

Dichotomies and Dynamics in Linguistic Pan-Africanism

SAMSON ABIOLA AJAYI

Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Nigeria.

Abstract. The language question in Pan-Africanism is as complex as the tortuous historical journey of the black continent is. The age-long efforts at arriving at a single or a very few pan-African languages have been confronted with strong and undeniable realities. This paper examines the complexities, through three major areas of: the language question itself, the multiple nationalism consciousness, and the centrality of language to not only identity but also development. It concludes that, varied and mountainous as the dichotomies and dynamics of linguistic pan-Africanism may appear, the fact remains that Africa may not get its developmental efforts right until the language issue, vis-à-vis education, science and technology, is fixed.

Keywords: Language question, dichotomies, dynamics, indigenous languages, development.

1. Introduction

Africa is a continent in quest for genuine development. Her experiences of centuries of slavery and colonization have inferred on her the status of a continent struggling to recover from the pains of the past, rediscover itself and set out to achieve greatness among the committee of societies. Efforts put in so far seem not to achieve the level and speed of development envisioned at independence in the 1960s. The challenges inhibiting or slowing down the pace of development in the continent are many and

daunting. Prominent among them is the language question which is not only the most important element of culture but also a key element in education: education itself being the bedrock of any societal advancement. And since the best forms of education are the ones made available in the language of children, the teaching done to African in the colonial languages has not been able to bring about the scientific and technological springboard needed for development. Moreover, the complexities of a possible adoption of a pan-African language or languages are no less challenging.

This work researches into the major dichotomies and dynamics in the discourse on linguistic pan-Africanism, language and development, including the issues of nationalism, to emphasize the urgent need for proactive, concerted and sustained efforts at national and regional levels, if Africa is not to miss the chances of getting it right in this twenty first century.

2. The Language Question in Pan-Africanism

When one considers linguistic pan-Africanism or the language of pan-Africanism, many questions come to mind, and these questions point to the dichotomies and complexities of the issue of language in Pan-Africanism studies: Why, What, which, how, when and who, are among the many prepositions setting up the questions: Why the need for any Indigenous

language(s) of Pan-Africanism? What about the existing colonial languages? How does Africa intend to arrive of any common African indigenous language(s)? What will happen to the cultures of minor languages? Of which importance is even the need for the adoption of indigenous African Languages given the long history of slavery and colonization? These and many more are questions around discourse on the dynamics in linguistic Pan-Africanism.

Pan-Africanism emphasizes unity beyond identities confined by geographical consideration and narrow nationalism. It emphasizes and champions inclusiveness at socio-cultural and political levels of Africans wherever they may be. Language is central to achieving these laudable objectives of the fathers of Pan-Africanism (Fanon 1967). Language is indeed central to the revalorization and repositioning of the African race for development and growth. In seeking to solve the language question in Pan-African a few pictures and areas of consideration have been drawn up clearly over the years should African adopt outright African languages or adopt inherited colonial languages as lingua franca, or a combination of the two options, or even a creolization of specific African languages?.

A central Pan-Africanism objective therefore, has been to seek ways of revalorizing Africa-languages, seeking, lingua franca from the creative domestication and blending of colonial languages with indigenous African languages, and simply using the colonial languages in authentically African ways, in the manner artificially employed by Amos Tutuola in the Palm Wine Drunkard and his other novels.¹

The options around the languages question in Pan-Africanism upon which scholars have debated and worked over time are:

- To choose and promot a few already dominant Africa indigenous languages as languages of Pan Africanism to replace the colonial languages, and be made to take pre-eminence over other local languages.
- To keep the colonial languages of English, French and Portuguese as more convenient modes of communication diplomacy, education

and development at the expense of African indigenous tongues.

- To do a combination of options 1 and 2 by keeping the colonial languages as of necessity while working on the development of indigenous African languages for socio-cultural relevance of Africa, and
- To adopt efforts at creolizing the colonial Eurocentric languages by injecting into them African idiomatic and structural reality, thereby getting languages that both the low and high in the society could use.

The fact, actually, is that each of these options has its own advantages and disadvantages, its own merits and demerits. None of them is free of prices and consequences. These dichotomies have, over the years, elicited discussions and debates. But these, rather than leading to solving the issue, have led to further dilemma and contradictions. Despite the age long debates; the question of language of Pan-Africanism, is not yet settled. And it does not look anywhere near being settled. This is because results of findings, recommendation from research efforts have not received adequate political will from appropriate quarters. But this is not to say that the language question has lost its value, far from it. If anything, it has received renewed impetus in recent years especially with the revival in consciousness of Africanism. Yet, the solution to the linguistic dilemma in Pan-Africanism doesn't lie in the audio or video tapes of conferences and symposia, not in the shelves of libraries, but in deliberate, decisive, concerted and sustained actions at state, regional and continental levels.

African intellectuals in Africa and the diaspora are busy doing their best in different areas of dichotomy of the language question based on their convictions. For instance Ngugi and Fagunwa, by writing in Kiswahili and Gikuya, and Yoruba respectively, seek to prove that African indigenous languages are also capable and effective vehicles like European languages. By so doing, these African scholars work to support the idea that African indigenous languages can well be languages of Pan-Africanism. The challenges scholars have are those of time, resources, and the fact that

resolving the language question may require to adopt a very few African languages over others, in a deeply cultural and ethnic continent like Africa. Ngugi in *Decolonizing the Mind*² argues that language is at the heart of colonization and if any true decolonization would take place it must also be through language and linguistic politics. Europeans improved their languages to achieve effective colonization; some forms of imposition must have to take place for a genuine decolonization of the mind of the African. It is indeed a truly decolonized mind that can stand up for development and progress.

Questions arise to whether African indigenous languages are capable of being vehicles of science and technology. The answer is that there is no language that is incapable of modernity. Eurocentric languages enjoyed deliberate assistance and support from visionary leaders at some moments of their history for them to be at the level they are today.

The option of creolization as epitomized by the likes of Amos Tutuola and Ahmadu Kourouma, consists in creatively appropriating or endonizing colonial languages by infusing them with African symbolism and idioms. Better known as pidgin English or pidgin French. These languages have festered in capital and major cities of Africa, involving both the learned and the unschooled in effective and productive communication. But nowhere has it been elevated to the official status, even though many writers have published works of literature in pidgin.

One of the challenges with this perspective is that Africa has seen many versions being developed across countries. This is because a pidgin is typically local, whereby a European language is infused with local indigenous linguistic ingredients. From Nigeria through Ghana to Sierra Leone and from Uganda to South Africa through Kenya one comes across versions of Pidgin English due to local colorations.

Moreover, such creolized European languages are not capable of winning Africans in diaspora due to their varied and diversified

contextualization. However, if worked on and harmonized, creolization has the potential of gaining ground across African borders faster. Creolized languages are also capable of carrying scientific and technological knowledge if assisted in this regard at appropriate political, legislative, evocative and educational levels.

Another category of Africanizing colonial languages, aside pure creolization, is the one adopted by writers such as Achebe, Ekwensi, Soyinka and Kourouma. These authors, though writing in the colonial languages, rather than writing in pure English or French, as the case may be, they consciously attempt to blend their colonial language their indigenous tongue. These writers see colonial languages as tools for speaking to a larger African audience, including Africans in Diaspora. Nyamnjoh and Shoro (1992) put it more succinctly in their paper entitled “Language, Mobility, African Writers and pan-Africanism:

...these authors include African symbols, characters, rhetoric, ethos and creative use of colonial language within their texts. Here, the litmus test for Pan-Africanism is not necessarily in how authentically African – language is, but rather, in how creative Africans are in their appropriation of colonial languages to address issues of Pan-African resonance. In this way, colonial languages lose their foreignness through creative local usage.

Through the efforts of this category of writers it is clear that Africans are not passive consumers of colonial languages. Creativity and others experiences come to the fore in the process of using colonial languages.

This part is germane against the background of argument, by scholars like Ngugi and Akinwumi Ishola, that for African literature to be truly African, it has to be written in indigenous languages. This work argues in support of Achebe and others that Africa can't do away completely with colonial languages, because they too have now become depository of African memories in e-text. Moreover, though a growing number of Africans can now fend for themselves in both a European and an African language, the fact still remains that only a few texts are

available in indigenous African languages. Only a few authors have ventured into writing in their local languages.

3. Nationalism and Pan-Africanism

Colonial apologists have argued that the colonial enterprise had already sown the seed of Pan-Africanism, as the colonial languages brought together nationalities hitherto divided by thousands of local tongues and ethnic differences. They claim that through the imposition of a few European languages colonization had united Africans and saved them from tribal wars going on in Africa before the settling of the Whiteman. But they forget or refuse to see the negative effects of the balkanization of Africa at the wake of the Berlin Conference of 1884/85 where Africa was divided not minding the socio-cultural and ethnic affinities of African peoples.

The fact remains that Europe and other continents also have a great number of tongues before the major ones, through share historical evolvment, took centre stages and became national languages. Even in those European countries till today some minor languages are still in existence in rural areas at the fringes of their societies. This is to say that if left on their own African societies would also have evolved with bigger and stronger nationalities coming to the fore. And thereby major indigenous languages would have emerged by share interplay of natural and historical manifestations.

Today, the fact is that though independent countries, each African nation houses within its borders hundreds of nationalities, some of which are clearly distinct from one another and indigenous languages that are poles apart structurally, idiomatically and semantically.

One of the tragedies of colonization which made many to allude to it as a divide and rule enterprise is the fact that many nationalities are left divided in bits between countries, and in the hands of different colonial systems. But be as it may, in the face of present realities, Africa can strive to get the best for her Pan-African efforts

for development and growth. Africans cannot forever continue to cry over the ills of colonization about six decades into political independence. Having said that, given the fact that every nationality has its right of existence in the face of growing consciousness of roots and ancestry, nationalism becomes a potential danger against Pan-Africanism, if care is not taken. This is what scholars call “narrow nationalism” which is a threat to the ideals of Pan-Africanism envisioned by Nkrumah and others. Franz Fanon (1967) did warn against the dangers of falling for the temptation of excessive ethnic sentimentalism and over consciousness of nationalities. Indeed, it is only with a great sense of flexible inclusion that the objectives of pan-Africanism can be achieved. In recent years, Nyanjoh (2006), Englebert (2009) and Phaswane Mpe (2001) among others have spoken against the wave of dangerous narrow nationalism and ethnic revival sweeping some regions of Africa. A phenomenon which is capable of easily and quickly reverse the little achievements recorded in Pan-Africanism efforts so far. Crises of citizenship in South Africa, Côte-d’Ivoire, Rwanda in recent years with resonance of nationalistic terms such as Makwerekwere (South Africa), Ivoirété (Côte-d’Ivoire) and Hutu-Tutsi (Rwanda), which all point to divides along ethnic and nationalist lines, are grave dangers to Pan-Africanism. Mutual acceptance must take place before any linguistic policy that would involve adopting one indigenous language over the other could be successful. An atmosphere of hatred fanned by narrow nationalism and over bloated ethnic consciousness cannot help national integration not to talk of regional and continental integration.

Narrow nationalism can easily jeopardize Pan-Africanism, and unless Africans are conscious of their common historical experiences, it is easy to forget the bond of destiny that binds together all nationalities. As it is today no nation, no nationality can claim to be able to stand and prosper on its own. If by stroke of chance or opportunity or turn of events, a nation is prospering today, it should be humbled by the past, the individual past and the collective past. That is why Mpe (2001) in his work of fiction

asks through one of the characters if it were possible that South African could become so oblivious of the gestures of Pan-African hospitality and solidarity extended to them during apartheid, for them to now turn back and treat their African brothers now trooping into South African as common criminals and pests. The point being emphasized here is that the language question or questions in Pan-Africanism remains only a mirage if suspicion and animosity still fester in bilateral relations and among ethnic nationalities. Ki Zerbo (1986) aptly captures this position:

The historical and contemporary dilemma in which African peoples find themselves reflects a crisis of consciousness, or rather a crisis of lack of consciousness – consciousness about what actually happened to us and the factors responsible for it, consciousness of the ultimate intentions of our “partners in various abortive programmes of development. To deal with this crisis of consciousness, we must first of all turn our attention to “that most manifest and coherent of all cultural systems – language...”

Nyamnjoh and Shoro (1992) suggest what they call “Counter-actions to narrow nationalism. In their joint work these researchers focused mainly on working on the connectivity between African historical realities and Greek deities and other Eurocentric realities. They posit that their “Thesis of Afro politanism as founded in tracing the linkages to how these everyday practices have been picked up by African writers as diagnostic of what would otherwise be taken as diverse ways of being. The counter-actions we suggest here against the effects of narrow nationalism in Africa are more political and pragmatic.

Narrow nationalism and ethnic revival spring up because of failure of leadership. Failure of leadership occasioned by parochial tribal sentiments and actions by African political leaders, failure in providing dividends of governance evenly, failure in form of corruption misappropriation of public funds. Consequently, in political dispensation in Africa, statements or questions often arise such as: “is he our son?”, “when would it be the turn of our tribe to rule?”, “we want restructuring” “let us control our resources”. These indices of political leadership

failure are counter-productive to genuine efforts of Pan-Africanism, because charity begins at home. Pan-Africanism can only succeed if there is national cohesion within national borders. If nationalities within the countries’ borders are at loggerheads with one another regional and continental unity is a mirage where things work well, where the people enjoy dividends of political patronage, were indices of growth and development are visible for all to see, nobody cares about who is leading or what is the tribal extraction of the leader. So, the point here is that good selfless and visionary leadership at all levels is an effective counter action to narrow nationalism in Africa.

Another counter-action capable of stemming the rising trend of narrow nationalism in Africa, which this study seeks to suggest, is a full restructuring of Africa. We suggest another round-table talk involving all nations and nationalities in Africa, a sort of counter Berlin Conference, where a re-grouping and re-amalgamation of nationalities, irrespective of nations or countries in which they presently fall, will take place. This implies a re-shaping of national borders to reflect true nationalism. The very minor nationalities could be given the choice of where they wish to belong. Such a Restructuring Conference, unlike the Berlin Conference, would enjoy the benefits of sound empirical evidences and data.

The demands of an eventual holding and a possible success of a Pan-African Restructuring Conference are not doubt many and daunting. Indeed if such a project would take off at all, it would take the commitment, understanding and selfless disposition of political leaders in each country. It is when incumbent leaders see the need for and benefits in it that they would influence decision making and policy engineering in their respective countries to open door for a possible Pan-African meeting of such agenda. That is, the understanding for a cross-border Pan-African restructuring exercise can only start at the level of each government entity.

Moreover, a possible Pan-African restructuring Conference would require pre-conferences to be conducted by each country in order to provide

the central Pan-African meeting with the required data to work with. Another additional approach could be that the African Union (AU) could conduct research on the feasibility and modus operandi of such a conference. A research work of that nature would be carried out by professionals across Africa and be adequately funded by all with the support of the United Nations (UN). This will avail the Pan-African Restructuring Conference with empirical data to work without to avoid lapses and post-conference protests and rejection. Restructuring of this nature would be painstaking and time consuming, if it is to succeed and be long lasting and enhance Pan-African Unit.

The benefits of a Pan-African restructure are many, no doubt. Nationalities would be part of the decision on where they belong. More unified and socio nations would emerge. Fewer nations with nationalities that agree to work and live together would emerge. These advantages would be a solid launch-pad for a genuine Pan-Africanism, politically, linguistically, and every economically. Dangerous suspicions, Energy sapping and resource consuming conflicts would be nipped in the bud, all things being equal.

Somebody may argue that the idea of Pan-African restructuring is late and dangerous. But it is never too late to make corrections in life. Moreover, the Berlin Conference took place in 1884/85, just a little over one and a half centuries ago. If it is agreed that the artificial division of nationalities into nations is affecting unity and development, then it is never too late to make amends. Also, no danger inherent in that project can ever be as big as that of continuing to live together in an atmosphere of suspicion, tension and disunity. The danger in keeping nationalities with grudges together is more than any possible negative effects of a restructuring. And in fact, it is an atmosphere of confidence and mutual acceptance that can encourage and facilitate the adoption of some major indigenous languages as eventual language, of Pan-Africanism. Since it is clear now, that no genuine development can take place with Africans using European languages as mediums of research, creativity and technology, concrete

deliberate steps must be taken to free the African soul from restructure hybridity. A similar view expressed by Kofi Anyidoho (1992)⁶ holds that a people denied the opportunity to name themselves, their own experiences, and in a language native to their very souls, their secret selves, is a people degraded to the state of shadows, shadows of other people's identity; it is the strong room in which the inherent soul of a people can be protected from "the too rough fingers" of a predatory world (Simala, 2003: 39)⁷.

In whatever way African chooses to approach the issue of adopting one or a very few indigenous languages as Pan-Africanism language(s) one fact is undeniable: Africa cannot continue to remain focused on preserving thousands of languages that have increasing marginal utility and relevance in a rapidly changing world of the twenty first century. Instead for African nations to continue to waste scarce resources on developing a multitude of due to ethnic sentiments and narrow nationalism, it is high time collective effort were geared towards promoting the very most viable few ones.

4. Language and Development

Education is the bedrock of development. Self-development and national societal development Experience all over the world has proved that countries that build nationhood on indigenous national languages develop better and faster, while nations that have foreign languages as their media of education and research tend to lag behind in development ratings. European countries and indeed northern hemisphere nations fall into the first category while Africa falls into the last category.

The relationship between language, education and national development is deep and diverse. Language fosters unity and readiness to work together for common goals for development, especially when the language is nationality based and the nation is nationality built, unlike the African situation where dozens of nationalities and languages compete for relevance and supremacy in the national sphere. In such a situation, rather than being a chord and

band of national cohesion, languages become instruments of politicking and divide-and-rule in the hands of visionless leaders. Such a situation in turn retards growth and development.

Education is key to emancipation and development, that is why, if Africa is to develop well and fast, a review of national educational policies that places national languages as mediums of instruction, teaching and research, is inevitable. Kwesi kwaa Prah (2000: ii) avers and rightly so that: "...The developmental transformation needed to eradicate poverty in Africa is only possible if we can take knowledge and modern science to the masses in their own languages.

There is therefore the need for linguistic revival and repositioning of indigenous African languages in teaching and research. The use of the language of culture of children enhances assimilation, knowledge acquisition and improves creativity. When children start by learning how to read and write in their mother tongue, they learn not only science but English language better. The experiment of Fafunwa (1989) in Ile-Ife, Nigeria, in the 1970s remains poignant where two groups of pupils were given instruction from the scratch, one group with Yoruba, the local indigenous tongue, and the other with English. English was just introduced to the first group as one of the subjects. At the end of the experimentation, the group which received instruction in Yoruba did far better in all subjects than the other one, at the school leaving examination after six years. The research effort underscores the fact that children learn better and faster in their mother tongue. This implies that indigenous languages are germane to national education and development.

There is therefore no doubt that the Eurocentric languages of English, French and Portuguese used for instruction in Africa mean a barrier to knowledge for the masses of African children, and to development. If the situation must change for the benefit of Africa and her teeming populations, policy makers at both national and pan-African levels need to work for standardization and harmonization of efforts towards solving the language question.

Legislators, administrators, educationists, linguists, researchers etc., all have a stake in this. It must be emphasized that Africa's development, more than ever before, must be research driven. Most developmental efforts have proved fruitless so far because they are not research driven, and where they are research driven, coordination and harmonization of findings have lacked. Moreover, "development research in Africa has failed to make substantial improvement in the quality of life for the majority, mainly because development theory and practice have failed to exploit local languages as media for research and development work" (Kitula Kingei, 2000:25). In fact, no meaningful development can take place without the full participation of the masses, and the masses cannot fully participate in a language foreign to them and their culture. The importance of speaking to people in their own languages is sine qua non to development. Djité (1990) notes that there is considerable research which clearly demonstrates that less than 15% of the African population of the francophone countries barely function in French, while 90% of the same population functions very well in the widespread African lingua franca such as Hausa, Djula/Bamananka, Fulfulde, Kiswahili and wolof.

The introduction or adoption of indigenous African languages for education and research has its challenges no doubt, but the long term benefits certainly, surpass the challenges. Where English or French have reigned supreme for almost a century, sentiments, complexes, fears, doubts cannot be overcome overnight. One of the challenges certainly is that schools compete to give instruction in English or French, as the case may be, because any school that uses a local indigenous language as medium of instruction would not get students, especially in this era where private schools spring up all over the place due to reduced government investment in the sector. No private school owner would take that risk, and governments are no longer building new schools, yet the population of children keeps increasing. One other challenge is the sentiment attached to indigenous languages by their owners due to cultural affiliation and, at times, to ethnic rivalry. Mark

Zuckerberg, the Facebook man, came to Nigeria in 2017 and eulogized the qualities of one of the main Nigerian languages, Hausa. The uproar that greeted the statement innocently but genuinely made by the technology giant shows that any attempt to adopt an indigenous African language over others, must be done with tact and wisdom.

Similar experiences to that of Zuckerberg have taken place in many countries in Africa and the diaspora. In Seychelles, for instance, it is recorded that the introduction of Créole in elementary school as language of instruction was vehemently attacked by the Elite that preferred English and French to Créole viewed as a street language; whereas, Créole is the language of the masses, spoken by everybody in the society, both the high and the low.¹⁰ In South Africa, policy makers seem to have doused possible rivalry among the major ethnic groups by pronouncing all eleven major languages in the country as equal and official languages. And this is fully backed up by appropriate legislative enactment in section 6(1) of the country's constitution.

In the light of the foregoing, this study emphasizes strong political will at national and Pan-Africa levels, as the examples of Seychelles and South Africa point out. The establishment of Regulatory Boards, Language Academies and curriculum Development Centers which would be given tools and freedom to research and work out policies on African indigenous languages is also recommended. Also, like Obanya¹² rightly puts it, African policy-makers and Western aid donors should devote more attention to strengthening African indigenous languages as languages of instruction, especially in basic education, to start with, if Africa is not to miss her long overdue development again in the 21st century; if Africa is to stand and be counted among societies that have crossed the Rubicon of under development.

Conclusion

Efforts of scholars, educationists, policy makers towards solving the pan-African language question have not yielded desirable results. The

results are not at all commensurate with the resources deployed over the years. Many things have worked and are still working against the laudable objectives of Pan-Africanism, especially at the linguistic level. The spring of narrow nationalism fed by failure of governments to be detribalized and to deliver dividends of governance, has been a major factor militating against pan-African linguistic efforts.

Also, the lack genuine commitment by policy makers at national and continental levels remains another serious challenge. Even, where some commitment is shown, lack of continuity and sustainable coordination has been a problem. Education sector which is the bedrock of any scientific and technological advancement remains available in the colonial foreign languages.

It is still possible for Africa to achieve the much needed linguistic pan-Africanism and join the league of developing continents in this twenty first century, if her intellectuals and policy makers at all levels can shake off their myopic and narrow considerations and work committedly and concertedly.

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