REVERSING ATTITUDES AS A KEY TO LANGUAGE PRESERVATION AND SAFEGUARDING IN AFRICA

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1. Introduction

1.1 Africa is not only the continent with the highest concentration of languages in the world, but also the area with the highest number of endangered languages (Grenoble and Whaley, 1998).

1.2 According to Batibo (2005:155), at least 74.8% of the African languages are either moderately or severely endangered and 9.4% are extinct or nearly extinct, as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: The Position of Language endangered in Africa (After Batibo, 2005:155)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Language</th>
<th>No. of language</th>
<th>% of Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Relatively safe</td>
<td>336</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Moderately endangered</td>
<td>1,287</td>
<td>60.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Severely endangered</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Extinct or nearly extinct</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,132</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.3 In recent years, the degree of endangerment has accelerated due to the increased prestige and dominance of the indigenous languages of wider communication, which have been accorded the status of national or official languages or used as lingua franca. This has resulted in the marginalization and low prestige of the minority languages. Consequently, many minority language speakers have developed negative attitudes towards their languages, resulting in limited intergenerational transmission.

1.4 In fact, the problem has been compounded in those African countries which have embarked on the process of technicalization and modernization of their major indigenous languages. These have indirectly become agents of globalization, attracting Western-based lifestyles at the expense of the rich traditional knowledge and skills embodied in the minority languages. Hence, there is an accelerated rate of shift from the minority languages to the dominant languages in Africa. An important
measure to take is therefore to reverse this trend by ensuring that the minority language speakers preserve and safeguard their languages.

2. **Measures of Language revitalization and preservation**

2.1 According to Grenoble and Whaley (2006), there are a number of measures which have to be taken in order to revitalize an endangered language. These measures include an all inclusive language policy, a sub-autonomous federal policy, instituting viable literacy programmes for all languages, and the enhancement of positive attitudes towards the respective community languages.

2.2 This paper argues that the enhancement of positive attitudes towards their community language is the most effective measure.

3. **The Role of Language Attitudes**

3.1 Language Attitudes

3.1.1 Language attitudes have been defined as a feeling, reaction or emotional disposition towards an idea, concept or phenomenon (Baker, 1992:12). Where languages are concerned, attitudes to a language could be described as positive, negative or indifferent. Such attitudes become more pronounced where speakers become bilingual or speak several languages. There is a tendency to develop different attitudes for each of the languages that they speak.

3.1.2 These attitudes, whether positive or negative, will normally depend on the degree of symbolic or socio-economic value manifested by each language. The role of attitudes in language maintenance has been recognized by a number of scholars, including Adegbija (1998), Batibo (1992, 1997, 1998), Chebanne and Nthapelelang (2000) and Smieja (1999, 2003). This is because the speakers of a language hold the key to the continuation or abandonment of their language, the inter-generational transmission or non-transmission of the language and the expansion or reduction of the domains in which it is used.

3.1.3 However, the speakers’ attitudes depend heavily on the status and prestige of their language (Smieja, 2003:63). Such prestige results from their perception of its symbolic or utilitarian value. The social esteem in which a language is held is often a function of favourable government policies, historical legacy, use of language in education, extensive domains of use, a well-codified form of the language, substantial documentation or cultural prestige.

3.2 Case studies in Eastern Botswana

3.2.1 The first investigation was carried out in two settlements, namely Manxotae and Nata. Manxotae is a small settlement about 20km off the Francistown road to Maun with about 500 inhabitants, most of whom are of Khoesan origin speaking Shuakwe and /Xaise. While Nata settlement is much larger. It is situated where the road to Francistown branches off to Kasane and Maun. Being a commercial and administrative Centre of the Nata region, the Nata settlement has become relatively
multi-ethnic. However, the study focused on the Khoesan speaking Wards of the settlement.

3.2.2 In both settlements, the Khoesan people have cultivated a strong positive attitude towards Setswana, the national language and widely used lingua franca, to the detriment of their mother-tongue. Their preference for Setswana stems from its many charms, such as being the language of wider communication in the country, being the sole language used in lower education, being the language of oral government business and village administration and being used in local meetings (Kgotla) and social interaction. It is also the language heard on the radio, television and the one used by public figures, such as civil servants, politicians and traders.

3.2.3 When the Khoesan settlement inhabitants were asked to state which language (between their mother tongue, Setswana or English) they preferred to use at home, to communicate with in the settlement and for cultural activities, they responded as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Preferred language(s) for home and settlement communication among the Khoesan speakers of Manxotae and Nata (Batibo, 2001).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Khoesan %</th>
<th>Khoesan and Setswana %</th>
<th>Setswana %</th>
<th>Setswana and English %</th>
<th>English %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preferred language used in the settlement for daily interaction</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language that parents would prefer children to speak at home</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>79.3</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred language(s) for cultural activities</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>64.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2.4 The results of Table 3 are a clear indication that the Khoesan speakers of Manxotae and Nata and, indeed, those of the other Khoesan varieties in North-Eastern Botswana, would prefer Setswana as the language to be used in their daily lives. This would include family communication, settlement interaction and cultural activities. By implication, therefore, most parents would like to see a shift to Setswana. These results are largely similar to those obtained by Hasselbring (2000) in the case of Gantsi and Smieja (1996) in the case of the other minority languages of Botswana. The strong preference for Setswana, as seen above, stems from the Khoesan-speakers attitudes towards it. Setswana is preferred mainly because it opens the door to many opportunities. English, on the other hand, is seen as a remote elitist language which has little place in village life.

3.2.5 The study also looked into the cultural identity of the Khoesan speakers of the two settlements. The aim was to determine whether these populations were still loyal to their cultural identity. Some of the responses are give in Table 3 below:
Table 3: Preferred names and cultural identity of the Khoesan-speakers of Manxotae and Nata (Batibo, 2001)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Khoesan %</th>
<th>Khoesan and Setswana (%)</th>
<th>Setswana (%)</th>
<th>Setswana and English %</th>
<th>English %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Origin of informants’ two (first and second) names</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>71.0</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred name(s) to be given to one’s children</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>64.5</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred cultural identity</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2.6 What was remarkable is that the Khoesan speakers of Manxotae and Nata preferred Setswana names and cultural identity to their own traditional names and culture. This was another demonstration of the negative attitude that they had developed towards their languages and culture in preference to that of Setswana. As a result, intergenerational transmission of their languages to the younger generations was little, and in many cases, non existent, as the children could only speak Setswana. The parents were proud to see them proficient in Setswana as then they were ready for integration in the wider world of education and employment.

4. Reversing the trends towards language loss in Botswana

4.1 Language Empowerment and shift reversing measures

4.1.1 One of the measures to be taken to stop or even reverse the trend towards language shift is to create positive language attitudes. This can only be done through a holistic empowerment strategy which empowers both the language and the speakers. Language empowerment should therefore refer to the institution of a set of measures to raise the social status of a language as well as to make it more viable in handling public domains.

4.1.2 According to Bamgbose (2000:17), there are a number of measures that can be instituted to empower a language. These include a charter of linguistic human rights, appropriate legislation, language development, the adoption of second language norms, use of language in education, provision of incentives to users, and expansion of domains of use. In fact, these measures could be summarized by categorizing them in three types: the linguistic and human based approaches.

4.1.3 The linguistic set of measures would aim at empowering the language so as to be effectively used by the relevant community by instituting an appropriate orthography, functional literacy and extensive documentation. While the human set of measures would ensure that the speakers are empowered both socio-politically and economically, so as to devise their own means of production and self-determination. The three sets of measures are shown in Table 4.

3.1 Holistic empowerment strategy (Batibo, 2005; Brenzinger et al. 1991; Dorian, 1998)
Table 1: A holistic method of empowering a minority language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Linguistic empowerment</th>
<th>Socio-political empowerment</th>
<th>Economic empowerment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collaborate with community to:</td>
<td>Assist community to:</td>
<td>Assist community to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Carry out a comprehensive sociolinguistic surveys to determine patterns of language use;</td>
<td>• Assert own perspective and self-determination;</td>
<td>• Devise independent and sustainable economic base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Conduct language description;</td>
<td>• Have access to appropriate land rights;</td>
<td>• Increase own income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Codify the language by establishing standard orthography, grammar and dictionary;</td>
<td>• Drive own education and literacy programs</td>
<td>• Improve income utilization methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Design literacy materials</td>
<td>• Strengthen cultural and spiritual heritage</td>
<td>• Train in income generation skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Train literacy teachers;</td>
<td>• Build self confidence and esteem;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Introduce reading materials to sustain literacy;</td>
<td>• Have access to social and political benefits and services, as other citizens</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2 A case study of attitude reversal: The Naro Language Project

4.2.1 The case of a language whose linguistic and human empowerment has brought about an attitude reversal and even the trend of language shift is Naro, a Khoesan language spoken in Ghanzi district. Naro is a Khoesan language, belonging to Central Khoesan. It is spoken by nearly 9,000 people at the border area between Western Botswana and Eastern Namibia. As most other Khoesan languages, the language was one of the critically endangered speeches, as the intergenerational transmission was rapidly diminishing in favour of Setswana, until the arrival in 1991 of a missionary couple with linguistic training, namely Mr Hessel and Mrs Cobby Visser.

4.2.2 The couple devoted their time on the Naro language by learning and describing it. They then worked out phonological and grammatical descriptions before instituting an orthography for the language. Then they started translating the Bible in Naro as well as published other books, booklets and a newsletter in the language. The publications include story books, history accounts, narratives and lists of names. They prepared learning materials for those who wanted to read and write in the language. They involved the whole Naro community, entrusting the elders with the direction and use of Naro literacy (Visser, 2000).

4.2.3 As a result, many community members, both youth and adults, enrolled in literacy classes. The literacy which was acquired became functional as it was used in their daily activities of painting, crafting, sculpturing, embroidering and weaving. They could count and settle their accounts in Naro language. As a result, the Naro community was excited to see that their language could be used, just like Setswana and English. They saw their language not as a useless entity, but as an asset for socio-
economic advancement and the promotion of cultural tourism. The new thrust of interest and value ion their language enabled them to make far-reaching socio-political and economic strides as the language was more publicly used in their daily activities.

4.2.4 In developing positive attitudes toward their language, the Naro speakers enhanced the intergenerational transmission of the language. As a result of the Vissers intervention, Naro is now considered one of the most vibrant languages in Botswana (Batibo 2005:11). In fact, it has even attracted second language speakers, such as the /Gwi and //Gana. Thus, the once experienced trend towards language shift has been reversed to language revitalization.

5. Conclusion

Language shift and death are very closely linked to language attitudes. Where the speakers are negative about their languages, they would consider them as not having any utilitarian value in terms of symbolic or socio-economic gains. But once they see such values, they fast become attached to them, as the case of Naro language. However, one major stumbling block in most African countries is the lack of recognition of these languages in the country’s language policies. Most African language policies tend to favour the ex-colonial languages and the major indigenous languages. Without tangible national policy support, it becomes always difficult to empower such languages for any public use. The work is often left to NGO’s and individual efforts.

In Botswana, the many efforts made by NGO’s and language experts are not always effective because of the lack of national policies which would allow these languages to be used in public domains such as primary education, local administration or customary courts. The action of ACALAN (Academy of Languages) to sensitize African Governments to review their language policies may put more pressure on our governments to re-think about the language policies, many of which were put in place during the time of colonization (ACALAN, 2008).

References


Smieja, B (1998) Language Shift, Cultural identity and Language loyalty in Botswana (Ms)

