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Review article

The question of school language in multilingual societies: the example of Ghana

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Abstract. The language used in school represents a crucial and polemic question in multilingual societies. Sub-Saharan Africa represents a world region with a significant linguistic diversity. Until recently, most of these countries were European colonies. During colonial times, the colonizer language generally dominated in schools. After their independence, many countries have continued using that language as the instructional language. It is observed that quite often, children are schooled in a second language, and teachers must teach in a foreign language. This situation results in potentially negative consequences affecting school learning. The specific example of Ghana is examined. It is pointed out that in Ghana during recent years frequent changes have been introduced in school language. Commonly, English is used as the primary school language. Because this association between language and school learning, speaking English provides not only significant social prestige, but also results in better working opportunities. The question of so-called “international schools” in Ghana is also examined; most of these schools do not teach any of the Ghanaian languages, but a foreign language, such as French, Spanish, or Portuguese. It is argued that these international schools may have adverse consequences on Ghanaian children who attend them. Ghana, however, has been a strong advocate of the so-called “African personality” and the use of English as the medium of instruction is in overt opposition to this ideology. It is concluded that children schooled in a second language, and teachers teaching in language that they do not master well enough may represent a potential barrier for the social, scientific, and economic development of sub-Saharan African countries, such as Ghana.

Key words: multilingualism, Ghana, schooling, English, national languages

Introduction

Worldwide, there are close to 7,000 different languages (Ethnologue, 2020). World languages however, have a quite uneven distribution: whereas one third of the languages have less than 1,000 speakers, 23 languages account for more than half the world’s population. Furthermore, throughout human history some languages have played the role of “lingua franca”, and hence, the number of speakers with

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a second language has notoriously increased. In Europe, the lingua franca has changed across the time: Greek, Latin, French, and now English. In some countries of the former Soviet Union, as another example, Russian continues being used as the lingua franca. In many former European colonies, European languages have been adopted as the lingua franca and are even used as official or co-official language (Crystal, 2010). As an example, in India, where about 447 different languages are spoken (Ethnologue, 2020), English has the status of “subsidiary official language” and frequently is used in education, and governmental activities. However, in India only 0.02% of the population speaks English as a native language.

Because of the complex ethnic composition, Sub-Saharan Africa represents a world region with a significant linguistic diversity. Northern African countries (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt), however, are mostly Arabic speaking areas, and hence, are not in conflict with the language used for instructional purposes. In most of the sub-Saharan countries, however, a significant diversity of national languages is spoken. Table presents the languages spoken in the 20 largest African sub-Saharan countries.

Table

Languages spoken in the 20 largest African sub-Saharan countries

Country	Inhabitants (millions)	Number of languages	Official language(s)
Democratic Republic of the Congo	91.9	242	French
Sudan	40.5	215	English & Arabic
Chad	14.9	120	French & Arabic
Niger	21.5	20	French
Angola	30.0	39	Portuguese
Mali	18.5	80	French
South Africa	58.7	35	11 official languages
Ethiopia	109.2	38	Amharic
Mauritania	4.5	10	Arabic
Tanzania	57.3	58	Swahili
Nigeria	191.0	520	English
Namibia	2.7	30	English
Mozambique	29.8	43	Portuguese
Zambia	17.1	70	English
Somalia	14.7	5	Somali & Arabic
Central African Republic	4.7	72	French & Sango
Ghana	29.0	79	English
Kenya	47.6	68	English & Swahili
Cameroon	20.1	250	French & English
Zimbabwe	14.5	16	16 official languages

Source: (Ethnologue, 2020).

Most of the 54 African countries, until recently were European colonies, and the language of the colonizer country quite frequently was used as the lingua franca (Gann, Duignan, Turner, 1969; Obondo, 1997). Schools and universities mostly used the colonizer language, usually, English, French, and Portuguese, and in few cases, Spanish, Italian, and German. When these countries became independent, in most cases during the second half of the 20th century, colonizer language generally was maintained as official or co-official language. The educational sys-

tem in the majority of the countries continued using the colonizer language. That situation results in a paradox: children are schooled in a poorly known and non-socially used second language, and teachers are required to teach in a weakly known foreign language. The potentially negative consequences are evident (Bodomo, 1996; Mohanty, 2017).

Language situation in Ghana

A typical example of the conflicts between national and colonizers' languages is Ghana (population about 29 million inhabitants). Ghana is a former colony of the United Kingdom, becoming independent in 1957 (Gocking, 2005). In Ghana, English occupies a special position in society. Close to 80 different languages are spoken (Ethnologue, 2020), but English is the language of education, the press, the judiciary, parliament, government, business, and the military. Accordingly, English has become the language of power and prestige and those who are competent in it maintain a higher social position. In view of this, conscious efforts are made by the government on one hand, and parents on the other, to ensure that children achieve the needed competence in English, in order to be able to function properly in the Ghanaian society. It is frequently perceived that the level of English determines the social success and academic achievement, regardless that English is a second language (Opoku-Amankwa, 2009; Owu-Ewie, 2006). A similar situation is observed in many African countries. If you speak English well, you will receive a special place in any important event, and esteem in society will be very high, simply because it is perceived that the level of your English language determines the level of your intellectual ability (Saah, 1986).

In Ghana, passing a Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) is required to enter high school. However, this exam is taken in English. Because of this language barrier, many students fail. Quite frequently, students do not have the sufficient proficiency in English to write and pass this national examination to guarantee their progress to the next level of their education ladder (Davis, Agbenyega, 2012).

Furthermore, in Ghana, a diversity of languages are spoken. According to Ethnologue (2020), there are 79 different languages (belonging to the Proto Tano, and Volta-Congo language groups). These languages are distributed over a total population of approximately 29 million people spread over ten geographic/administrative regions occupying 239,567 km². These languages tend to be closely associated with ethnic groups (Dakubu, 2015; Ghana Institute of Language, 2020). Consequently, one might easily assume that there are as many ethnic groups as there are languages. However, a close examination reveals, what is usually described as a language group, typically consists of a cluster of socio-culturally and linguistically related ethnic groups who do not see themselves as internally homogeneous. For example, Akan, the largest ethnolinguistic group in Ghana, is constituted by a cluster of ethnic and sub-ethnic groups who speak different but largely mutually intelligible dialects of the Akan/Twi language. Akan ethnic group alone constitutes 49.1% of the national Ghana population, Mole-Dagbani – 16.5%, Ewe – 12.7%; Ga-Adangbe – 8%, and Guan – 4.4% (Ghana Statistical Services, 2002). While 90.7% of Ghana's population is constituted by only five ethnic language

groups, the remaining ethnolinguistic groups constitute only 9.3% of Ghana's population (Owu-Ewie, 2013). The number of native English speakers in Ghana is close to zero.

In short, Ghana is a highly multilingual country with no national language (Boahene-Agbo, 1985). As a result, language choice is determined by social factors, such as the background of the interlocutors involved in the communication, or the specific region where you are situated. English, Akan, and Ewe have emerged as important lingua francas and different forms of diglossia have developed in Ghana (Obeng, 1997). For instance, there is a Ghanaian English dialect that represents an English creole. However, only English is the official language, although there are eleven government-sponsored languages supported by the Bureau of Ghana Languages.

The history of language policies in Ghanaian schools

There exists a language controversy concerning which language should be used as a medium of instruction in African schools, especially at the lower basic level dates back to the so-called "castle schools" (name given by the Portuguese governor of the castle at Elmina in 1529) and missionary era. Before formal education was introduced in Africa, traditional education was conducted in the indigenous languages. With the inception of formal education and the subsequent use of English or other European language as the medium of instruction in Sub-Saharan Africa, the indigenous languages were seen as "inadequate" as teaching media (Bamgbose, 2000). Bilingual education commenced with the inception of formal education in the castle schools and later was continued with the Christian missionaries. This period is the pre-colonial period. The languages used were those of the "metropolitan" country (the "metropolitan languages"): Portuguese, Dutch, French, Danish, English, etc.

The situation, however, changed with the arrival of the missionaries, who resorted to the development of the local languages in both their educational and proselytizing efforts (Graham, 2013). The language policies during this period were as varied as they were independent (Andoh-Kumi, 1994). During this period, a systematic pattern began to emerge with regard to both education and language use. The first legislation discussing the use of a Ghanaian language in education was promulgated during the early 20th century (MacWilliam, 1969; Graham, 2013). It was determined that Ghanaian languages were to be used as the medium of instruction only at the lower primary level, with English used thereafter.

The policy was reversed and became unstable when the administration of the country came under the jurisdiction of indigenous Ghanaians in 1957. Since then, the use of a Ghanaian language as the medium of instruction at the lower primary level has had a checkered history. From 1925 to 1951, Ghanaian languages were used as medium of instruction for the first three years, but later, between 1951 and 1956, those languages were only used for the first year. From 1957 to 1966 Ghanaian languages were not used at all; from 1967 to 1969 they were used only for the first year, and between 1970 and 1974 Ghanaian languages were used for the first three years and where possible beyond (to the sixth year). From 1974 to 2002, Ghanaian languages were again used for the first three years. A Ghanaian

language in this case is understood as the language of the locality including one of the following: Akan (Fante and Twi), Nzema, Ga, Ga-Adangbe, Ewe, Gonja, Kasem, Dagbani, and Dagaare.

In January 2001, the Director General of the Ghana Education Service (GES) signed a letter that sought to remind its officials, teacher associations and all heads of basic schools in the country about the then existing language policy originally announced in 1971. Essentially, this policy states that, instruction at the Lower Primary Level (Primary 1–3) will be conducted in the pupil's mother tongue, or in the major Ghanaian language of the local area, while English will be studied as one of the subjects offered at the Lower Primary Level. From Primary 4 onwards, class instruction will be conducted in English; and the Ghanaian language will then be studied as one of the subjects offered. The Director General rationalized the policy as follows: "The fundamental philosophy underlying the Ghanaian Language Policy in our schools is to enable the individual to acquire a sense of cultural identity and make him/her literate in his/her own mother tongue. Another essential factor is that basic literacy in one's mother tongue or the local language enhances the child's ability to transfer and apply acquired learning skills in the local language to proficiency in subsequently learning English and other languages" (signed by the Director General of GES, Jan. 2001).

However, within 17 months of the circulation of this reminder, a policy change was declared by the Minister of Education, which compelled the GES Director General to send another circular to inform the same recipients that: (a) English should replace vernacular as the medium of instruction in the first three years of primary schooling; (b) every Ghanaian child must study one local language from Primary One Level up to the Senior Secondary School Level; (c) students should be encouraged to study the French language.

In 1987, the People's National Democratic Congress (PNDC) government, under pressure from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, introduced a major educational reform, which reduced basic and secondary education from 15 to 12 years and increased university education from three to four years. Instead of focusing mainly on academic content, the reform introduced technical and vocational skills training in the basic school curriculum (Osei, 2004). Though the reform might have been well intended, it was perceived that the government had rushed to implement it without prior adequate preparation, including the training of teachers, provision of school infrastructure, supply of books and equipment and education of the Ghana population. Consequently, when the majority of the first batch of graduates from the new school system failed their final examinations, criticism of the reform was intensified, and suggestions were made for a return to the former system.

Within a period of three and a half years, January 2001 to August 2004, heads of basic schools received three circulars stating different language policies they were expected to implement in P1–3, i.e. (a) the sole use of local language in teaching, (b) the sole use of English, and (c) the use of both local language and English.

The presentation above gives only a glimpse of the general lack of continuity and consistency, a major problem that has dogged language-in-education policy

since the inception of formal education in Ghana. Since the announcement of the change of policy, the debate over the language of education has picked up momentum from academics, politicians, educators, educational planners, traditional rulers, and the general populace.

Ghana has been a strong advocate of the African personality since Nkrumah's era (Anyidoho, Dakubu, 2008). Nkrumah was the first Prime Minister and President of Ghana between 1957–1960. The promulgation of the use of English as the medium of instruction in education and the abandoning of her indigenous languages in education is in overt opposition to this ideology. Unlike most francophone countries, which had French forced on them as medium of instruction through the Brazzaville Conference of 1944 and made the use of local languages in schools forbidden (Djite, 2000), England laid a solid foundation for the use of the indigenous languages as media of instruction at least at the lower primary level. For example, Côte d'Ivoire prior to independence in 1960 entered in agreement with France to maintain the cultural and linguistic policies of their colonizers (Djite, 2000).

Ghana's current education policy includes two years of kindergarten (KG) as part of its commitment to Free and Compulsory Basic Education and places it ahead of the curve compared to other countries in sub-Saharan African countries. Recognizing the benefits in the past two decades, Ghana, through Ministry of Education and Ghana Education Services, has registered increased national efforts to equitably expand KG services, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children (Avoke, Hayford, 2017). Since the year 2,000, the Ministry of Education and Ghana Education Services has actively worked towards universal access to basic education (Owu-Ewie, 2013).

What about international schools in Ghana?

Recently, a diversity of international schools has been created in Ghana, particularly in Accra, Takoradi, Tema, Kumasi, Cape Coast, and Tamale. Most international schools in Ghana consist of children of foreign diplomats and other foreigners; needless to say many Ghanaian children are attending these international schools. However, the majority of these schools do not teach any of the Ghanaian languages; they teach French, Spanish, Portuguese, Lebanese, Chinese, and other foreign languages.

These international schools include aspects of their culture in the curriculum they use. It could be argued that not only are they denying these foreign children the opportunity to learn Ghanaian languages, but they are also denying Ghanaian children the same opportunity to learn their own local languages. This phenomenon of international schools not featuring local languages in their curriculum may have adverse implications on Ghanaian children who attend these schools. Many of these Ghanaian children attending these international schools cannot even read and write any local language. Ironically, these children frequently grow up to become the elite in society.

Recently, Afua Hirsch, an African-American, pointed out that the British Empire forced its colonies to abandon their own languages, and now these former colonies are making English their own language (Hirsch, 2020). This statement itself is a revealing symptom of the colonial way of thinking. The attempt to dis-

courage Africans from speaking their own languages may have negative consequences not only in education, but also on people's identity.

The paradox of empire is perhaps most visible in its legacy of language. The psychology of colonization could not have worked without suppressing expressions of existing culture, and “educating” its subjects to believe in their own inferiority. But probably the independence of the African continent in the 20th century could not have come about when it did without the unity that was forged out of common languages brought by colonizers.

The resulting ambivalence towards English is shared not just on the African continent but in the diaspora, as well. As the African-American writer James Baldwin once wrote, “my quarrel with the English language has been that the language reflects none of my experience”. In Akan language there is the proverb: “Until the lion learns how to speak in its own language, every story will glorify the hunter”.

Conclusion

Instructional language has been a long-lasting question in multilingual countries. This question acquires a special perspective in those formerly sub-Saharan European colonies. In these countries, colonizers imposed their language in the educational system. After independence, the European colonizer's language has frequently been maintained as an official or co-official language, and generally used as an instructional language. This results in a paradoxical situation: school language is a foreign language that is not used at home or in society. That means, children are schooled in a poorly known language, and teachers are required to teach in a language that they do not master enough. This language issue represents a potential barrier for the social, scientific, and economic development of sub-Saharan African countries, such as Ghana (Mohanty, 2017).

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Роль языка школьного обучения в многоязычных обществах (на примере Ганы)

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Аннотация. Проблема языка, используемого в школьном обучении, является важной и дискуссионной в многоязычных обществах. Африка к югу от Сахары представляет собой регион мира со значительным лингвистическим разнообразием. До недавнего времени большинство из стран этого региона были европейскими колониями. В колониальные времена язык колонизаторов обычно доминировал и в школах. Даже после обретения независимости во многих из этих стран продолжилось использование языка колонизаторов в качестве языка обучения в школах. Соответственно, довольно часто дети обучаются на неродном (втором) языке, а учителя должны преподавать на иностранном языке. Эта ситуация ведет к потенциально негативным последствиям, влияющим на школьное обучение. В статье эта проблема рассматривается на примере Ганы. Отмечается, что в последние годы в Гане происходят изменения, связанные с языком школьного обучения. Часто английский язык используется в качестве языка обучения в начальной школе. Поскольку существует связь между языком и школьным обучением, говорение на английском языке обеспечивает не только значительный социальный престиж, но и приводит к улучшению перспектив трудоустройства. В статье также рассматривается вопрос о международных школах в Гане, большинство из которых не преподают ни один из ганских языков, но преподают иностранные языки, например, французский, испанский или португальский. Авторы считают, что посещение подобных международных школ может иметь неблагоприятные последствия для детей Ганы. Ведь в свое время Гана была активным сторонником так называемой африканской личности, однако использование английского языка в качестве языка школьного обучения явно противоречит этой идее. В итоге сделан вывод о том, что дети, обучающиеся на неродном (втором) языке, и учителя, преподающие на языке, которым они недостаточно хорошо владеют, могут представлять потенциальную угрозу для социального, научного и экономического развития стран Африки к югу от Сахары, таких как Гана.

Ключевые слова: многоязычие, Гана, школьное обучение, английский язык, национальный язык

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