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English Language and Sustainable Development in Ghana

Emmanuel Sarfo, M. Phil.

Abstract

The choice of English as either national or official language in English as Second Language (ESL) situations has been the subject of many academic and political discourses for a long time now. After (colonial) independence, many African nations, including Ghana, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda and Zambia, have had to grapple with the problem of language choice. Many people have argued for the choice and development of local languages for national and/or official purposes. However, it appears that the argument for the choice of local languages is based on language loyalty and nationalism rather than real socio-politico-economic needs of the times. It is my conviction that the argument must be based on the reality of the social, political and economic needs of the 21st Century. This paper, therefore, sets out to argue for a development of right attitudes towards English; for the English language has come to stay as a communicative tool for social, political and economic development.

Key words: official language, national language, language policy

Introduction

One major problem that has confronted most governments around the world is whether to use one language or another as national and/or official language. The choice of English as either national or official language in English as Second Language (ESL) situations in particular has always been contentious among academics and politicians.

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After independence, many African nations, including Ghana, Nigeria, Namibia and Zambia, have had to grapple with the problem of language choice. Many scholars (Bodomo, 1996; Dolphyne and Boateng, 1998; Ofori-Panin, 2009) have argued for the choice and development of local languages for national and/or official purposes. This argument for the choice of local languages is based on language and nationalistic loyalty rather than the socio-politico-economic needs of the times. It is my conviction that the argument for the language choice must be based on the reality of the current social, political and economic needs of the 21st Century. The paper discusses the issue by considering the use of English and language policy in Ghana, arguments in favour of English as a tool for national development, and conclusion and implications.

English and Language Policy in Ghana

Everywhere in the world, there appears to be one language problem or another. “Every country ... has its language problems ... All the former British colonies ... were left with the English language on the departure of the colonial government, and this legacy has turned out to be an ambiguous one” (Banjo, 1997: p.307). For instance, in Africa, countries such as Ghana, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe use English as their official language. In these situations, English serves as a lingua franca and so defuses ethnic conflicts, and yet questions the authenticity and identities of these users. This has always resulted in arguments about the choice of indigenous languages for official and national purposes because the use of English as official or national language strikes at the root of national pride (Banjo, 1997) since English is a colonial language. In other words, the fight against English has mostly been part of the struggle for total independence, as Ngũgĩ (1981: 28) puts it: “I believe that my writing in Gĩkũyũ language, a Kenyan language, and African language, is part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African peoples” (quoted in Coulmas, 2006: 182). In Ghana, for example, after independence, the government under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah made frantic efforts at choosing a local language for official/national purposes. This, however, failed due to a number of reasons – ethnicity, underdevelopment of the local languages, among others.

After Nkrumah, many other people have made calls for the adoption of one local language as official and/or national language. For instance, in the Saturday, November 7, 1998 edition of the “Daily Graphic”, Prof. Florence Abena Dolphyne of the Department of Linguistics, and Dr. Barfuo Akwasi Abayie Boateng of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, called for a national or official language for Ghana. In the Friday, August 7, 2009 edition of the same paper, Kwabena Ofori-Panin of Living Education Aid added his voice to the call, while in the Monday, August 17, 2009 edition of the paper, Dennis Yao Sokpoe of Greenstreet Lane, Tanyigbe-Atidzi, called for a referendum on a common language for Ghana. The calls – both formal and informal – have been numerous. However, what we need to ask is: What are the reasons for such a call? Are the reasons the result of identity crisis, ideological or practical socio-politico-economic development?

According to Coulmas (2006: 185):

... political choices of language are variously motivated and take various forms ... it is possible by means of political decisions to determine the language that is used for certain purposes and how it is used. In many cases, an explicit language policy is adopted because of the coexistence of several languages in one polity and the necessity of regulating their functions and mutual relationships.

Thus, since 1951, Ghana (with about 79 languages) has been grappling with language policy issues due to multilingualism (Edu-Buandoh, 2006). The Accelerated Development Plan for Education (1951) stated that English should be taught as a course at the beginning of the school system and a local vernacular used as the medium of instruction. For lack of clarity of the expression “As soon as possible, there will be a transition from the vernacular to English as the medium of instruction...”, in the Language Policy of 1957, the policy was modified to state that English should become the medium of instruction from Primary Four. Again, due to disparities in the access to the English language, the policy was once again modified, stating that as children in the metropolitan and other urban areas got exposed to the language faster than those in the rural areas, English could become the medium of instruction in the metropolitan and urban areas earlier than Primary Four (Education Review Committee, 1966).

The argument raged on and in 2002, during the New Patriotic Party government’s administration, the then Minister of Education, Prof. Ameyaw-Akumfi, on behalf of the government of Ghana, declared English as the medium of instruction at all levels of formal education (“Daily Graphic”, May 17, 2002: 1 & 3). However, just recently, after taking over the reigns of governance in 2009, the National Democratic Congress government has reversed the policy to using local languages as medium of instruction at the lower primary and English as a subject. It must be noted that the argument is still on-going as some Ghanaians are still not in favour of the current policy.

It must be noted that in the implementation of these policies, parents had (and still have) indirectly played various roles. In some cases, some parents attempted to make policy implementers and teachers flout the policies and introduce pupils to English as early as possible. In some schools, some teachers were discouraged from using the local vernaculars even as early as Primary One. This was because most parents saw no “utility” and “economic force”, which are the driving force underlying language policies (Coulmas, 2006), in the local languages. It must be noted that “... language planning choices are undertaken in the expectation that they will affect future developments in predictable ways” (Coulmas, 2006: 187). And so since there were no foreseeable practical benefits of learning the local languages, parents sought to discourage the learning of such languages. For instance, Andoh-Kumi (1997: 117) quotes an educationist, J. T. Yankah, as having remarked that it was pointless to teach any of the languages as a subject in schools, “for such insignificant and uncultivated local dialects can never become so flexible as to assimilate readily new words and to expand their vocabularies to meet new situations ... and their absence of literature discredits them and the use of any of them as medium of instruction”.

The reaction of some parents to the language policy as stated above is true of Coulmas’ (2006: 199) saying that:

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As the social functions and opportunities to use a small language diminish, it loses the support of its users. Parents see better chances for their children if they receive schooling in a more widely spoken language and children fail to develop an interest in language they consider obsolete and unsuitable for modern life. Shift to a larger language is the likely outcome.

Axelrod (1984: 24), also, avers that ‘to be effective, a government cannot enforce any standard it chooses but must elicit compliance from a majority of the governed. To do this requires setting the rules so that most of the governed find it profitable to obey most of the time’ (quoted in Coulmas, 2006: 194).

In offering a proposal for addressing language policy and planning issues in Ghana in particular and Africa in general, Bodomo (1996) advocates a trilingual language regime. He proposes that the mother tongue should be used widely as the medium of communication and education in metropolitan, municipal and district assemblies in Ghana and first cycle institutions. After that an African language should be introduced at the regional level and the second cycle institutions, and another language of wider communication such as English or French introduced and used at the national or international and the tertiary education levels. Bodomo’s proposal appears quite nominal. He appears to see language and language learning as numerical such that we can always know exactly the number of years every person can use to learn a language to become proficient in one language or another. One wonders how feasible it would be to apply this trilingual model. If serious learning of English or French has to be delayed until tertiary levels of education, Ghanaians (or Africans), I believe, can hardly become proficient in the two languages. This could rather retard development rather than promote it, looking at the economic and political importance of English (and French).

Arguments in Favour of English as a Tool for National Development

To justify the choice of English as the official language of independent Namibia, Candlin (1989) offers an eight-point criterion. These are unity, acceptability, familiarity, feasibility, science and technology, pan-Africanism, wider communication and the United Nations. On the issue of unity, Candlin states that the language chosen must be able to unify the people towards national reconstruction; it must be a language “with which Namibians, both inside and outside the country, have some familiarity and, preferably, one with which there has been some short- and long-term experience in the educational system”(p.75). Feasibility has to do with whether the chosen language has the available resources for educational purposes, such as books and materials, teachers and teachers’ trainers as well as other professionals for curriculum design and educational administration. Again, the chosen language must be able to meet virtually all scientific and technological needs. The said language must as well be spoken widely in Africa so that it can serve as a bond between Namibia and other African countries and the international community such as within the United Nations. According to Candlin, the only language that satisfies all the criteria is English (except for acceptability, which, I think, may be argued against – even though such an argument may arise from language loyalty and the bid to protect identities).

Candlin's eight-point criterion largely applies to the Ghanaian situation also. It could be said that, of all the eight points raised, Ghana hardly satisfies any of them; not even acceptance because "Linguistic wars are always also political and cultural wars" (Kramsch, 2001: 73). The choice of a local language may spur ethnic and tribal wars in Ghana (Edu-Buandoh, 2006), for if you give a language power, you give its native speakers educational, social, political and economic power over others. A case in point is the Kenyan experience where, for example, Sure (1998; cited from Edu-Buandoh, 2006) reports that the choice of Kiswahili as national language in Kenya has led to intolerance among speakers of different languages – Kiswahili does not carry the social value and goods that English carries, and many Kenyans use Kiswahili only for interpersonal interaction and not for complex cultural activities. Thus, Kiswahili has not united Kenyans. In terms of feasibility, it is clear that no Ghanaian language passes the test. Andoh-Kumih (1997) reports that by 1968, the following were the figures for the number of published items in the various Ghanaian languages: Akan, 511; Ga, 192; Ewe, 185; Nzema, 69; Dangme, 52; Dagbani, 41; while others ranged between 25 and 1. Although 1968 appears a bit far, the information provided should give us an idea of the state of local language development in Ghana.

Coulmas (2006), also, offers some consideration for the choice of an official or national language. According to him any language policy aimed at choosing a language for official and/or national purposes must consider status planning, corpus planning and acquisition planning. To him:

Language planning involves making informed choices about language that counter quasi-natural, market-driven developments that are expected to take place in the absence of any intervention, or that have taken place, with or without intervention, and which the language policy is intended to halt or reverse (p.186).

Thus the policy should expect to affect future developments in predictable ways. In terms of status, the language(s) can perform different functions. For instance, one language can be used for education, law, government and administration, and international affairs and all other identifiable groups while another language performs other functions in society. However, speech and language behaviour in private domains is not easy to control. Therefore, governments making a deliberate choice of a language as national and/or official language may not guarantee the use of that language by individuals privately. This is because individuals must have a motivation for using a particular language – to satisfy a certain kind of need. The implication here is that if a Ghanaian language is chosen as national/official language it may not practically reverse or promote any developmental trends. Those in favour of a Ghanaian language may argue that it will allow as much participation in local governance as possible (Bodomo, 1996). However, it must be noted that in the various metropolitan, municipal and district assemblies in Ghana, the medium of communication is a local vernacular and so, for example, if Akan or Ewe becomes a national language, it would hardly be used in other assemblies that are in non-Akan or non-Ewe communities. This counters the issue of acceptability as put forward by Candlin (1989). Note that Akan is the most widely spoken language in Ghana followed by Ewe (Ofori-Panin, 2009; Edu-Buandoh, 2006; Dolphyne, 1998; Bodomoh, 1996).

On corpus planning (regulatory measures designed to influence structural aspects of a language such as the lexicon, grammar, writing system and spelling rules), Coulmas says that it is theoretical to think that terminology adaptation is possible for all languages because most speech communities lack the resources as a result of which “only a tiny fraction of the languages of the world are adjusted to science, technology, modern education, government and commerce” (p.197). For example, even though Arabic is one of the most developed languages of the world (one of the six languages of the United Nations) and has no principal lexical limitations, it is practically not able to function as an access language to modernity and real and practical socio-economic and political needs of the speakers in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia (Salhi, 2002; Sirles, 1999). Also, corpus planning “requires sophisticated know-how, an institutional framework and considerable funds that only rich countries can afford. The general point that economic disadvantage constrains linguistic choices comes to bear here” (Coulmas, p.196).

The point is that if Arabic faces such a problem in these three countries, what would be the status of a Ghanaian language which is chosen as national and/or official language? In other words, such a move is theoretically possible, but practically impossible. It is not feasible (Candlin, 1989) for a Ghanaian language to be developed to meet corpus planning requirements.

One other thing that Coulmas (2006) thinks affects language choices is acquisition (or acceptance) planning. According to Ladefoged (1992: 810), “It is paternalistic of linguists to assume that they know what is best for the community”. This is because “acceptance of status decision does not automatically produce a language practice in compliance with that decision” (cited in Coulmas, 2006: 195). For instance, in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, most Arabs use Arabic for national and religious pride, and doesn’t imply an uncompromising commitment to use Arabic in all communication domains (Sirles, 1999; Salhi, 2002). Because French occupies an important position in education and administration and is symbolic of access to modernity, the educated elite have been quite unwilling to renounce French, the sole official language of the three countries during colonial period (Coulmas, 2006).

It is clear from the foregoing that instituting a language policy is one thing and the practical application of the policy is another. This brings clearly to the fore that whilst the government of Ghana may officially declare one local language as national and/or official, compliance with such a decision from the governed may be impracticable or may not be realised. Whilst most parents/citizens see English as the only language of utility which can afford them real social, political and economic needs for their advancement, it appears that those who call for the adoption of a local language as national/official language do so as a result of language loyalty, nationalism and identity.

This is because language is an identity marker and culture-tied (Edu-Buandoh, 2006) and so when people see their language dominated by another language they feel that their identity, economic and ideological empowerment are threatened (Kramsch, 2001). That is why, notwithstanding its low-prestige, African-American vernacular, for example, has not been discarded by African-Americans: it functions to express their black identity (Rickford and Rickford, 2000; from Coulmas, 2006: 177). According to Frempong (2005), maintaining all

languages in a community is important for cultural literacy, development, and identity formation. However, it must be noted that identity is not fixed and “Identity change is possible ... More generally speaking, economic incentives provide a principal rationale for crossing group boundaries and identity change” (Coulmas, 2006: 175).

What we need, then, is literacy development in English. For instance, in Singapore, English remains “the *de facto* working language of the nation and the sole medium of instruction in all its schools ... assigning its other three official languages, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil, an L2 status in the school curriculum” (Rubdy et al 2008: 40). In Singapore, “English has also acquired a value for expressing the cultural and national identities of Singapore and for facilitating inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic interaction within the country” (Pakir, 1998; cited in Rubdy et al). It is interesting to note that about 80% of the Singaporean population have some command of English. A population census indicates an increase in literacy in English from 56% in 1980 to 71% (15% increase) in 2000 (at the expense of, for example, Tamil which dropped from 52.2% to 42.9%), far surpassing the figures for the mother tongues. This phenomenon is quite revealing because English became the medium of instruction in all Singaporean schools in 1979 (Rudby et al). The apparent loss of support for the local languages is the result of the people seeing English as the language of utility and modernity.

It can be argued that the economic growth of Singapore is partly the result of the positive attitude towards English and the subsequent high literacy rate in it, and not because they have indigenous languages as national or official languages. Singapore now claims ownership of English because “English has also acquired a value for expressing the cultural and national identities of Singapore” (Rubdy et al, 2008: 40; Mary Tay, 1993); Singapore is “well on the way becoming a largely English speaking country” (Newbrook, 1987: 6; quoted from Rubdy et al).

The English situation in Ghana is far different and below the levels of literacy rates and status of English in Singapore. In the 2000 Population and Housing Census (p.67), it is stated that “For the country as a whole 42.6 per cent of the population are illiterates while 16.4 per cent are literate in English only, 2.5 per cent are literate in a local language only and 38.1 per cent are literate in both English and a Ghanaian language”. It is clear, then, that the number of people who are literate in English is more than those who are literate in our local languages, emphasising the fact that the teaching and learning of any of the local languages in Ghana may even be more difficult than the teaching and learning of English.

Conclusion/Implications

This paper has tried to argue against the adoption of a Ghanaian language as national and/or official language due to the inherent problems associated with such a decision (even though it does accept the teaching and learning of the local languages).

The paper observes that it will not be feasible to choose a local language as national and/or official language in Ghana because of ethnicity, lack of acceptability, lack of utility, lack of corpus development for the scientific and technological needs of the 21st century (Coulmas, 2006; Candlin, 1989). However, we can teach, study and learn the local languages for some local and personal purposes, and not for official or national purposes. Moreover, if speaking

or using a language offers no practical and real socio-economic needs, speakers will switch to another language that offers such incentives, for “Language loyalty persists as long as the economic and social circumstances are conducive to it, but if some other language proves to have greater value, a shift to that other language begins” (Dorian 1982: 42). As Ofori-Panin (Daily Graphic, August 7, 2009: 9) puts it “It is great to be proud of one’s identity; but of what benefit is it if it keeps one in isolation and poverty”.

Thus the paper has implications for positive attitudinal development towards English. Attitudes affect language learning. It has been identified that “learner attitudes toward the target language and its speakers play a central role in determining levels of success for the acquisition of the language” (McKenzie, 2008: p.63). According to Spolsky (1989), an individual’s motivation to study a language comes from his/her attitude towards the native speakers of the said language and the use to which such a language will be put. In other words, attitudes condition motivation. There is no doubt that in most ESL countries, if people are not willing to learn English, it is because of colonialism. The learning of English still makes such people feel that they are being colonised linguistically (Ngũgĩ, 1981; Banjo, 1997). Such people have a lackadaisical attitude towards the learning of English. However, in terms of what practical use a language can be put, English is the most important language – It is the language of modernity and utility. And so those who share the latter view normally have a positive attitude towards English. Thus it is clear that the majority of those who support local language choices in ESL situations do so for reasons of linguistic identity, while those on the other side appear to be more practical and represent a more objective position.

It is, therefore, important to develop a positive attitude towards English for a sustainable development through communication. Is it not possible for us to claim ownership of English, as is being done in Singapore, to express our own culture? Can we not localise the English language to suit the Ghanaian (and also African) cultural experience and situation? (Achebe, 1964: cited in Crystal, 2003). What we have to bear in mind is that the English language has come to stay as an important communicative tool for ESL countries, especially those in Africa. We should, thus, begin a serious and strong literacy-in-English campaign at all levels of society in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa.

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