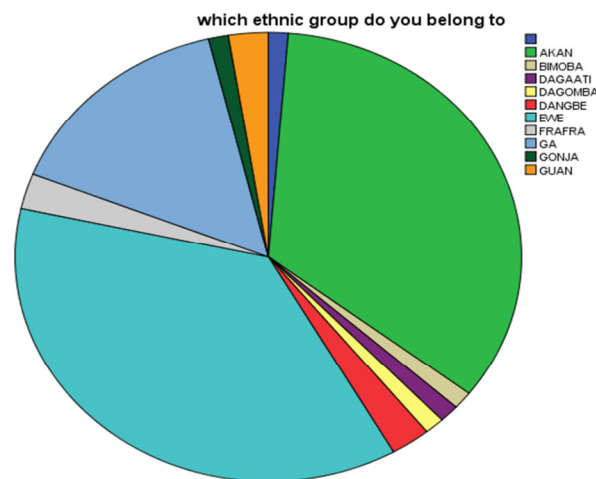


4.3 Response from ethnic groups

Ewe has the highest number of respondents with 36.7%, followed by Akan with 34.2%. The ethnic group with the third-highest number of respondents is Ga with 15.2%.

Chart 3 below gives the illustration.

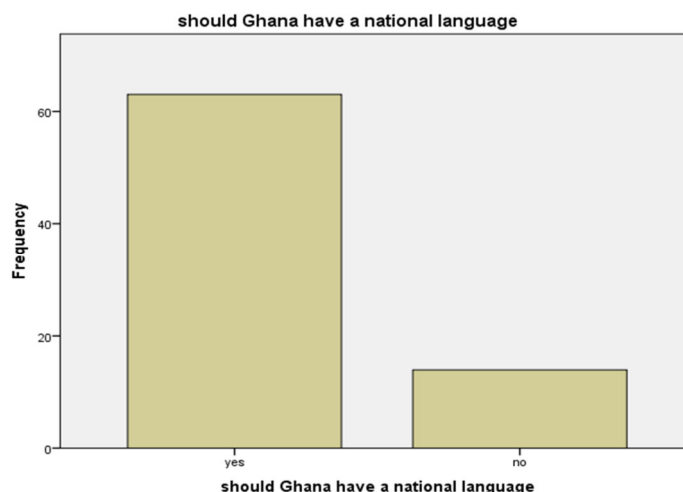
Chart 3



4.4 Should Ghana have a local language?

The respondents' views support the idea of national language. 81.8% of the total responded positively that Ghana should have a local language. Out of the total number, only 18.2% do not want Ghana to have national language. The illustration is found in chart 4.

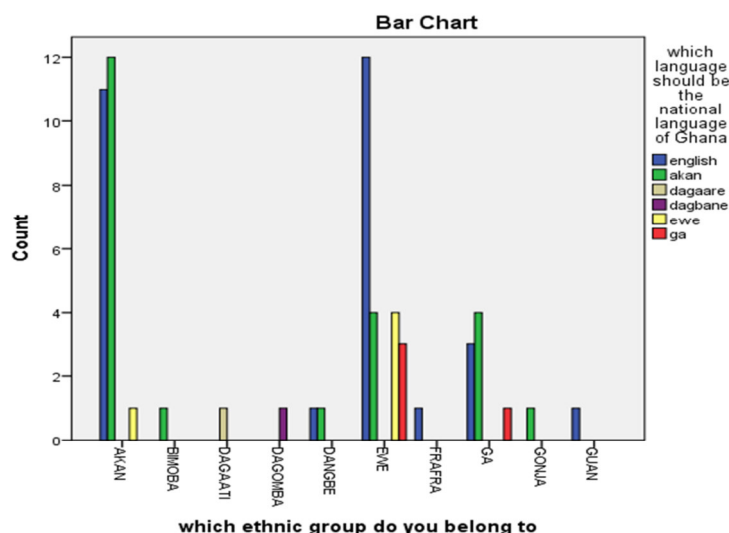
Chart 4



4.5 Ethnic groups vis-a-vis language choice

On the issue of the ethnic groups as against the type of language Ghana should adopt as the national language, English is leading the chart with 29 respondents, followed by Akan with 23 respondents. Surprisingly, only 5 want Ewe to be chosen as the national language, meanwhile Ewe has the highest number of respondents. Below is chart 5.

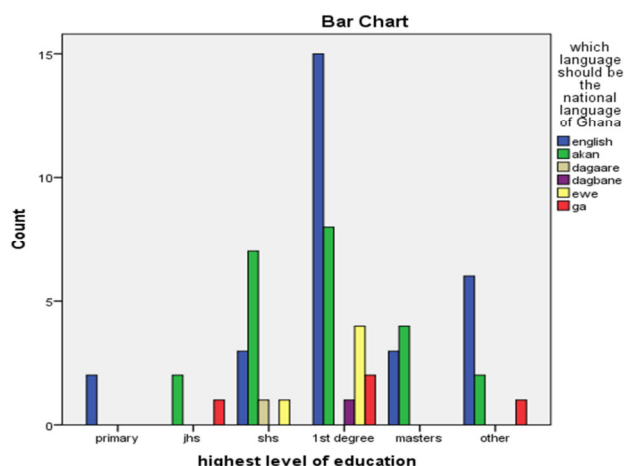
Chart 5



4.6 Level of education vis-à-vis national language

English leads the chart on the choice of national language vis-a-vis the level of education with 29 respondents, followed by Akan with 23 respondents. Ewe is the third with only 5 respondents while the fourth position was Ga with 4 respondents. There is one trend for almost all the correspondents except the PhD respondent. Apart from the PhD, in all the respondents, those who want Ghana to have national language are more than those who do not want Ghana to have a national language. We have 100% of the respondents with PhD against Ghana having national language.

Chart 6



5.0 Conclusion

It has always been the case that the authorities favor the languages of the colonial powers to the detriment of the indigenous languages when they are in competition for a particular domain. This is because national and official languages of the Nation-States have been shaped by the specific socio-economic circumstances. I believe that if all the languages are given same chance, they could develop in the same way. There are several objective factors which may affect the attitude of groups on the choice of one or more languages. Studies have shown that these factors include migration, industrialization, urbanization and government policies concerning which languages can and cannot be used in schools and other institutions (Kulick 1992: 8).

Considering the data gathered, the responses are in favour of National language. It means, majority of the Ghanaian population, representing 81% want Ghana to adopt a national language. This is a clear indication that Ghanaians will embrace the idea of national language. Moreover, majority of the respondents, at all level of education, also support the idea that Ghana should adopt national language. Surprisingly, Ewe is the ethnic group with the highest number of respondents with 36.7%, but when it comes to the language choice for national language, Ewe was third with only 5 respondents out of 78 responses. Shockingly, English ‘which is not a local language, was first on the chart, followed by Akan. Even though Ghanaians want a national language, intensive education on national language must be carried by the government before any action.

It is the therefore a positive step when Ghana Education Service introduced the National Literacy Acceleration Program in order to enhance the pupils’ knowledge in the local languages. The cardinal principle of Ghana’s National Literacy Acceleration Program (NALAP) is to increase in the literacy rate for early grade primary school pupils. Hartwell (2010:1) confirms that the National assessments indicate that the great majority of primary pupils cannot read with understanding in their first language or in English.

The NALAP was introduced by the Ministry of Education and the Ghana Education Service, with USAID’s assistance. It was established in June 2006. The aim is to improve pupils’ ability to read and write in the early grades (KG to P3) using a bilingual Ghanaian and English languages approach. The national implementation of the program began during the 2009/2010 school year and includes the production and dissemination of teacher guides and instructional materials; training for national and district education staff, and workshops for all primary head teachers and lower grade teachers; and a public awareness and publicity campaign.

The program is devised to improve Ghana’s low rates of pupil literacy and numeracy. The synopsis of NALAP is what Hartwell (2010:iv) stated :

NALAP is based on the premise that pupils learn to read and write best when they do so in a language that they understand and speak. In NALAP, pupils learn how to read and write in a Ghanaian language, with English introduced gradually, and initially only orally. By P2 pupils also start to learn to read and write in English, and by P3 pupils should be able to read with fluency and understanding in both a Ghanaian language and English

However, NALAP has its own problems. Awedoba (2001) lamented that vast majority of written materials available have been English language texts with very limited access to text in Ghanaian language. In view of this, local materials should be made available to enhance the teaching and learning processes in the lower primary.

Government should consider the language policy in Ghana especially the language policy in education as one of the important policy that will the country to attain higher heights. However, government upon government did not have the political will to implement the policy that will bind both the public and the private

SECTION C

Use the language in the table to answer the questions that follow. Specify any language if it is not in the list provided.

English	Akan	Dagaare	Dangbe	Dagbane
Ewe	Ga	Gonja	Kasem	Nzema

10.	What is your native language	
11.	Which language do you speak at home	
12.	Which language is your first language	
13.	Which language do you use when buying from the market	
14.	Which language do you use when transacting formal business	
15.	Which language do you use when conversing with your peers	
16.	Which language do you use when conversing with your family	
17.	Which language do you use when working	
18.	Which language do you prefer should be the national language of Ghana	
19.	Should Ghana have a national language	
20.	Which language should be the national language of Ghana	
21.	Why did you select the language above _____	