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The Umbilical Connection Between Language and Culture and its Implications for the Socio-Cultural Development of a Community: Time to Reverse the De-Centering of African Languages

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Abstract

Essentially, in the human kingdom language is regarded not only as a medium of communication, but also as a carrier of culture. As a carrier of culture language is of paramount significance in that it controls the way a people, individually and collectively, perceive themselves in relation to other selves in the world, and initiate and sustain their creativity. Unfortunately, for European cultural hegemony language also became a mechanism for launching strategies of domination and alienation of the African personality. The psycho-social effect of the type of displacement that followed this action, as it is described in this article, especially by Biko (1978), Ngara (1985), Ngugi wa Thiongo (1986) and Pityana (1995), is such that the processes of subjugation and domination did not only have to do with the colonised having to inherit alien syntax or lexicology, but also the ways in which they ultimately perceive self and the world, and how to relate with Europeans in their assumed superior status. In this relation, the main aim of this article is to briefly reflect on the history of the use of language as a mechanism that was used to assert European cultural domination in the space of power relations and the disorientation and marginalization of African indigenous languages and cultural heritage, and ultimately the sabotaged the socio-economic development of the geo-south The

article advocates for the reversal of the de-centering of African languages in ear of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Key words: Language, Culture, Identity, Alienation, Subjugation And Domination and Power Relations.

1. Introduction

Language is culture and in language we carry our identity and our culture. Through language we carry science and technology, education, political systems and economic developments (Makgoba, Shope and Mazwai 1999: xi)

In a bid to sustain its domination of the African cultural thought and creativity the European cultural hegemony, among other tools or mechanisms of domination and subjugation, used something that is key to people's self-expression, identity, innovation and creativity, namely, language. Language is defined as that aspect in life that "bears the record of history, traditions, beliefs and knowledge of any people. It is in language that people learn, relate to each other as social animals in a material world of production, reproduction, distribution and exchange" (Prah 1998: 2).

Furthermore, as Ngugi wa Thiongo (1986: 13) asserts language is "both a means of communication and a carrier of culture." As a tool for communication a language can be used by different cultural groups in a society, but as a carrier of culture language can be used by a specific group or native speakers of the language and in this way it "reflects the concerns, attitudes and assumptions of its speakers" (Ngara 1985: 42).

The function or role of language as not only a medium of communication but also a carrier of culture is of paramount significance in that it controls the way a people, individually and collectively, perceive themselves in relation to other selves in the world. It is also a means through which people invent and create material tools that sustain their existence. In this regard Ngugi wa Thiongo (1986: 15) identifies three components that constitute the function of language as a carrier of culture:

- (i) Language in culture is a product of history, which it in turn reflects,
- (ii) It is an image-forming agent in the mind of a people; individually and collectively,

- (iii) and it also operates as a transmitter of those created images of the world and reality through the spoken and written language.

The emphasise here is that, language plays a central role in articulating culture and the formation of an identity of a specific people within a society, mainly because it forms part of their cultural heritage. Ngara (1985: 42) endorses this when he maintains that, “there is ... a fairly number of ‘loaded words’ in any language, words whose pejorative and ameliorative arise from the social psychology of the native speaker, from the store of prejudices, opinions and value judgements which form an important part of ... culture.”

Considering the description provided thus far, it is therefore obvious why it was crucial for European cultural imperialism, in its process of asserting and sustaining its total domination of the African cultural thought and behaviour, to use language as a tool. The implication therefore, is that to devalorize and disorganize the language of the colonized is equal to disorientating their world-view and definition of self in relation to other people in the world. In congruence with Ngara (1985), Pityana (1995: 85) explains that “language as discourse is a system of differential relations: it expresses power relations; it can be a sign of domination or subjectivity.” In this relation, the main aim of this article is to reflect on the history of the use of language as a mechanism that was used to assert European cultural subjugation and domination in the space of power relations disorientate and marginalize African personality and cultural heritage. The article also argues for the reverse of the de-centering of African languages, and furthermore, highlights its significance in a people’s socio-economic development.

2. Language and culture, and the history of the socio cultural politics of power relations between the coloniser and the colonised

As Biko (1978:240 and Ngara (1985: 39) assert to advance its mission of displacing the African personality and means of creativity, the coloniser accordingly reduced the African to a perpetual student, having to learn from a perpetual teacher, and was not only given a Western education, but also taught in Western European languages to the extent that education was equated with the acquisition of a European language. The result of this action was that literacy became only associated with mastery

of English, French or Portuguese, and above all it became linked to the Western type of schooling and epistemology.

Through the curricula that was purposefully prepared there was "... a systematized indoctrination ... [of Africans] ... against their own heritage in favour of alien culture" (Mugambi 1992: 2). With strategies such as these Western cultural imperialisms achieved its supreme objective of invalidating African indigenous education. In this connection, Mugambi (1992: 2) further argues that "Africans experienced a dichotomy between what they learned at school, and the socialized life they lived at home." This means that whatever was taught at school radically contrasted with what was taught at home and in the society through various indigenous practices and institutions.

Since language is not only a medium of communication, but also a carrier of culture, the implications of the psychological effect of the type of displacement described here, especially by Biko (1978), Ngara (1985), Ngugi wa Thiongo (1986) and Pityana (1995), is that the process did not only have to do with inheriting alien syntax or lexicology but also the ways in which the colonised will ultimately perceive self and the world and how to relate to others, especially Europeans in their assumed superior status.

As a further strategy to suppress and marginalise indigenous languages all different colonies were made to adopt languages of the coloniser as official languages and thus indigenous languages were to be used only 'at home' and other informal situations which were separate from the colonialist realm. In this way "the colonial child was made to see the world and where he [or she] stands in it as seen and defined or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition" (Ngugi wa Thiongo 1986: 17). As Fanon (1967: 38) aptly points out "a man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language." This is part of a strategy that has as its objective to ensure that the psycho-social terrain of domination and subjugation is sustained.

In support Mudimbe (1988:2) asserts that through its strategies and actions, the colonizing structure and hegemony sabotaged the African personality and perspective from three fronts, namely, "the domination of physical space, the reformation of the native's mind, and the integration of local economic histories into the Western perspective". This led to indigenous communities being alienated from their tools of self-definition, meaning everything that constituted their means of "belief in their names, in their environment, their environment and their capacities and ultimately themselves (Ngugi wa Thiongo 1997: 182).

The implications of the de-centering of the African indigenous languages is something that continues to be experienced even in the post-1994 South Africa. For example, Moodie (2004: 6) points out that, some communities in a nation in transition from apartheid social arrangement to democratic society have adopted the view that “say the value of African languages has been diminished as many young educated black people view English as the language of aspiration, while the government and parents steer children towards science and maths-orientated professions.” This is an evidence of the fact that apartheid as a socio-economic system that was engineered towards the subjugation and domination of the indigenous people of South Africa thrived on its use of culture as a tool of oppression and dehumanisation, and this was achieved through the promotion of Afrikaans. Should it have not been of the Soweto uprising, which was about the use of Afrikaans as a language of learning for all South Africans, this could have continued.

As observed by Freire (1993: 29) what makes communities such as those that embrace English as the only language that can be used for learning and expression of cultural creativity is the fact that the colonised has become “adapted to the structure of domination in which they are immersed, and have become resigned to it, are inhibited from waging the struggle for freedom so long as they feel incapable of running the risks it requires.” The risk is being able to be self. Through languages, foreign to Africa, concepts and thoughts, which were in direct conflict with traditional communal development values, got into the life of the colonised and ultimately disorganised the colonised psychologically and referentially. One such explicit example is given by Asante (1980: 7) when he writes that “... Islam [as, one emerging foreign cultural hegemony] ... made Arabic the language of millions of non-Arabs, thus spreading culture in a most powerful manner”. In this case hearing God in a foreign language automatically makes one experience the divinity in foreign form and content and this ultimately alienate the colonized from indigenous cultural heritage and identity.

In the main, using language as a tool or mechanism to sustain cultural imperialism, the aim of European cultural imperialism was to destroy the collective memory bank of the colonised past achievements and their experience over time, all of which form the basis of their identity in relation to other people in the world.

3. The need to reverse the de-centering of African languages

Language is key in any nation's self-expression, identity, cultural creativity and socio-economic development. Coupled with culture language is a means through which people design and create things (material, intellectual and spiritual) in time and space. In support Makgoba et al. (1999: xi) argues that it is through language that people invent and reinvent science and technology, education, political systems and economic developments. In the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) to effectively challenge and launch a programme of curbing the socio-cultural and economic domination and marginalization of Africa and its people and set an agenda for the continent's regeneration and development, African communities and organic intellectuals need to begin to take as their responsibility to initiate the processes of prioritizing the recovery and advancement of indigenous languages. This among other things can be achieved through the development of strategies and policies deliberately aimed at re-centering African languages into the space of intellectual engagements and creativity. African languages must also be used as languages of science and technology.

In support of the call for the re-centering of African languages Prah (2009:91) argues that;

there exist two parallel histories of knowledge and knowledge production. The first of these is what is generally described in the literature as endogenous knowledge – knowledge that is built into African thought and practice and in steadily modified forms passed down to successive generations. ... The other history of knowledge is one which has been acquired through the Western encounter and which is also produced to narrower sections of the African population and which goes into creation of the modern elite in African societies.

What is clear in the argument that is advanced in this article and is also supported by Prah's (2009) observation is that over the years there has never been an attempt to merge the two histories of knowledge, namely, the European and the African thought and culture embedded in their languages.

Any form of knowledge is enshrined in the language of the producers and its developers. African languages are core to Africa's processes of invention and reinvention in its contact with the other selves in the world. In this relation, Sibuyi (1999: 8) aptly argues that:

to sideline a body of indigenous knowledge systems or scientific knowledge which is encapsulated in these languages will do a great disservice to the African renaissance project and its intended objectives.

In the South African context, to enhance the nations' transformation agenda, African languages can, among other things be used to advance some communities understanding of the concept democracy and its implications as a mechanism of creating structures that are critical in addressing their daily needs. In this way the idea of a perspiratory democracy can be fully realized.

4. Conclusion

What this article attempted to demonstrate is the fact that language as a carrier of culture is a means through which the identity of a specific people can be formulated, and their socio-cultural and economic development in time and space be navigated. At the same time the article has also highlighted how European cultural imperialism has used language to achieve its objectives of subjugation and domination of the African personality. It is through the intentional recovery of indigenous languages that Africa with all its people can be able respond effectively to the challenges and opportunities of the 4th Industrial revolution. Indigenous knowledge systems are intractably connected to the indigenous languages, culture, innovation and creativity.

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