Language Policies and the Role of English in Ethiopia ¹

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0. Abstract

Ethiopia is a country which was never colonised in the era of colonisation when most were. So one of its indigenous languages, Amharic, has maintained the dominance in politics, business and social communication in history. Nevertheless, this does not mean that English has not penetrated into the sphere. English has gotten an increasing power over Amharic in Education, since the introduction of modern education, and in business, since the enthronement of the incumbent political power.

Therefore, this presentation tries to show the roles of the English language in the Ethiopian Education and Business sectors, with a glimpse of the language policies of the country. In addition, it tries to briefly touch upon the problems observed in the usage of English in those sectors under study: Education and Business.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and motivation

Ethiopia is a multilingual, multiethnic, and culturally a pluralist country. Above all, it was never colonised while almost all African countries were. Nevertheless, its language-use policy had not been the reflection of this diversity and historical autonomy or 'indigenousness', as several works point out (Cohen, 2000?; Getachew and Derib, 2006). In those days of the introduction of modern education into Ethiopia, the media of instruction used to be foreign languages (French, Italian and English). Heugh et al, (2006:45) prove this saying "this first school [Menelik II] was primarily limited to teaching European languages such as English, French and Italian, ..." with the exception of the Italian occupation period in which attempt was made to make some local languages media of instruction. In recent dates (the imperial and military regimes), too, one foreign language, English, was in use in education, particularly from grade seven upwards.

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Despite the linguistic and ethnic multiplicity of the country, English has continued to spread getting more dominance and importance not only in education but also in business and administration. In every aspect of cities and towns English and Amharic languages are neck in neck. One can easily observe this on the streets from peoples' ordinary talk, the business banners, logos, office names, etc.

Therefore, the writer of this article wanted to investigate issues concerning the status of English and other local languages, and the language policies the country have had further than personal observations and opinions. In other words, such recurring questions in the mind of the writer as 'has Ethiopia had legitimate language policies ever since?', 'If so, how has English been portrayed in the policies?', 'What are the legitimate and the practical roles of English in Ethiopia?' were his motivation.

1.2. Methodology

This presentation is an overview and informative of the Ethiopian language policies and practices including the roles/status of English language to the IATEFL/BESIG community. Information and data have been sought from secondary sources: websites, research articles, books, etc., on top of the personal observations and experiences of the presenter. The presenter, as a (student and) teacher of English at different levels for about 12 years, has been able to practically and analytically observe (at least the current) language policy of the country and the roles/status of English.

1.3 Ethiopia: country profile

1.3.1 Geography

Ethiopia is located in eastern Africa in the southern Red Sea region. It is bordered by The Sudan on the west, Eritrea on the north, Djibouti and Somalia on the east, and Kenya on the south. Its topography consists of a central high plateau bisected by the Ethiopian segment of the Great Rift Valley into northern and southern highlands. It also has extensive lowlands on the east and southeast. The plateau varies from 1,500 to 3,000 meters above sea level and features mountainous uplands separated by deep gorges and river valleys, especially in the north. The Abay (Nile) gorge is the largest of the gorges

found in the country. The highest point is Ras Dashen at 4,620 meters in the northern highlands, and the lowest is the Denakil Depression, part of the Rift Valley in the east, which is 115 meters below sea level and is one of the hottest places on earth (Library of Federal Congress, 2005).

As a feature of a highland country, Ethiopia is rich in water bodies. It has a chain of lakes lying in the southern Rift Valley, Lake Tana in the northwest being the largest inland body of water. Several rivers flow from the north-west highlands to the south-east lowlands, and many other feed Abay which is known as Blue Nile and crosses the Sudan and Egypt into the Mediterranean Sea.

As to the climate, in general, the highlands above 1,500 meters enjoy a pleasant, temperate, with daytime temperatures between 16°C and 30°C and cool nights. In areas below 1,500 meters, such as large river valleys, the Denakil Depression, the Ogaden in the southeast, and parts of the southern and western borderlands, daytime temperatures range from very warm (30°C) to torrid (upwards of 50°C), sometimes accompanied by high humidity. Precipitation is determined by differences in elevation and by seasonal shifts in monsoon winds. The highlands receive by far the most rainfall, most of it between mid-June and mid-September, whereas lower elevations receive much less (Library of Federal Congress, 2005).

1.3.2 Demography and Sociolinguistics

The peoples of Ethiopia are ethnically and linguistically one of the most diverse in the world. According to the Ethiopian population census report (2007), there exists a minimum of 85 ethnic groups most of them with their own distinct vernaculars. Of those the Oromos, Amharas, Somalis and Tigrayans are the largest in that order, while the political dominance rests on the Tigrayans.

In terms of languages, Amharic is the lingua franca and the federal working language, while the rest major languages are regional working languages and spoken by the respective nationalities.

The total population is projected from the 2007 census to be about 76 m. However, this figure is not the nationally and internationally quoted one as the actual population size of Ethiopia. For instance, the homepage of the British Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) displays some brief information about Ethiopia, and there the population is said to be 85.2 million (for webpage address see 'Reference').

2. Language policy and language use: literature review

This section is not supposed to inform the participant of this conference (IATEFL BESIG 2010) much on the current literary development of language policy and language use. It rather needs to give some literary background to the main talk (I have) on the Ethiopian language policy and language uses.

Therefore, it briefly highlights on the definitions, issues and considerations, and implementation of a language policy.

A language policy is a high level governmental document that sets decisions and guidelines for and determines what language and for which purposes shall be used in a given country (Getachew and Deribe, 2006). In other words, language policies are legal but political decisions on the statuses, developments, functions, etc. of languages in a state.

For good language policy, according to Kembo-Sure in Mair, 2003, policy makers should consider the following considerations while making the policy:

- human rights implications for minorities
- economic utility of each language
- national integration and government efficiency
- group identity as a well as personal identity
- aesthetic expression. (Kembo-Sure, 2003: 252)

Most of the times, however, as policies are made by politicians and politically committed experts, they fail to consider one or more of the above. For example, if we look at the existing Ethiopian language policy, it seems to have focused more on the 'human right

implications' but not well regarded the economic utility and the national integration issues the language policy might bear (Lukas, I., _; Data, 2000; Hirut, 2007).

Furthermore, such high level political documents do not guarantee clear understanding of what they actually mean in implementation. Therefore, institutions and activities such as language education policy, language planning, language management, and their constituting elements (status planning, corpus planning, acquisition planning, etc.) are required down the way in the hierarchy of institutions and decision bodies (Heugh, et al, 2006). There remains much to be done in Ethiopia in these critical and 'implementational' steps.

3. Language policies in Ethiopia

As was explained in the background section of this paper, the language policies of Ethiopia in the different regimes, more specifically until Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), had been dominantly unitarian that favoured Amharic as a national language. Amharic had been regarded as a language of national symbol and unity: primary education, civil services and societies, trade and business, etc. all used Amharic as a medium of instruction, interaction, transaction and communication (Getachew and Derib, 2006; Bamgbose, _; Hirut, 2007).

The use of Amharic before Haile Silassie I was a 'de facto' language policy, as there was no any written constitution or policy document. From Haile Silassie I forward constitutions were written, though nothing was clearly stated regarding language use policy, and the use of Amharic as a national language was relatively a 'de jure'. Similarly, the military government had tried to address the issue of linguistic equity and rights in a constitution more overtly than its predecessor. Nevertheless, this was highly criticised as mere paper-based and impractical. Getachew and Derib's *Language Policy in Ethiopia: History and Current Trends* is one among others.

Though, [sic] Article 2.5 of the 1980 constitution states, "The peoples Democratic Republic of Ethiopia ensures the equality, respect and development of the nationality

languages [sic],²⁹ practically, there was no other Ethiopian language given any official status nor there was any implication in the constitution, that other Ethiopian languages could be used for official purposes.

(Getachew and Derib, 2006:48).

Since the fall of the military regime, Dergue, and the enthronement of the incumbent government, EPRDF, the national linguistic climate has changed. Both the new constitution and the education policy of the country legally and clearly laid the equity of each vernacular language and the right to use each for education, administration, business and communication. The federal constitution devotes one article (Chapter one, Article five) to the equity and rights to language use as follows.

(Chapter One) Article 5

Languages

- 1. All Ethiopian languages shall enjoy equal state recognition.
- 2. Amharic shall be the working language of the Federal Government.
- 3. Members of the Federation may by law determine their respective working languages.

Negarit Gazeta (1995:3):

The Education and Training Policy, which is aligned to the constitution, also addresses the language use issues in education and instruction as pointed out in the following quotation.

[Article] 3.5 Languages and Education

- 3.5.1 Cognizant of the pedagogical advantage of the child in learning in mother tongue and the rights of nationalities to promote the use of their languages, **primary** education will be given in nationality languages.
- 3.5.2 *Making the necessary preparation*, nations and nationalities can either learn in their own language or can choose from among those selected on the basis of national and countrywide distribution.
- 3.5.3 The language of teacher training for kindergarten and primary education will be the nationality language used in the area.
- 3.5.4 Amharic shall be taught as a language of countrywide communication.
- 3.5.5 English will be the medium of instruction for secondary and higher education.
- 3.5.6 Students can choose and learn at least one nationality language and one foreign language for cultural and international relations.
- 3.5.7 English will be taught as a subject starting from grade one.

3.5.8 The necessary steps will be taken to strengthen language teaching at all levels.

FDRE (1994:23-24) [emphasis mine]

The current national constitution and education policy, though still fail to be all complete and satisfactory to every ethnicity, have manifested far better implementation and practicality.

4. The Status and Roles of English in Ethiopia

According to Gnamba [I 361: 235-240) quoted in Ouedraogo (2000:1): economic development of a community develops its language as well, and can lead to both economic and linguistic hegemony over others.

... the development of all peoples goes hand in hand with the development of their languages. Economic imperialism and linguistic imperialism appear thus as two sides of the same coin. Economically powerful nations naturally wish to expand their languages as natural and normal vehicles of their thought, their cultural values, and their ideologies that they may want or even force other peoples to adopt.

In this respect, English has been the most successfully expanded language. It has been the number one widespread language all over the world. This is well stated by Yun-Kyung Cha in his article 'The Spread of English Language Instruction in the Primary School' as:

If the Babylonian builders who were scattered over the face of the Earth by God for their arrogant attempt to build a tower that would reach to heaven could get together today, they would perhaps be able to continue their work without having any problems in understanding each other. A quite unexpected challenge to God's work is now being made by the English language. The diversity of human languages, one of the major barriers to reuniting innumerable ethno-linguistic groups for thousands of years, is about to be overcome by the rapid spread of English all over the world.

(Cha, 2007: Abstract)

Accordingly, it has several and strong functions/roles in Ethiopia too. Of those roles English is playing in Ethiopia, the educational/instructional role is the long standing and dominant one. Trade and business communication, advertisement and entertainment,

administration and office communication are some of the other growing roles English is fulfilling.

4.1 Educational Roles

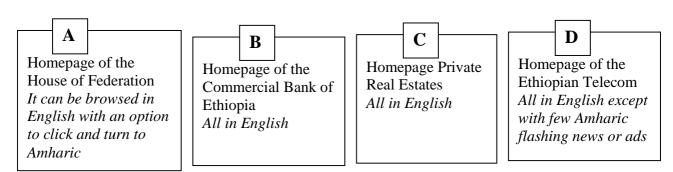
English is taught as a subject from grade one and is a medium of instruction from grade nine through colleges and universities nation-wide. All universities in the country are supposed to use English as their working language; they ought to produce documents, hold meetings, write minutes and reports, etc. in English.

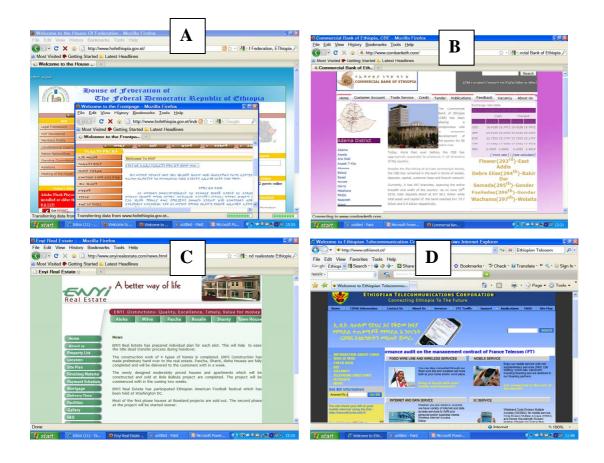
Apart from these nationally consistent practices, different regions have adopted different regional policies and attitudes towards English in their education system; some of the regions have made English to be a medium of instruction from grade 7, some from grade 8 and some from grade 9 (Heugh et al, 2006).

4.2 Other roles

Most government, public and private organisations in Ethiopia, not to mention international organisations, use English side by side with the federal working language, Amharic, or as a sole working language in trans-boundary communications. To prove this prevalent, though not supported with a legislature, use of English in almost all sectors and services, one doesn't need to undertake research; a simple conduct of surveys of websites and documents of various organisations should suffice.

For instance, let us look at the homepages (websites) of some predominantly domestic sectors. They are all in English, while very few use Amharic, the national language, as an alternative language of browsing to English.





As Pennycook (2003) and Ouedraogo (2000) discuss, the role of English in business and economy is one of the most important as it helps a nation to become globally competitive, or at least beneficiary. The increasing use of English in most government and business sectors in Ethiopia, hence, can be attributed to such global challenges and benefits.

Generally, speaking English, or at least mixing English while using a local language, is perceived by the majority of the societies as a sign of being educated and modernised. On the contrary, nevertheless, most graduates leave school and colleges with a very low level of English as the English language teaching, in general, has been faced with several challenges.

4.3 Studies on the status/roles of English in Ethiopia

English is well studied in the world in general and in African in particular. The proliferation of books as 'World Englishes', 'Global English', 'The Politics of English as a Language of the World', etc. is evident for this. However, as we look into where

English is studied and where not, specifically in Africa, we can find titles or topics as South African English, West African English, East African English, etc. More specifically, as Ethiopia is part of the East African region, we could find studies on English in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, but not in Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somali and the Sudan. (Schmied, J. 2006).

When Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda were studied for their English language usage as "East African Englishes", Ethiopia was left aside with Somalia and Sudan with the belief that these countries have more dominant Arabic influence than English. Although, there was taken such a general view, no proper and full scale survey was conducted in these north eastern countries. To substantiate, *The Handbook of World Englishes* in its section on 'East African Englishes' (by Schmied 2006) states that "literature on EAfE is still scarce and patchy. Although ... a big sociolinguistic survey of language in Eastern Africa [was undertaken in the] late 1960s and early 1970s, the descriptive data published as a result ... are relatively limited, especially for English" (p189). In such a limited study, Ethiopia has not even been included.

However, the situation or status of English in Ethiopia is more or less the same as in those three surveyed countries. English in Ethiopia is a medium of instruction from secondary school through higher education but the learners proficiency remains always poor and the effectiveness of English language teaching remains always questionable, despite the efforts being undertaken by the Ethiopian government and concerned institutions. This situation of English in Ethiopia can be compared to that of in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, which is stated by Schmied (2006:192) as follows.

The fact that universities have started extensive course programs in "Communication Skills" or even explicitly "Remedial English" reveals some of the problems. The discussions can be followed on the Internet, for example in numerous letters to the editors of major national newspapers. The key problem is that English is used as the language of instruction from upper primary school onward (in Uganda and partly in Kenya) and is thus the basis for all further education. The discussion is less about teaching English properly than teaching (other subjects) in English properly.

What is explained in this quotation reflecting the situations English in Kenya and Uganda is exactly the same or worse in Ethiopia. English has been used as a medium of instruction from grade 7 or 9 upwards since long time ago, but problems in learning and teaching English have been observed ever since (Jarvis, 1969; Personal experiences and observations). Presently, teachers at schools and employers in industries have been complaining about the low level English language competence of students and graduates, respectively. An evident example to this is the IELTS testing and the remedial training that Addis Ababa University has been administering since 2009. Another one, on the side of the employers, is the general declining tendency of recruiting the 3-year-graduates of the new education policy.

4.4 Policy Premises for English

As it was discussed in one or more of the sections above, English has no mention in the federal constitution or in the regional ones. The Federal Constitution has been written in English as well as in Amharic and it states that "The Amharic version ... shall have final legal authority" (Negarit Gazeta, 1995:38).

On the other hand, it may be argued that the Ethiopian Educational and Training Policy (1994) document defines the roles of English. Yet, the roles of English defined in this document are restricted to the educational contexts: the teaching of English as a subject in schools, the use of English as a medium of instruction, and the purposes of learning English as a foreign language.

Therefore, as it is increasingly getting acceptance and stamina in Ethiopia for purposes of both domestic and foreign interactions and transactions other than in the educational contexts, the Federal Constitution needs to consider including a general guiding national stand with regard to English in general.

5. Challenges in English language teaching in Ethiopia

An old article entitled 'Developments in English Language Teaching in Ethiopia', which was published in ELT Journal, 1969, pointed out that Ethiopia couldn't afford to avoid English and have a national language, Amharic, as medium of instruction saying:

... Even if it were ever found possible to use Amharic as the language of instruction, Ethiopia could not do without at least a proportion of her students having a [sic] knowledge of a world language. The need for English will continue, and yet—until recently—little had been done to have it taught effectively.

A previous article in this journal presented a rather depressing picture of the state of English teaching in Ethiopia...

(Jarvis, 1969:151)

Today, after over 40 years, the observations of this article hold more water. That is, Ethiopia's need for English language is more intensified as globalisation is the agenda of the time, whereas the 'depressing picture of English language teaching' never improved. Students who join colleges and universities are unable to express themselves in English well; graduates who join the world of work fail to write their own CV and application letters for job. Teachers in primary and secondary schools, and even in colleges and universities lack the proficiency to teach well and become role-models.

Fisher & Swindells (1998) in their survey of the views of higher education teachers in Ethiopia put "What are the major difficulties facing students in Ethiopian Higher Education?" as one of their survey questions, and most of the responses they obtained from stressed on students' low level of English skills: "Regarding students, due to the weakened status of high schools in the last two decades, the students' English ability is weak and they find it difficult to grasp the series of lecture and reading ... Lack of proficiency in the English language ... Poor language skill.", (P312; Italics original).

Thus, although the scope of this paper is limited and hasn't tried to deal with it, 'what are the underlying factors or challenges for such extensive problem of poor English level among students and teachers?' should be a basic question to be further investigated and be followed with remedial suggestions.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, two main points, which can further be considered for more formal and deeper research, override the theme of this presentation.

- 1. We can see how Ethiopia is politically and strongly promoting the linguistic equity and mother-tongue policy, which has given way for the development of the vernaculars. In parallel, minority culture and values may be promoted. On the other hand, a deterioration of a commonly shared culture, values, systems and communication medium may be exacerbated. Hence, strategies of implementing mother-tongue policy, the outcomes and consequences, and related issues are questions, among others, for further research.
- 2. English has a wide coverage of functionality as a sole medium (or side by side with Amharic) in education, business and trade interactions and transactions, media and communication, etc. Nevertheless, the appropriateness and accuracy of the English in use is low. The quality of English language education and training is poor. The reason why English is used so widely in almost all sectors is so obvious and global; no research is needed to answer this. However, despite such a wide spread and 'multisectoral' use of English, 'Why has not the country's constitution included any statement about English language use/role in Ethiopia?' can be a leading question for research. 'How have the curricula and syllabuses of English at the different levels been developed?', 'Who develops and implements them ... with what capacity?', 'What are the underlying factors for low level of English at all levels: primary, secondary, tertiary, and postgraduate?', 'How could these be tackled?' etc. could be some of the questions for research.

Therefore, researchers in the areas of English language teaching (ELT), curriculum and policy designers and concerned governmental bodies (in collaboration with international bodies) should consider doing further research. Then, the findings should direct the Ethiopian language policy, in general, and its policy about English, in particular. Such a widespread use of English should not be left to nobody and astray at all.

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