Globalization and Languages: Building on our Rich Heritage

BUILDING SHARED KNOWLEDGE WITH OUR LANGUAGES IN A GLOBALIZING WORLD

by
Mr Adama SAMASSEKOU
Executive Secretary a.i. of the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN)
President of MAAYA Network– World Network for Linguistic Diversity

2008 – International Year of Languages

27 August 2008
Honourable guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like, first of all, to thank the organizers of this important Conference, particularly the Director General of UNESCO, Koïchiro Matsuura and the Rector of the United Nations University, Konrad Osterwalder for inviting me, which is for me an honour and gives me a good opportunity to share with you here, in this wonderful country of Japan open to fruitful inputs of the World, across the oceans and seas, on a thematic close to our hearts – Globalization and Languages: Building on our Rich Heritage, in particular in this International Year of Languages.

I would also like, at this stage of my statement, to thank the Authorities of Japan and the organizers for the warm welcome and the steps taken to make our stay at the same time studious and highly enjoyable.

Honourable guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Globalization is henceforth a well established reality in the life of nations and peoples of our planet. We increasingly learn about the danger it represents when it leads to an excessive unified lifestyle and culture, the dominance of one simplistic vehicular language, the Global English on all the other languages of the planet. The Global English, sometimes derisively called Globish, allows, indeed, a Korean and an Argentinean to ask their direction when they intersect in a Parisian airport, but it does under no circumstances enable to build a cultural identity neither at the level of an individual, nor at the level of a nation.

Nevertheless, we also know that globalization can be a tremendous asset if, together, we gather our efforts to preserve and cultivate linguistic and cultural diversity, considering all our languages and our cultures as a single humanity treasure. On this treasure, this rich heritage, we can build and share knowledge and know-how which, in solidarity, we can exchange with all the peoples on the earth. This is the message that Africa, by our voice, launched to the world during the second phase of World Summit on Information Society held in Tunis in November 2005, calling for the creation of a world network for the promotion of linguistic diversity and shared knowledge in a globalizing world.

There is no use recalling that we are in the 21st century, the era of ICT, of Information and shared Knowledge Society... and yet an estimated 774 million illiterate adults in the World are likely to disappear with their knowledge and know-how, because of their not being able to access to writing and instruments enabling them not only to develop and improve their knowledge, but also and above all to create the conditions of their transmission to future generations!

We are in the 21st century, at a time when the great potential of ICT enables young people to develop their genius and their creativity... and yet approximately 75 million of the World's Children at school age have not yet got this chance and, worse, in many countries in the world, and specifically in the vast majority of the African countries, school - place for building knowledge par excellence - is still foreign to the
environment, from which it is cut off by the medium as well as by the content which does take into account neither the culture nor the history of the community, of the country or of the continent!

How to ensure that national languages become real training, information and communication tools for citizens at all levels, in order to ensure a wider participation of masses in the development process?

In other words, how could we empower languages for them to be used again in all spheres of public life, particularly in education?

How many young and even not so young, throughout the world and in Africa, continue to face language barriers preventing them from developing their creative genius, to construct new knowledge and to share it and access to universal knowledge?

Honourable guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

You will understand that this will not be possible without all world languages, in all continents, being used in all spheres of public life particularly in education.

That is why, many countries, therefore in Africa, have taken initiatives to introduce their national languages into the educational system, which is the only way to reverse the situation and to bring African languages back to their appropriate status, for the benefit of more than 80% of the population.

ACALAN has therefore opted for a functional convivial multilingualism as a strategic educational approach. This strategic approach subtended by an administrative decentralization and sub-regional and regional integration policy, based on the essential principle of conviviality of languages and having as a matrix the mother tongue, an African cross-border language and an European language of international communication. This approach reinforces the philosophical and ideological choice of linguistic diversity, at the same time it can implement our pan-Africanist vision: it is the key for African perspective of managing multilingualism for the development of the Continent.

Thus, bilingual education is the springboard which leads, to full term, to a multilingual education - basis of intercultural education, guarantee of the promotion of linguistic diversity and the best means for building shared knowledge in a globalizing world!

You will therefore understand that the first challenge of Education in Africa, for example, is the language of instruction. It is urgent that at all levels of the continent, especially at national and regional level, strategies for implementation of the Language Action Plan for Africa, the Decisions of the African Union and the vision and projects of ACALAN be designed and implemented particularly with the support of all Africa’s development partners.
This is now technically possible, politically inescapable and historically an imperative!

This is why ACALAN stresses on the need of Rebuilding African Educational Systems, which requires the application of three main principles:

1°) rebuilding the cultural identity of the learner, based on the use of the mother tongue as the foundation of the process of acquiring knowledge and on the concomitant use of the European language – the official language.

2°) linking school to the community life, from the point of view of both teaching content and teaching methods. It would therefore be needed, on the one hand, to reform the curricula so as to encompass the development of the necessary know-how and life skills, and, on the other hand, to replace inhibiting frontal teaching methods with active ones which free the learners’ initiative.

3°) creating a process of partnership and cohesion around the school from which it will benefit; allowing for relations amongst the teachers, the learners and the administration to be democratic; and having the entire educational community, especially the learners' parents, involved in school life.

The introduction of African languages in the educational system of each country as medium of instruction, with a special attention to the teaching of these languages to children, is undoubtedly one of the most important elements for the survival of African languages and the preservation of linguistic diversity in Africa.

Language, the pedestal of both individual and collective cultural identity – is also the privileged instrument of knowledge construction. Language is the receptacle and the vehicle par excellence of the Cosmo-vision of human societies. Therefore, how to preserve Humanity from the drama of the predictable loss of knowledge housed in the languages of the world and to outline perspectives permitting to ensure the maintenance and development of this world’s intangible heritage - treasure of Humanity?

How to help all citizens of the world, particularly in Africa, specifically to exercise their right to communicate in the language of their choice? How can we ensure, for example, that the use of the Internet reflects the cultural and linguistic diversity of peoples? More specifically: How to better exploit the information and communication technologies to empower, in their languages, the millions of illiterates in our African continent and other parts of the world, so that they can be creative and conscious actors of the information and shared knowledge society?

You will understand we could not build a shared knowledge society without our languages, without the choice to preserve and promote linguistic diversity which means accepting to substitute to the destructive logic of market competition, the logic of solidarity and complementarity, which is likely to restore harmony of beings and species. We know that cultural and linguistic diversity is for human society what biodiversity is for nature: the ferment, the bedrock of what I have called, a few years ago, our “humanitude” or “humanness” (for you to have an idea ), our permanent opening to the Other, our relationship as human beings to be human, which requires
a permanent relationship of solidarity, without calculation, a spontaneous impulse of the Other... this “humanitude” that links man to man, according to the beautiful expression of our Dear Elder Aimé Césaire! It is through this concept of humanitude that I translate what we call in Africa maaya, neddaaku, boroterey, nite, ubuntu... People of Mande (a West African area inherited from the Mali Empire) say to us: "I am a human being not because I think I am, but it's your eyes landed on me that make me a human being!"

This is why it is time to move from rhetoric on the defence of linguistic diversity to the implementation of concrete actions of synergy between languages, including partnerships between languages in the world: partnership requires above all the recognition of others and respect for their identity and sincere desire on both sides to work together to build a common project, in a spirit of true and mutually beneficial Solidarity.

Initiative of the African Academy of Languages born in Tunis in November 2005 during the second phase of the WSIS during the AU ICT Week, MAAYA Network - the World Network for Linguistic Diversity was officially launched on February 21, 2006, on the occasion of the International Mother Tongue Day at UNESCO in Paris. Its goal is to enhance and promote linguistic diversity as a basis for the unity of human communication: therefore it is called MAAYA from Mandingo language, a major cross-border vehicular language of West Africa. Now it brings together many international organizations like UNESCO, the Francophonie, the Latin Union, the International Telecommunication Union, Maison des Langues and NGOs such as the Language Observatory Project (LOP), Linguasphère, SIL, ICVolunteers, Funredes, the Global Knowledge Partnership (GKP) etc... Maaya network is particularly attentive to support and encourage all initiatives to promote, facilitate and ensure the development of linguistic diversity in the world, and obviously the backup and the revitalization of endangered languages and less widely spoken languages. In this context, Maaya network is honoured to be one of UNESCO’s partners in monitoring the events on every continent in celebration of the year 2008, International Year of Languages, so that one can say everywhere: "The languages matter! ". To this end, an International Advisory Committee, composed mainly of international organizations concerned with linguistic diversity, and chaired by the Interim Executive Secretary of ACALAN, President of MAAYA Network, is being established.

That is what MAAYA Network is worldwide devoted to, whereas the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) at the level of the African continent, a perspective reinforced by the proclamation of 2008 - International Year of Languages.

The birth of this network will greatly contribute to the rehabilitation of world’s disadvantaged African languages.

Our goal is to develop the network on all the continents, in order to strengthen cooperation between all national and regional organizations interested in promoting linguistic and cultural diversity within their sphere of activities.

At present, MAAYA serves as a platform of exchange and sharing in the area of shared knowledge, where technology offers a great potential for languages, but is
also risk to them, as to date only a very small number of languages of the 6000 spoken in the world are available in the Cyberspace.

It also serves as the moderator of the sub-theme on Linguistic Diversity of the action line C8 of the WSIS Plan of Action and has initiated the “Dynamic Coalition for Linguistic Diversity” of the Internet Governance Forum.

Among the research projects and programmes of activities initiated and particularly supported by MAAYA network, we can quote:

- The observation programme of world's languages in cyberspace, undertaken, on the one hand, by Professor Yoshiki Mikami, from Nagaoka University of Technology, here present, with LOP for Asian and African languages and Professor David Dalby, with Linguasphère, and secondly, by Daniel Pimienta from Funredes NGO, located in the Dominican Republic, for European languages spoken in the West. These observatories provide us with a fairer vision of languages evolution in cyberspace, which allows us to focus our efforts adequately to preserve linguistic diversity in this space, including support for emerging languages and lesser equipped languages.

- The training of interpreters in lesser diffused languages by the Federation of the International Conference Volunteers (ICV). This NGO founded by Ms. Viola Krebs, who ensures also the Permanent Secretariat of MAAYA network, is located in Europe, Africa, American continents and, more recently, Asia. It is very active in interpreting during small and medium size conferences, where the same service would be unaffordable to the market rate. Training of volunteers is an important project to increase opportunities for communication in a greater number of languages.

- The Project "Voices and Texts" which aims to save a portion of the intangible heritage of Africa, recording and digitizing oral voluminous texts, and developing software for speech recognition, automatic writing, translation and speech to exploit these texts and share them with other linguistic communities. It is precisely this kind of project that illustrates very concretely what we mean by "build knowledge about our rich heritage and share the knowledge so built."

At the African continent, the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN), which I have the honour to lead, has been organizing a series of Conferences in five regions (West Africa, Central Africa, Southern Africa the East and North Africa), with the support of Unesco, the OIF, the Swiss Cooperation and ADEA, to sensitize policy and decision makers from each region on the role of cross-border vehicular languages that could contribute to regional integration of Africa, and the place lesser diffused languages in the national language policies. This increasing awareness paves the way for more cooperation between states in promoting languages and linguistic diversity in many areas as bilingual education, administration, agricultural training, health campaigns, civic education, communication…

There is no doubt ACALAN is the only academy of languages in the world that has a continental jurisdiction. It has initiated research programs and training for the entire African continent, including:
- a higher multilingual education programme integrating African languages not only as taught subjects, but also as vehicles for education at tertiary level. This program is entitled Pan-African Master and Ph.D, in Applied Linguistics and African Languages (PANMAPAL). It is located on an experimental basis in three African University, Cameroon (University of Yaoundé I), South Africa (University of Cape-Town) and Ethiopia (University of Addis Ababa), before it covers all African Universities...

- a Terminology and Lexicography programme to develop appropriate terminologies, especially in science and technology in African languages. The development of terminology in African languages is an effort to empower these languages to make them suitable for use as working languages in all development areas Africa needs;

- an Atlas of African languages to make Africa’s languages maps, at national, regional and continental levels, to get a more accurate vision of languages and their evolution. According to specialists, the number of African languages currently varies between 800 and 2000, depending heavily on what one wants to take each one as a language or dialect of a language. The ACALAN linguistic Atlas project wants to help establish data and more reliable analysis, while providing Africa with the means of regular updates and observation of the dynamics of languages, thanks to computer data processing

- a programme of promotion of African languages in Cyberspace and Information and Communication Technology. This project is not limited to the presence of African languages in cyberspace, but also the key issues of localized Domain Name, the development of Web 2, with the problematic of multilingualization of communicative appliances, as well as the localization of software.

For all our projects and programmes of activities, both for MAAYA network and for ACALAN, we hope, besides the African Union Commission, to benefit from the financial partners’ support, whom we would like to thank for having understood the value and importance of our mission to safeguard Languages in Africa and in the world.

Honourable guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

These are the thoughts that I wanted to share with you, hoping that this conference, like other activities of the International Year of Languages, can contribute to the emergence of a global shared knowledge Society!

Thank you for your kind attention!
Shukran!
Merci de votre aimable attention!
Asante saana!
Gracias por su atención!
Muito obrigado pela sua atenção!
Aw ni ce aw ka tulomajo la!