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## How language influences social development: A cross-cultural analysis of the language of development in sub-Saharan African multi-linguistic communities

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### Abstract

Development professionals and researchers are yet to give adequate attention to the fact that languages used in different communities have patterns that are worth considering in the process of providing a global civic competence that stimulates social change. Patterns in language influence meaning, social organizations and cultural practices. Despite the wide spread understanding of these interrelationships, western scholars have not sufficiently addressed language and culture as development components thus inciting a thought provoking ideology that western development concepts are clouded with hidden agendas that complicate the whole process of development within the global context.

This article investigates the idea that local languages be developed alongside western languages (English, French, Spanish, and German) in order for concepts of social development to be appreciated within the understanding of local African communities. It discusses the point that western languages constitute sociocultural barriers to effective cross cultural African communication because of the legacy of colonization and argues that the language used in social development studies is foreign to the social realities of the target African communities and as such constitutes a socio-linguistic barrier to the ethnocentric bond that unites African communities.

**Keywords:** sociolinguistics, Multi-linguistics, community, awareness, development, geopolitical, language and culture.

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Definition of Social Development

If we were to define the word social development, it would certainly not be an easy task. This is not only because the word itself is wrapped up in a complicated network of concepts, but equally due to the fact that the notion is interpreted, perceived and understood within various frameworks of contextual and sociological mindsets. According to Kendra Cherry (2008), “development is a complex issue, with many different and sometimes contentious definitions”. One perspective equates development with economic growth (Sachs, W. 2010). But the United Nations Development Programme (2009 p.2) web site gives a more detailed definition being “to lead long and healthy lives, to be knowledgeable, to have access to the resources needed for a decent standard of living and to be able to participate in the life of the community.”

What we can gather from these definitions is that, achieving human development is linked to freeing people from obstacles that affect their ability to develop their own lives and communities. By implication, development is about people taking control of their own lives, expressing their own demands and finding solutions to their problems. These considerations align with the principles of social studies and underpin the analysis in this paper.

#### 1.2 Objective of the Study

Since language conveys meaning and influences our way of thinking, it is evident that when development strategies or concepts are conceived from the linguistic lens of western ideologies, African concepts of development become fossilized.

In this study, we want to demonstrate how the interaction between the English/French language and the local languages of African linguistic communities cause confusions and constitute a barrier to the understanding and interpretation of social development.

In Cameroon, just like with many other African countries where local languages have been suppressed through the influence of colonization, there is evidence that social studies have not created any real change in the living conditions of these communities despite the huge amounts of money that have been pumped in as development grants; and the shared purpose of helping “young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good, as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world” (William B. Russell, 2012). Madeley (1991.P 58) [8] equally shares similar views as he argues that in all development projects in Africa south of the Sahara, most of the poorest are losing out, which means that “the global aid effort is failing in perhaps its most crucial task of helping the neediest.”

Our argument is that, this failure is because, using English /French carries foreign social ideas of development and can cause confusion as in the case with LEDUCANET a national nongovernmental organization that takes care of orphans and vulnerable children in rural areas in Cameroon. In the execution of the Family Planning project, spacing children was misleading to many rural women. This had nothing in connection to age differences between children as intended in the objectives of the project. The concept of spacing children was taken to mean letting children sleep spaced out in different rooms. This was equally the case with the national program to fight against the spread of HIV/AIDS where most of the concepts used were western and did not really yield the expected results to the Cameroon Government. Therefore, we strongly argue for the need to revive local languages so as to revitalize people's own concepts of identity and development. This is reflected in the success of the mobilization campaign (2006) when LEDUCANET carried out an HIV/AIDS screening campaign, but first of all had to train rural community agents within the community to sensitize and mobilize community members for voluntary screening. There was a resounding success as opposed to when the Government used to send people from the city centres to carry out the same activities. We therefore see that using local languages can contribute in authentic development process, yet there are linguistic challenges coping with the global context.

Africa being a multi-linguistic and sociological setup is particularly challenged because the French, English, Spanish or German systems of education have created other cultural splits amongst the various sociolinguistic communities. This has further complicated the process of achieving a common vision of civic competence development as the internal dynamics of cultural supremacy has generated other sociocultural norms with serious implications. However, these implications will be examined within the framework of infusing different concepts of social studies- “the integrated study of social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence” in multifaceted linguistic contexts that do not only cause problems, but also creates opportunities that can be harnessed and transformed as a catalyst for cross-cultural social development.

### 1.3 Justification of the Study

Language is at the core of social studies and provides the interconnectivity among the various fields the account for social studies: - anthropology, archaeology, economics, history psychology, sociology as well as appropriate content from humanities and natural sciences.

Throughout the history of language, numerous scholars including Harbans (2008) [6], Gboku (2007) [4] and Snocks Desmond (2008) [3] have provided different definitions. The commonality in these definitions is that language is found in all cultures of the world and it is a symbolic system of sounds which when put together according to a certain set of rules conveys meaning to its users. By implication language is subjected to and helps determine social norms and behaviour. But what connection has language got with social development?

The whole process of social development requires conforming or changing established sets of conduct and social behaviours that societies recognize and accept as part of their life style. From this, the questions that come to mind are: Does the western culture of social development articulated in English or French constitute a clash of ideological mindsets with local languages? Is the approach to development conflicting with the norms and traditions of African indigenous cultures? If language is strongly linked to culture and society, does the western language and culture of social development constitute a sociological barrier to the understanding of the very concept of global development? What can be the best approaches that enhance communication in development with incorporated western cultures? Is the whole concept of development viewed by many African countries as a western ideology imposed on the colonial mechanisms and neo-colonial practices completely incomprehensible within the frameworks of customs and traditional concepts of African communities?

The list of interrogations could be long in line with social studies. Nevertheless, these questions have been very instrumental in the formulation of the investigations presented in this paper.

The hypothesis we am developing is that, if the concept and practice of development is wrapped up in a mixed cultural imbroglio wherein sociocultural variants have a bearing to peoples understanding of their life-matters, then emphasis must be laid first on the communicative components or more precisely on sociolinguistics concepts of development so that people can be engaged with development from their own frame of sociocultural mindsets. This will lead to a better understanding of the whole process of social studies and development, since language is the vehicle for human thought and linguistic categories provide the basis for concept formation. It is in language that understanding, energy, dynamism, and the excitement needed to move a people towards change is channelled and if the language is foreign to the target community, so will the concepts be.

The challenges concern the inadequacies in bringing together action, culture and words like positive vocabulary (glass half full as opposed to half empty; citizens as opposed to clients; participants as opposed to beneficiaries) in conveying poverty, social change or underdevelopment to a common understandable denominator. Within this complex context, the language used in development reveals in a fundamental way, what we perceive as our social realities. The language we use in development work reveals who we believe belong and does not belong to the society we live in, and it influences our understanding of the whole concept and process of development. The example of Cameroon bilingualism and national development policy is a real manifestation of cultural interference: The Anglophone and Francophone communities of Cameroon are distinct and consequently their perceptions of development realities are culturally framed. The whole debate on social development

in Cameroon is culture-bound, for more often than not one turns to put cultural interest ahead of national considerations. A critical analysis of the present trends in global development reveals that the concept of democracy, which is the quest for freedom and equality, as well as the pursuit of social justice, welfare and economic empowerment considered as the fruits of development are framed within socio-cultural values.

## 2. Discussion

### 2.1 The Concept of Language in Social Development

Social development concepts are framed using international languages (English, French, Spanish etc.) which over the course of time have gained unquestionable strength within global context through the technological influence they have over less powerful systems usually referred to as local languages. The concepts of social development are based on complex cultural and environmental factors and their interactions. Communities operate under specific conditions that are context bound commonly referred to as sociocultural context. It is through language and culture that the operational values and mindset of a community is established and reflected in their ways of thinking, behaving and interacting with the outside world. The language used in development does not take this into consideration whereas this is fundamental in creating a sense of belonging which leads to awareness or a sense of not belonging which leads to dejection and non-commitment. It is along this paradigm that the whole process of social development operates within the African context and is considered as a philosophy of existence or mode of self-expression.

### 2.2 Language in the Social Context of Development

To look at language in development is in a way to look at how language is used to mobilize, motivate and energize people to make use of available resources in the realization of a common vision of becoming masters of their own destiny. From this point of view language is a force that can make people act in a particular way depending on how it is used. Language could take any form but personal, social and cultural factors will influence such a choice. Whatever the choice is, we are using language to mean something or to explain an action and there is always a sharp dichotomy in the way language is used to create cohesion within a community. As such, communicating in any language will necessitate the command of a different set of options and alternatives from any other. However, the extent to which any individual can convey meaning in a language determines the reality he or she perceives. Hence, the different realities for those who have grown through with the language and lived with it from those who have learned the language but have not lived it. It is within this framework that we will be examining issues of language in relation to development.

### 2.3 How Language Influences Development

Language makes it possible for its users to satisfy the basic function of describing ideas, making requests and solving problems. The power of language to reshape ideas is recognized throughout history and social studies experts (William Benedict 2013, Regional Hopkins 2013) <sup>[13, 7]</sup> agree that “meanings are created as one interprets a message singly and collectively.” However, Adama Ouane lays emphasis on the point that “multiple meanings can exist from the same set of messages.” While it is likely that those

who share the same language experience within the same speech community will create similar meaning from the experience, it is “unlikely that everyone else will create the same meaning.” (Ouane p. 26). The whole process of development is built on complex concepts of growth, evolution and maturation. This makes it difficult for those who use the word to free themselves from the web of meaning that impact a specific blindness to their language thought and action (Sachs 2010, p.6). Development is connected to the way we think and how we see the world around us. This is embedded and reflected in the language we use. For this reason, it ends up creating meanings that differ from others within the same community. Watson in his article: “*Power, Development and Geopolitical changes*” (1999), argues that the complex nature of language issues facing development has always placed language at the centre of development. He contends that development discourse has been dominated by economist, policymakers, political sciences or policy analysts whereas these issues equally concern interdisciplinary scholars since language issues play a central role in development. He considers the situation regrettable in that language issues have been left solely to the hands of linguists or national policy makers. The point Watson is making here is very important in that this approach does not foster development in a sustainable way. Development should be framed within the contexts of peoples' culture, that is, around the concept on which their experiences, attitudes and knowledge are framed. That concept is nothing else than their language. For example, if you show a dozen people from different communities the same symbol and ask them what it means, you are likely to get twelve different answers. I wonder if the American Statue of Liberty brings out the idea of freedom to an Ethiopian the same way it is perceived and lived by an American?; If the image of a hunger stricken child in Sudan is perceived with the same magnitude by a Canadian as the person in Sudan? The answer is definitely no. Just like words, symbols can be interpreted in many different ways creating situations of misunderstanding.

It is possible to have an argument about poverty without ever realizing that the encoder and the decoder are using the word to represent entirely different things. This same goes for development as experienced in the Family Planning Program to which allusion has been made in section one. What I am saying here is that, development is greatly influenced by those who pilot the process and the objectives beneath. Involving people who have a good understanding of the sociocultural context will enhance an inclusive approach as they will serve as background informants and resource persons in selecting the most appropriate channel of communication.

The point we are marking here is that, the way people use language to communicate depends to a greater extent on the background of their linguistic community. This point could be simply illustrated in that: when a Canadian development consultant who studied in an institute of development in the United States and did some development work in Japan tells a development worker from Cameroon who attended the Pan African Institute of Development and is now working in Kenya, that he is working on a community project, the persons do not have the same key for the word community because communities differ in concepts and settings. Nonetheless, if the one understands the other, it is by improvising the keys as one goes along. This is because effective communication calls for effective use of language

patterns and shared codes. Bettina Bochynek (2007, p 29) <sup>[1]</sup> thinks, and I agree with her that, this is only possible “between people who are used to the same... form, trained to code and decode a meaning by using the same key.” Effective development can only take place among people who use the same key to communicate or understand the complexity of using many keys.

Though Snocks (2008) argues that “such changes require language education that permit the recipients themselves to negotiate a compromise between local attitudes and practices and development enhancing alternatives,” it is clear that in a situation where a local language competes with a language of wider communication with a colonial history, each code curves out for himself a role linked to specific socioeconomic factors. This means that the propensity to develop African languages will be very high if the language policy is linked to socioeconomic activities. In discussing some of the difficulties linked to the African literacy program Gboku (2007) <sup>[4]</sup> makes mention of “the lack of an explicit link between the acquisition of literacy and socioeconomic goals.” This reinforces Snocks argument of coding literacy with socioeconomic values and ties with Gboku’s concluding remarks that “while considerable enthusiasm was manifested, there is no evidence to the fact that the local language literacy has made a significant contribution to rural development.”

### 3. Language in the African Sociolinguistic Context

The verbal and nonverbal features of language and communication contribute enormously in shaping and orienting human thoughts, attitude and action to the extent that writers like Hamper (2011), have stressed its importance by virtue of that it creates cultural bonds which are shared by a group. Cultural values shared by one group may be rejected by another. The values are learned by members of the group; hence taught by other members. A culture is passed down from one generation to the next. It is acquired and not innate. This makes it difficult for one to be culturally alert in a community where he or she is not a member. Communication plays a vital role in the support and expansion of our development work, through the channels or tools we effectively use in our social, official and interpersonal interactions. It is in this light that we have come to realize the strength of language, not only as one of humanity's greatest assets, but equally as a source of many problems. The problems begin from the fact that language not only describes people, ideas, processes and events, it shapes our perception of them in areas including status, credibility and attitude about issues such as gender and ethnicity. Along with influencing our attitude, language reflects them. The words we use and our manner of speech reflects power, status, affiliation, attraction and interest. Viewed from this frame, there is evidence to the fact that how we use language has the potentials to create misunderstanding.

Writers like Ferguson (2005), have expressed concern on how communication and information sharing contribute in creating social ties that enhance transactional concepts in representing the process- oriented nature of human interaction.

The obvious setback to these limitations has a direct consequence on the purpose of communication in development that is the language we use for the purpose of development. This could be related to a fact that the rate of information sharing to increase knowledge has not produced

expected results and is reflected in the slow change in awareness necessary to stimulate development. Though it may be argued that the slow change within the African context is due to the little motivation derived from global communication, it is also worth acknowledging from and sociolinguistic perspective that any communication for development which does not motivate, inspire and promote heighten awareness in the community, will definitely “bounce back” without achieving set goals. Family planning programs and urban sanitation projects in Africa are instances in point.

Most researchers who identify with groups traditionally marginalized from mainstream research have come up with an important finding that reveals the importance of evaluating the impact of communication on the targeted population. (Kapoor, 2007; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2008; Madeley, 1991) <sup>[8]</sup>. However, they recognize human diversity as a significant factor in communicating with groups of people or a community and assert that when communication is monitored the “ongoing spiral of interaction” can be checked to see if it is effective. (Kapoor, 2007 p.43) This model allows for evaluation and feedback which obviously will ameliorate the communication approaches and strategies in social development.

### 3.1. Language and Globalisation

In a global sense, the role of language in development is increasingly becoming an important subject in development literature and social studies. Its central role in connecting economic, political, social changes and other developing communities is linked to the cultures to which these communities belong. It is therefore impossible to understand such changes without considering the cultural factors embedded in the language.

Though many development scholars (Maaka & Andersen 2006) <sup>[9]</sup> accept that African languages matter in development, it is still an elastic concept solely depending on the nature of the community it serves. They argue that cultural values, attitudes, orientations and opinions which are expressed through language are key variables in determining economic progress and explain why some nations succeed in their quest for development and others fail. Our concept of language must therefore take into account that cultures are constantly changing and are not internally homogenous. However, the language culture alone does not determine our lives and identity because class, gender and politics also influence us as do institutions and incentives. Yet the role language plays in culture as an agent of development is indisputable in the sense of being an active component in the production of social behaviour.

This study searches the alternative to western form of imperialistic development in the vulgarization of local languages and indigenous knowledge through literacy programs. Modernization of development, through the diffusion of formal scientific and technical knowledge from the Global North to the Global South in English or French, is seen as an effective way to eradicate poverty. Consequently development has frequently been conceptualized as a fundamental technical issue driven by the dominant science discourse of Europe and North America. But now, it is evident that this transfer has not been wholly successful in transforming the lives of many, especially the countries south of the Sahara of which Cameroon is not an exception. It is in this light that we argue for the remaking of development to include local

constructions in African indigenous languages. We consider this shift to be the condition for any reasonable change within the global context of development. This approach highlights the importance of local-level history, geographies and sociocultural constructs in understanding social-level development. Our argument is that, in developing the local language it will provide the opportunity to integrate sociocultural values that portray indigenous concepts as a valid body of knowledge. Despite the fact that much current development thinking still reflects the dominance of formal science, development remains a technical challenge and the voices of the poor and dispossessed can only be heard if they are mobilized around one unifying factor which is language.

However, the challenges for a new vision of development remains, and there is increasing explicit understanding among many researchers and practitioners showing that local participatory research approaches have given advantage for the development of appropriate environmentally friendly and sustainable development systems.

Although it is only in the last quarter of the twentieth century that the interest in indigenous knowledge and the development of local languages explicitly emerged in the literature of development, it is becoming increasingly important in discussions on sustainable development because of the way in which such knowledge has apparently allowed people to live in harmony with nature while still being able to make a living.

On the other hand, the fact that indigenous knowledge is differentiated in communities makes it difficult for social studies scholars to make exclusive use of it. Although it would be attractive to generate the concept of community knowledge through community literacy, it is fragmentary and is cut across by societal inequalities such as wealth, status, household circumstances etc. All these factors impact on an individual access to knowledge and the individual's ability to deplore such knowledge. The risk of having gender issues is equally very high in such circumstances. With this kind of fragmentation and differentiation, it might be difficult to see how indigenous knowledge enhanced through community literacy can be successfully and efficiently deployed across a range of communities within the context of globalisation.

Our worries about the effectiveness with local languages are that, Cameroon has about 150 local languages and there might be the tendency for the developed ones to take undue advantage over less powerful linguistic communities. Other fears are in that indigenous knowledge appears to be an untainted knowledge system hence; the risk becomes that of how to tease out this knowledge which will then provide the key to sustainable development in rural communities of the Cameroons. The danger with this approach is that it privileges indigenous knowledge in the same way that modernization proponents privilege western science. Though it is common knowledge that the linguistic situation in Cameroon has made Cameroonians to be very open to a whole range of ideas, regardless of their origin as long as they make economic sense and are culturally acceptable, it is nonetheless an issue of contextualization of indigenous knowledge. Indigenous knowledge does not exist separately from the society in which it is found. It is very much embedded in the everyday practice and reflects the socioeconomic and sociocultural realities of the communities. This is particularly difficult for development

because it makes the deployment of indigenous knowledge difficult over different geographic communities.

This heightens one of the key differences between indigenous knowledge and western science. Whereas the former is deeply embedded within its context, the latter is separated, almost disembodied from its context, and is therefore presumably much more universal and applicable.

This line of reasoning seemingly leads to the conclusion that African languages cannot really be developed successfully into a development tool because they have little relevance or applicability outside their immediate communities. But looking at this from a sociological lens, there is much to benefit in developing African languages which are the only media through which the very concepts of development are built. Mother tongue literacy is of great importance to speed up contextual development if incorporated in mainstream development of the community. If I should go by the Asmara Declaration on African languages and literatures of January 11 to 17, 2000, in Eritrea – a conference organized by writers and scholars from all regions of Africa, titled *Against All Odds: African Languages and Literatures into the 21st Century*; It states in unequivocal terms in its second point that “The vitality and equality of African language must be recognized as a basis for the future empowerment of African people.” It equally emphasizes on its last point that “African languages are essential for the decolonization of Africans minds and the African renaissance.” This is not just a simple declaration; it is more like a prophecy that if Africa has to be developed, it must start by developing its language. It is for this reason that any meaningful development strategy or any venture in sustainable development for Africa must incorporate the cultural specificities of the community as embedded in their local/indigenous languages.

#### 4. Conclusion

Language issues continue to plague the process of development in colonized less developed countries in general and the Cameroons in particular. Coupled with this, the official bilingual context of co-habiting the English and French languages in an already fragmented community of 150 ethnic languages poses serious communication barriers to effective social development.

This article has highlighted the linguistic challenges of African countries within the framework of constructive social development. The research draws on existing literature on the subject matter and interviews with some Cameroon development scholars.

As earlier mentioned, language barriers affect communities in various ways; the primary impact is that it is a deterrent to effective communication thus creating difficulties in the understanding of development concepts that are conceived in western languages.

They also have secondary micro economic impact of limiting communities that are not educated in the western language medium.

The research reveals that the linguistic situation in Africa is complex and justifies why it is. It has equally provided arguments for the use of indigenous knowledge as a counter strategy to the over domineering Western science and highlighted the limitations it disposes in not being able to cut across many geographic communities. In a nut shell, the paper underpins the importance of African language development and recognizes its indisputable role in maintaining the social fabric of the community through

which any meaningful social development should be constructed. Nonetheless, in our opinion, we would recommend that:

1. A step-by-step introduction of African languages in the global education curriculum
2. African literacy programs be linked up with socioeconomic production
3. Develop vibrant National African Language programs.
4. Constitute a strong African Commission to advocate for the institutionalization of the African language policy through the adoption of the Asmara Declaration at the United Nations.

These are some of the recommendations we think could be salient within the present analysis of the pluralistic language situation in Africa south of the Sahara.

There is all evidence that the challenges are enormous therefore the collective mobilization of African social scholars to develop contextual approaches and strategies for Africans to judiciously manage resources destined for development purpose and to draw on their indigenous knowledge, will be needed to bring about real changes. Consequently, global mutual acceptability amongst nations and the full implementation of equity will constitute a pool where world views converge under a single philosophy of commitment to development and under a unifying denominator- "effective cross-cultural communication" as an indispensable tool in the complex process of social development.

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