Language Attitudes in Sub-Saharan Africa
A Sociolinguistic Overview

Efurosibina Adegbija

Clevedon: Multilingual Matters

1994

Summary
An informative sociolinguistic and sociopolitical description and analysis of language attitudes in sub-Saharan Africa. The book emphasizes the strong ideological and polemical view that multilingualism in sub-Saharan Africa should be seen as a resource and an asset. It argues, therefore, that African indigenous languages need to be empowered for greater functions to ensure effective mass mobilization, literacy, and total and original self-actualization.

Contents
1. The language scenario in sub-Saharan African countries.
2. Sociohistorical foundations of language attitude in sub-Saharan Africa.
3. Language attitudes research in sub-Saharan Africa.
4. Small languages, big languages: attitudinal dimensions of language speaker power and numbers in sub-Saharan Africa.
5. Attitudinal perspectives of language use in education.

Review by Augustus Kwaa, Boston University

Language Attitudes in Sub-Saharan Africa:
A Sociolinguistic Overview
Efurosibina Adegbija (1994)

In Language Attitudes in Sub-Saharan Africa, Efurosibina Adegbija effectively traces the socio-historical origins of current language attitudes in sub-Saharan Africa. His analysis provides a timely and very desirable sociolinguistic overview of one of the most neglected areas of academic research. The book is based on well documented library and field research. Chapter 1, which serves as an introduction, is a succinct description of the linguistic context of the geographical area covered by the study. Chapter 2 is a critical examination of the socio-historical background necessary for the proper appreciation of current language attitudes in sub-Saharan Africa. In chapter 3, the author investigates the aims of current research into language attitudes, and offers some helpful suggestions as to how the findings of such research can be usefully applied in language policy planning and implementation in the multilingual communities of sub-Saharan Africa. Chapter 4 examines the political potential of the use of the different categories of languages of sub-Saharan Africa on demographic bases, and shows how this human resource can be positively harnessed to aid in the general development of the societies concerned. Chapter 5 effectively documents the implications of language attitudes in the field of education, and warns about the harmful results of failure to face the challenges posed by this complex, but fascinating, sociolinguistic phenomenon. Adegbija strongly advocates for deliberate planning and implementation of language policies which will recognise and utilize this neglected human resource inherent in the multilingualism of sub-Saharan Africa. Chapter 6 is a fitting conclusion to the study. It demonstrates how the findings and conclusions of the study may be replicated in other multilingual settings. In this connection, the exhaustive bibliography, the elaborate end notes, and the sample questionnaire in the appendix provide useful starting points for further research in the area of language attitudes in multilingual societies.

Adegbija's major concern is to provide reasons why there are disproportionate attitudes of superiority toward European languages in sub-Saharan Africa, while there are attitudes of low esteem and inferiority toward indigenous African languages. His explanation for this state of affairs is that European languages are generally accepted as the languages of the conquerors of Africa, and as such are accorded some aura of superiority. Moreover, the European masters always pursued very aggressive language policies in their colonies, which left no doubts in the minds of the conquered peoples [-1-] that European cultures and
languages were superior to those of Africa. The devastating effect of these aggressive language policies is that in most sub-Saharan African countries, the indigenous languages have been either underutilized or completely excluded from important spheres of public communication, such as being used as official or national languages, in the mass media, or as media of instruction in schools. Adegbija also attempts to offer some answers to the problems that such a language scenario poses for language policy planning and implementation in these societies in general, and in education in particular.

In chapter 5, entitled "Attitudinal Perspectives of Language Use in Education," the author successfully demonstrates that it is in education that the negative attitudes toward indigenous African languages are most glaringly displayed. He points out that, while various colonial masters had different policies regarding the use of African languages as media of instruction in their schools, in the final analysis they all resulted in inducing negative attitudes towards local languages. Even in those colonies where the colonial masters allowed the use of the indigenous languages as media of instruction, this was limited to the first few years of primary education. In the French and Portuguese territories, the use of African languages was proscribed. Such policies created, in the minds of the students and in the general public, the impression that African languages were inferior and less suitable for use at higher levels of education. Unfortunately, these negative policies were uncritically adapted by many post-colonial governments in independent Africa. As a result, in no sub-Saharan African country is an indigenous language used as the medium of education at the university level.

As Adegbija rightly points out, this attitude has been with us ever since the first encounter with Europeans, and the situation has worsened as attitudinal misconceptions become institutionalized under the guise of official language policy in education. He argues that unless this is consciously reversed and provision made for the use of indigenous African languages in education and other areas of public communications, most of these languages will stagnate. He therefore advocates for the need to empower African indigenous languages for greater function in national life.

The significance of the study and its contribution to knowledge become evident when the arguments raised in chapter 5 are viewed in light of Elliot W. Eisner's (1979) theory of "the null curriculum." In The Educational Imagination, his book on the design and evaluation of school programs, Eisner argues that "...schools provide not one curriculum to students but three..." (p. 83). That is, the explicit curriculum, the implicit curriculum, and the null curriculum, which is what schools teach by not teaching. If the language policies of British and Belgian colonial educators could be compared to the explicit, implicit and the null curricula, the [-2-] French and the Portuguese policies could only be described as the null curriculum. By their refusal to allow the use of indigenous languages as media of instruction even at the lower levels of primary education, they were teaching students that their own languages were not good enough for their edification.

Apart from the devastating effect such policies had on the mental development of these Africans (i.e., mental enslavement), there were also political consequences. As Adegbija rightly points out, only the educated elite in Africa can achieve effective competencies in the European languages of the colonial masters. And since European languages were readily accepted as official languages, and thus the languages of education at the post primary levels, it meant that only a small segment of the African population could participate fully in matters of government, education, religious worship, and so forth. Furthermore, the restriction on the use of African languages to the lower levels of primary education meant that those languages were deprived of the challenges that would ensure their development. This study, therefore, underscores Walter Rodney's (1982) contention that Europe used colonial education as a means to underdevelop Africa.

Rodney's book, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa, came out in the early 1980s, and many professors made it a required reading in their college courses. His detractors dismissed the work as a "piece of shoddy historical research, mere propaganda that had little intellectual value and hence little place in academia" (Kaba, 1982, p. 47). I presume it is Adegbija's awareness of such criticism of Rodney's important work on colonial education and its contribution to the development or the "underdevelopment" of Africa that prompted Adegbija to include a chapter on the methodology of research in language attitudes as well as a second on the implications of such research on the formation of language attitudes for development in general and the development of languages in particular.

Some comment on the style of the writer insofar as it clarifies some issues raised in the book may be appropriate. My first observation is that he has presented his findings in such a way that each chapter can stand as an independent unit and effectively appeal to a particular audience. For instance, chapter 5 is likely to appeal to policy planners in education, while chapter 2 is likely to attract the attention of the social historian, the social worker and even the politician. For the non-African who wants to make some sense out of the socio-political upheavals afflicting sub-Saharan Africa today, Adegbija's book would be a good introduction as well as a useful handbook. To the expatriate worker or administrator on a tour of Africa on behalf of an international organization such as UNICEF, WHO, or OXFAM, my advice would be, "Don't leave home without reading it," or better still, "Don't leave home without it." [-3-]
Still, on the question of style, it is pertinent to observe that the writer is very fond of long sentences. As one who is prone to the use of long sentences myself, I could not fail to notice that Adegbija is also a victim of this problem. However, he makes amends for this shortcoming by the special way in which he utilizes popular short sayings to wrap up important arguments supporting major thesis statements. For example, in chapter 2, he discusses the idiosyncratic sociological ecology of languages. Here he attracts the attention of the reader most forcefully to his points of emphasis by employing two popular sayings: “Some languages...achieved greatness naturally partly by sheer force of numbers of their speakers. Some others achieved greatness through sociohistorical forces being in their favour....still others have simply had greatness thrust upon them by decrees” (p. 42). He then forcefully wraps up the chapter's main argument by concluding thus: “Generally, then, while all languages are apparently equal, it does seem that in terms of national and official functionality, at least, some are more equal than others” (p. 42).

In a similar manner, he uses the popular saying, 'One can force the horse to the stream, but one cannot force it to drink' to conclude his discussion warning against the dangers of using legislation and decrees to promote or enforce the use of a particular language in a hostile sociocultural setting (p. 26). His use of the saying, ‘He who pays the piper calls the tune,’ to describe the extent of dependency on the ex-colonial masters and their European languages in language policy planning and implementation in post-independent, sub-Saharan Africa is also very apt in this connection.

In conclusion, it would be fair to say that the book is a brilliant and monumental achievement in the field of sociolinguistics. Ultimately, it is not simply a book about language attitudes in sub-Saharan Africa, but also one that is intended to draw attention to, and focus attention on, the problems that the lack of official interest in the study of this sociolinguistic phenomenon pose for the general development of independent nations in sub-Saharan Africa. In essence, according to his own declaration (p. 13), this is what Adegbija set out to achieve; and it is appropriate to point out here that he succeeds very well in doing that, and even more. This is because the book can also be seen as a very serious indictment of the western-educated elite (who are also the policy makers and the political power brokers in their respective countries) for hanging on to unworkable colonial language policies in order to perpetuate their own political power over the majority of citizens less proficient in the European languages.

This point is forcefully demonstrated in the author's discussion of some of the common arguments often advanced to justify official neglect of indigenous African languages, or the lack of interest in the study of language attitudes, that has contributed to [-4-] under-utilization of these languages in public and official communication. Old arguments such as the following are no longer valid:

-- African governments can not afford to invest scanty economic resources on multi-lingual programs aimed at developing indigenous languages for wider public communication.

-- The argument that European languages are already serving the purposes they were meant to serve is also not acceptable because empirical research has demonstrated that young students learn best in their mother tongue.

-- The argument that having many languages perpetuates disunity and political unrest is based on the idea of "one nation, one language," a myth that is not supported by empirical evidence. Indeed, evidence has amply demonstrated that monolingualism does not necessarily guarantee national unity. If that were the case, Somalia would be the most stable and united nation in sub-Saharan Africa. Arguments like these are part of the powerful evidence which Adegbija has successfully used to draw attention to the problems posed by the language attitudes he discusses in the book. It is hoped that policy planners will have the political maturity to heed his timely warning and take the necessary measures to save indigenous African languages from extinction.

REFERENCES


Augustus Kwadwo Boston University
Kwadwo@acs.bu.edu