

APPROACHING MOTHER-TONGUE EDUCATION AS A PERSONAL AND SOCIETAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY¹

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This paper underscores the need for a broadly defined market orientation in our advocacy for mother-tongue learning, as well as in the research that seeks to establish the value of mother-tongue competence in Africa. The paper calls attention to the fact that the world of today is driven by market ethics, in which people's choices are guided by the persistent quest for what to sell in the market of opportunities, both in the social and material domains of life. Our young people must be shown how speaking a mother-tongue opens up opportunities for self-advancement in their struggles to make life meaningful. This general argument is hinged on literature from both linguistic and non-linguistic scholarship, and illustrated with Kenya's sociolinguistic realities and the corresponding constitutional and policy provisions.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the self-marketing writer, Girard (2003:19), "Every salesperson who is successful knows this... you don't sell a thing; you sell the benefits of the thing." (Underling added.) The fundamental argument presented in this paper is that mother-tongue education should be seen as something that is beneficial to Africans in terms of both personal and societal development. This position is, by implication, an argument away from the tendency towards sentimentalism that sometimes characterizes ideological appeals in favour of mother-tongue education in Africa. For example, a publication of the International Institute of Educational Planning on languages of instruction policy options in Africa says the following regarding "ideological issues" in the policy debates (1997:16):

The ideological issues concern the role of language in the expression of the African spirit and the projection of the African view.... It is argued that people educated in a foreign language cannot confidently express their community spirit or project their community's world view....

A more powerful sentimental appeal in the ideological mode may be seen in the argument of the renowned Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o as quoted

¹The original version of this paper was delivered as a keynote speech at the International Mother-Tongue Day Celebrations seminar on 17th February, 2015 at the University of Nairobi. The author hopes that elements of its speech characteristics that may still be discernible will be tolerable.

by the People Daily (June 4th, 2015, p.8):

Slavery of the mind is not visible but very powerful. If you know all the languages of the world but you can't speak your mother tongue, that is enslavement. But if you know other languages and your mother tongue, that is empowerment. (Thiong'o, 2015)

The argument in this paper is inclined towards the school of thought that favours an instrumental rather than integrative orientation in relation to the motivation for language learning (cf. Richards and Schmidt, 2002:343). It is this point which is summarized in the popular saying among promoters of Kiswahili in Kenya's electronic media debates, namely: "Kiswahili kinalipa" (i.e. (knowing) Kiswahili pays). In explaining why many Chinese ethnic minorities abandon their languages in favour of Mandarin, Oduor and Rotich (this publication) suggest the same kind of motivation for language preferences in a multilingual society. Thus, what one would like to see in arguments such as the one by Thiong'o is an elaboration of the ways in which one gets empowered by knowing one's mother-tongue. In Africa, the empowerment that comes by knowing other languages is adequately appreciated by most people. That is the point highlighted by Kembo-Sure and Webb (2000) as referred to and discussed below. As I pointed out more broadly in my University of Nairobi professorial inaugural lecture (Okombo, 2001:27):

Language policy is worth the efforts it requires and costs it entails only when it is placed in the broad context of national development.... It is people's welfare which justifies the energy put into development activities... and [the]... costs of development policy research and formulation. Language policy is not for the welfare of languages; it is for the welfare of people. (Underlining added.)

The paper starts by discussing the market-value argument presented by Kembo-Sure and Webb (2000:112) and broadens the argument to embrace the views of marketing experts (e.g. Kibera, 1996) as well as experts on self-selling such as Girard (2003). The paper then looks at Kenya's multilingualism and the Constitutional provisions for managing it alongside the relevant policy guidelines.

Having clarified the policy positions, the paper reverts to the market-value-based WIIFM (what's in it for me) question and summarizes the benefits accruing to the individual learner of English and Kiswahili in Kenya. This prepares the ground for an exploratory examination of the benefits accruing to the individual who has had a successful mother-tongue education programme within a favourable policy framework. It outlines benefits in the areas of political/community leadership, career development, general economic benefits, and benefits in the area of social mobilization for societal

development.

The conclusion calls for research efforts that attempt to reveal the benefits that can motivate young Africans to learn indigenous African languages, emphasizing, as stated above, the fact that this is not something done for the languages themselves, but for the welfare of African individuals, communities, and societies at the highest level possible.

2. THE MARKET-VALUE ARGUMENT

In a review of the functions of language suggested in a wide range of sources associated with scholarship in the field of linguistics, Mooney et al. (2011:13) have the following to say about the conative function:

Focused on the addressee is the conative function of language. This function helps us describe messages that are intended to have an effect on the audience. This might be anything from a command, an insult, or an attempt at persuasion. (Underlining added.)

In effect, the conative function of language is the function that gives language users power to influence their world to their advantage.

In other words, through its conative function, language empowers its users by putting them in relative control of the happenings in their social environment, at least to the extent that those happenings depend on the thinking of individuals who receive the messages transmitted through the language medium. Herein lies what is arguably our greatest attraction to language: its use as a tool to shape the happenings in our world and hopefully get what we want. It may to some extent be related to what David Crystal (quoted in Mooney et al., *ibid*: 14) refers to as the use of language for “controlling reality.”

Writing from the perspective of communication, O’Hair et al. (1997:16) mention control, affiliation and goal achievement as the three “primary (one might say ubiquitous) functions” of communication. More significantly, they further say (*op. cit.*:18) the following:

Of the three primary functions of communication, control is probably the most important. It could be argued, in fact, that it is the most important because it seems to permeate both affiliation and goal orientation functions. By control we mean the ability of one person to influence both another person or persons and the manner in which their relationship is conducted.... In fact, control is a defining characteristic of every relationship (Underlining added.).

What they are saying, in effect, is that communication (as well as language, its most significant medium) is generally perceived by human beings as a tool for empowering ourselves by getting things done and negotiating our place in

human relationships.

When a language learner's emphasis is on this function, we talk of what is usually referred to as the instrumental motivation in language learning (cf. Richards and Schmidt: loc. cit.). This essentially means that one learns a language for its value in the prevailing market of opportunities in society. It is all about what one can do with the learnt language in order to achieve one's goals in life, including: opportunities in education, job placement, business activities, relationships and other aspects of personal endeavour within one's community and beyond.

In a sense, it is this motivation for language learning that is behind the following observation by Kembo-Sure and Webb (2000:112): "The reasons [why Africans prefer some languages to others] clearly have to do with the 'market value' of the different languages in their society...." The idea of market value as used in this discourse must be understood in a broader sense to include any benefit that one derives from the mastery of a given skill, linguistic or otherwise. In simple terms, it boils down to the question of what one gets in their world of opportunities by being able to speak or write using a particular language.

This broad concept of market is now acceptable to experts in the area of business studies. Thus, in a publication of the University of Nairobi's Business School, the concept of marketing is explained as follows (Kibera, 1996:145):

In the narrow sense, marketing refers to the "performance of business activities that direct the flow of goods and services from producer or seller to consumer or user." Of late, however, marketing has been and still is being applied to a variety of non-business situations. Thus, election candidates do market themselves to the voters; a job seeker has to market himself or herself to prospective employers; different churches appeal to potential followers using marketing techniques; and political parties and governments have to market their policies to the larger society. (1996:145)

The prevailing marketing/selling orientation in our lives is captured more graphically in the more practical writings of authors whose approach is less academic so as to make it appealing to a wider audience.

A leading authority in this genre is Joe Girard, who makes the point in the following words (Girard, 2003:2-3): "Whoever you are, wherever you are, whatever you do and wherever you do it, you're busy selling. You may not have been aware of this, but it's true." A writer in the same genre, Davies (2000:2) states the point more categorically by saying:

In today's highly competitive environments, it's just not good enough to be good at something. You have to be really good at selling this ability to others as well, otherwise they may not spot it....We need to view ourselves as mini-businesses, with the emphasis on what we sell that's transferable from one job to another.... Dealing with the general public as customers or clients demands ongoing wooing,

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as does trading with other businesses.

Davies (loc. cit.) touches on the role of language in selling ourselves by stating:

While some of the methods of selling [our] ability may be inanimate ... the really crucial channel is live and human: how we talk to each other. Whether informally, such as a chat to someone we meet at a party, or in a more structured setting, such as a business pitch or job interview, the crux of selling ourselves is how we talk.

Clearly, when how we talk is the issue, it requires only a little stretch of imagination to relate the argument to the language we speak. This marketing/selling spirit is reflected in all areas of skill acquisition, including language skills.

The African youth are seeking opportunities in all areas of life. Many of them are going back to their ethnic roots to find inspiration for artistic expression (song, dance, theatre, etc). The only thing stopping them from devoting time and energy to the learning of their ethnic languages is the pervasive thinking that those languages do not have a place in modern markets, whatever their definition.

Scholars in development communication are apparently more aware of this fact. As Moemeka (1996:7) explains: "Specific activities that development communication must strive to accomplish if it is to contribute effectively to development" include a number of things, one of which is:

Provision of horizontal and vertical (interactive) communication linkages at all levels of society and communication channels through which people at all levels of society and in all regions and localities can have the capability to communicate with one another in order to accomplish the co-ordination necessary for human and material development. (Underlining added.)

Their argument is predicated on the communication requirements of a multilingual society and the challenges it presents to development experts.

In such contexts communication is not just a matter of technology; it is more a matter of opening up opportunities for interaction and exchange of ideas in an all-inclusive manner, ensuring that people's differences in language and culture do not become hindrances to the development of any community or individual. The language requirement in the promotion of development agenda is mentioned more explicitly by Locksley (2009:2), who says:

Relevance [in development communication] requires that content be readily accessible and meaningful to broad segments of society and that the information delivered be adapted and disseminated in formats and languages that diverse

social groups can understand and act on.... (Underlining added.)

Put together, such observations drive home one message: we have to deal with what in popular business parlance may be referred to as the WIIFM (what's in it for me) question about mother-tongue.

To locate this discourse in the Kenyan context, we need to turn our attention briefly to Kenya's sociolinguistic realities and the constitutional provisions and policies that guide practice and decision-making on language issues.

3. KENYA'S MULTILINGUALISM AND THE RELEVANT CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS

Within its territory, Kenya has over forty indigenous languages and one (ex-colonial) international language, not to mention a number of foreign languages including German, French, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, and Chinese. To regulate communication in this Tower-of-Babel scenario, the Constitution of Kenya 2010 (Article 7) provides as follows (Republic of Kenya 2010):

- (1) The national language of the Republic is Kiswahili
- (2) The official languages of the Republic are Kiswahili and English
- (3) The State shall -
 - (a) promote and protect the diversity of language of the people of Kenya; and
 - (b) promote the development and use of indigenous languages, Kenyan Sign Language, Braille and other communication formats and technologies accessible to persons with disabilities.

Article 44 (2) further says:

A person belonging to a cultural or linguistic community has the right, with other members of that community -

- (a) to enjoy the person's culture and use the person's language; or
- (b) to form, join and maintain cultural and linguistic associations and other organs of civil society.

It is important to note that the Constitution gives individuals operating within the jurisdiction of the Kenyan government the right to speak their languages but, by implication, limits the use of such languages to non-official domains, which are the preserve of the mentioned official languages, i.e. Kiswahili and English. However, Kenya's Language-in-Education Policy, as stated in the Sessional Paper No. 14 of 2012 (Republic of Kenya, 2012), spells out arrangements for languages to share space in educational settings as follows:

- 1) National and County Education Boards shall encourage the use of the two official languages Kiswahili and English both in and out-of-school as provided for in the Constitution of Kenya (2010).
- 2) The language of the catchment area (Mother Tongue) shall be used for child care, pre-primary education and in the education of lower primary children (0-8years).

Those that are against this policy particularly target the part of it that has to do with mother-tongue education, as illustrated by the following argument in the *Daily Nation* (Sunday, February 2, 2014):

The Ministry of Education has got it wrong again as far as policy formulation and addressing priorities in the education sector is concerned. It has come up with Sessional Paper No 14 which states that children under the age of eight be taught in their mother tongue....This policy is retrogressive since it has been overtaken by socio-economic and technological development, and the country's needs as spelled out in Vision 2030. Besides, such a policy contradicts the government's commitment to promoting national unity and cohesion. Apart from being difficult to implement, such a policy will go against the rights of children whose parents work in communities outside their original home areas. (Abagi, 2015)

We shall not pursue this line of argument in this paper. Issues related to the pros and cons of bilingual/multilingual education policies have been discussed extensively in various fora and publications (cf. Okombo, 2001; International Institute of Educational Planning on languages of instruction policy options in Africa, 1997; Grosjean, 1982).

On matters of national cohesion, it is manifestly clear that such arguments go against the spirit of the Constitution of Kenya as quoted above. Indeed, such arguments emanate from the mistaken view that diversity is bad for national development. As Muhlhauser (2004:104) observes:

The processes of streamlining which are taking place in the field of language can be compared to the streamlining of the world's plant and animal species. Both developments have been promoted by people acting with the best intentions - reducing the cost of communication.... Regrettably, those people [have] only a very limited understanding of the nature and function of diversity.

4. THE WIIFM QUESTION

Assuming that the benefits of English and Kiswahili in the life of a Kenyan operating within the complexities of the Kenyan Tower of Babel are adequately understood, what are the benefits accruing to the individual who has had a successful mother-tongue education programme within the policy framework outlined above? This is what, borrowing from business discourse, may be called the WIIFM (What's in it for me) question regarding mother-tongue education.

While it is acknowledged that answering this question exhaustively requires extensive research, there are some benefits that may be identified on the basis of initial observations. One, for example, may mention benefits in the field of leadership, political or otherwise, wherever connecting with the masses is a requirement for success, as is the case during political campaigns and policy vetting and implementation processes, where popular participation must be encouraged. A glaring example is seen in the case of the Turkana County Government, where individuals who managed to get good

school education in very difficult circumstances and proceeded to work away from the Turkana environment are now back to work with a population that is largely illiterate and monolingual (speaking Turkana only).

One may also mention benefits in career development through publications on indigenous knowledge systems such as Professor John Kokwaro's 'Dholuo Botanical Dictionary' series; the late Asenath Odaga's 'Dholuo English Dictionary' and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's exploits in Kikuyu fiction. There are also economic benefits to individuals in such areas as participation in rural small-size enterprises, finding gainful employment in skilled and unskilled labour, securing job opportunities in the emerging ethnic-language media industry (community radios and FM radio stations such as Radio Ramogi (Dholuo), Kameme FM (Kikuyu), Sulwe FM (Luhya), Athiani FM (Kikamba), Kass FM (Kalenjin) etc. Other economic benefits to individuals include: advertising opportunities in vernacular radio/TV programmes and investment in vernacular media technologies.

There are also economic benefits to the country/county, including: promoting development projects (in agriculture, health, education, etc), and promoting trade and commerce within a county. We may also mention benefits based on social mobilization and behaviour change communication, including: HIV/AIDS campaigns, anti-FGM campaigns, vaccination campaigns, voter-registration campaigns, population census campaigns, and anti-drug abuse campaigns, not to mention campaigns for registration of births and deaths, among many others. As in the "Kiswahili kinalipa ((knowing) Kiswahili pays)" slogan mentioned above, the payment (benefits) for learning a language need not be in the form of money. The range of benefits, actual and potential, may be economic, social, intellectual, etc.

5. CONCLUSION

The core argument in this paper has been that mother-tongue languages in Kenya, and Africa as a whole, have a perception problem which prevents their potential speakers from seeing the market value (broadly understood) of learning to speak and write them. The paper calls for research and advocacy aimed at revealing that unseen market value and making the relevant research findings known to the public as a key strategy in the campaign for mother-tongue learning.

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