

# LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS IN MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION IN UGANDA

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**“If the foundations be destroyed, what can the  
righteous do ” (KJV Psalms 11:3).**

# Introduction

- This paper assesses the Uganda Government's policy of mother tongue education at early Primary level as a way of achieving the Millennium Development Goal of Universal Primary Education (UPE).
- While it acknowledges government's commitment to UPE, it however exposes the loopholes in government's mother tongue education policy and how it reflects on the massive dropout rate in UPE.
- I argue that the lack of effective mother tongue education is central to the massive drop out [push out] of pupils.
- The paper examines how the Uganda government promotes a few favored languages by producing teaching materials in those languages and distributing them widely among related languages.
- It also assesses the impact of translation of foreign materials into Ugandan languages or from one Ugandan language to another for teaching mother tongue.
- It assesses the role of the local language boards as the liaison between the ministry of education, schools and local communities.
- It also revisits the challenges of orthography development for Ugandan languages the development of writing and reading in Ugandan languages using locally generated and communally tested orthographies that take care of the uniqueness of Ugandan languages.

# A Time of opportunity

When the government of the Republic of Uganda launched its UPE drive in January 1997, it aimed at using UPE as one of the “policy tools for achieving poverty reduction and human development” (Bategeka & Okurut, 2005 p.1).



# Government's objectives were:

- To provide access to primary education for all, and indeed enrollment rose from 3.1 million in 1996 to 7.6 million in 2003 (1)
- To provide quality education “as a basis for promoting human resource development” (2).
- Government increased the education budget tremendously under the Education Sector Investment Plan.
- Additional funding came from the heavily indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative, through the country's Poverty Action Fund.
- But the quality of education did not improve, and UPE pupils dropped out at an alarming rate.
- “... of the 2,159,850 pupils that were enrolled in primary school level one in 1997 at the time UPE was introduced, only 485,703 (23%) reached primary seven in 2003. Pupils abandon school for different reasons, *but the most common include lack of interest (46%), family responsibilities (15%) and sickness (12%)* [Emphasis mine]” (Bategeka & Okurut, 2005, p.3).
- It is my contention that the cause of *lack of interest* is directly related to the language factor at primary level, be it English as a foreign language, or “foreign” local languages, or lack of a good curriculum, text books, or effective teaching strategies where pupils are taught in their mother tongue.

# A time of opportunity

- The Uganda Government White Paper (1992) was produced by an Education Policy Review Commission set up in 1987 to recommend strategies and measures for improving the system.
- The Language Policy was a product of this commission although the language policy is more concerned with the question of one national language and sees the variety of Uganda's local languages as more of a curse than a blessing since it "makes it difficult for the country to achieve rapid universal and democratized education" (15).
- But it does acknowledge grudgingly "from a scientific point of view" and with a "flexible attitude" what it calls the "traditional argument" about the role mother tongue plays as a stepping stone in the education process, but it is quick to note that English works just as good in urban areas since "children at the most malleable stage of early childhood have the highest capacity and desire to learn new languages" (White Paper 16).

# The good and the bad in Uganda's Language Policy

- Recommendation 4, that “The mother tongue should be used as a medium of instruction in all education programs up to P. 4. “ (16).
- Where there is a dominant local language, therefore, that becomes the language of instruction in that area, except in metropolitan settings where there are many languages; in such a case, English will be used as the language of instruction.
- Recommendation No. 6, says that area languages (the most outstanding languages in each region) should be taught as subjects in schools. (But it gets tricky!) The languages were reduced to five. Luganda, Lwo, Runyakitara, (Runyoro-Rutoro Runyankore-Rukiga), Ateso/Karimojong and Lugbara.”
- It's important to note that Uganda is a very culturally diverse country. It has over fifty distinct languages recognized by the state (Rempel, 2010, p.5). Each language contains history, culture, wisdom and even medical knowledge of the different people groups/nationalities and is a vehicle for political, economic and cultural transformation. Most Ugandan tribes are larger in population than some countries on the world map.
- According to the 2002 Uganda National Census, the population of Lango sub-region where I come from was 1.5 million, which is bigger than the population of at least 73 countries, 8 in Africa alone. What we call tribal groups are actually nation groups.
- The constitution of the Republic Uganda, states explicitly that “The State shall ...encourage the development, preservation and enrichment of all Ugandan languages.” (Objective 24 (b)), yet not all Ugandan languages are being enriched.

- Rather, separate languages are lumped into clusters following old colonial compartmentalization of languages which led to the arbitrary creation of nonexistent languages just like arbitrary colonial borders created new nations by separating brothers and cousins in the process and forcing unrelated communities into one nation.
- What this means is that one dominant (or perceived to be dominant) language is selected to represent other closely and even remotely related languages.
- This has implications for curriculum design, for teaching, for funding and for development of text books.
- This in turn has implications in terms of pupils' comprehension and consequent interest or lack of interest in studies.
- It also has long term social, political and economic implications for entire people groups.
- Government sees multilingualism and pluriculturalism as a head ache and a hindrance to development and democratization and is using a pragmatic approach to deal with the issue.

# Language, the engine for development

- Scholars like Kwesi Kwaa Prah (2002), Birgit Brock-Utne (2003), and Godman Okonye (2009) argue that linguistic emancipation is a critical component of political, economic and cultural emancipation. This doesn't just apply to the linguistic imperialism of the west, but also the linguistic hegemony of dominant tribal languages over minority languages.
- “The answer to the language question provides the key to development challenge and the further emancipation of African people. It is at the same time, what will determine whether we remain a recognizable and distinct cultural component of humanity or vanish into another existing cultural area; that is, whether we cease to exist culturally as Africans” (Prah, 2002, p. 14).
- “The forms of knowledge that could have empowered the underprivileged would have to be built on African culture and tradition and be delivered in African languages” (Brock-Utne 2003, p.1).



# The Role of the Language Boards

- One of the strategies of the National Language Policy was the establishment of local language Boards who were mandated with the responsibility of overseeing the scientific development, teaching and production of materials in the indigenous language of each district. They were also to help the National Curriculum Development Center (NCDC) with vetting books for teaching in schools.
- Not all districts or language sub-regions have formed language boards. Even then, most of the existing language boards are not functioning due to lack of a clear guideline on the functions of the boards and mostly due to lack of funding. Some of the boards are composed of retired teachers who do not have the energy to build up an active language board, or district education officials who are too busy and might not have the passion, or could even be hostile to mother tongue education.
- The language boards in turn face challenges like the negative attitude of some head teachers and parents to mother tongue education, the politics of language at national level, orthography development, resolving dialects, and lack of political will from government.

• There is also no clear link between the language boards and NCDC.  
• For example, recently there was a new directive from NCDC about the composition of language boards. The new directive states that a Language Board must be composed of:

1. District Education Officer (DEO), or the District Inspector of Schools (DIS) of the district (determined by speakers of a particular language) or in case of a regional language board, the DEO or DIS of the hosting district.

2. Chairpersons of education committees of Local Council (the legislature of each district).

3. Four (4) Teachers (2 retired and 2 practicing)

4. Two chairpersons (2) of Head teachers associations (1 primary school, 1 secondary school)

5. Two (2) recognized authorities from each dialect

6. Two (2) recognized authors

7. Two (2) representatives from the Bible translation association/committee (Oketcho, 2010).

• This arrangement does not take into account the fact that the DEO, DIS or even Chairperson of the District Education Committee might not be a local language speaker.

• Chairpersons of head teachers association might not necessarily be linguist or even advocates of mother tongue education, let alone diligent in attending meeting and making the necessary sacrifices to build up a strong language board. In fact, some of the fiercest enemies of mother tongue education are head teachers.

• Government doesn't fund the boards. The boards are told to source for money to run a secretariat, hold regular workshops, sensitize stakeholders on the current language policy.

# Scarcity of teaching materials

- Since the introduction of UPE, government has invested heavily in primary education. Total education expenditure for instance rose from 2.1 % GDP in 1995 to 4.8% GDP in 2000. While the education sector's share in the national budget rose from 13.75 in 1990, to 24.7% in 1998. Besides, up to 65 % of education budget was allocated to Primary education under the Education Sector Investment Plan (Bategeka & Okurut, 2004, p.1). Indeed, one of the main roles of the Ministry of Education in UPE is “providing instructional materials in form of text books and teachers guides” as well as “providing curriculum and assessment standards” (Bategeka & Okurut, 2004, p.2). In spite of this obvious investment in UPE, there is a serious scarcity of teaching materials for the mother tongue curriculum.
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•Although the problem is national, there is linguistic favoritism in the procurement of text books. A typical example is the scarcity of materials for the Thematic Curriculum which was launched recently in Uganda without adequate preparation and mostly built around mother-tongue education in early primary.

•Lango, my mother tongue is spoken by 1.5 million people in Northern Uganda covering 7 districts, and Acholi is a neighboring language spoken by 1.2 million people covering 5 districts. The Lango and Acholi languages are Nilo-Saharan languages belonging to the Lwo language family and have a high degree of mutual intelligibility but different historical and socio-cultural contexts. But the Ministry of Education has produced quite a few Thematic Curriculum Readers Series for P.1, P.2, and P.3, in Acholi, and not a single one in Lango. To solve the our problem, the MOE has instead distributed the Acholi books in the Lango sub-Region. This is a clear case of “linguicism” to borrow Tove Skutnabb-Kangas’ term for those ideologies and structures that perpetuate unequal linguistic powers relations while promoting the interest of one language and its speakers at the expense of the others (2002, p.13).

•Even the Thematic Curriculum Assessment Tool from the National Curriculum development center (NCDC) was only translated into Acholi and that was meant to take care of Lango. This is now forcing Lango pupils to learn in Acholi which is not their mother-tongue and Lango teachers to work with a different language with serious disadvantages.

This is not to say there are no books completely, for Lango is a written language with a history that stretches back to the 1940’s. The irony is that there are books that have been used in lower primary for years, but these have been swept aside without any replacements.

# Publishing challenges

- There are lots of manuscripts of all kinds that have been generated in mother tongue, and language boards have people asking what to do with their manuscripts, but publishers are not interested in local language manuscripts. They prefer contract publishing where they are paid in full.
- There is need to develop local language publishing, not just to award contracts to the big publishing merchants who only go after money without any social responsibility and patriotism.
- The Lango Language Board for instance has generated several manuscripts for teaching the Thematic Curriculum in Lango—materials that have been reviewed in the local newspapers and critiqued in writers workshops.
- We also hold writers workshops to generate new teaching materials.
- There is lack of research by NCDC on text book's availability, text book design and text-book distribution; the result is confusion.

# Economic expediency

- The Ministry of Education thinks the solution to lack of funds and scarcity of resources for indigenous languages is to lump up related languages in clusters, and produce materials in one language and then distribute it among several languages.
- This pragmatic morality of economic expediency: pay less to produce the materials and simply distribute it in two or three different regions without any concern for the immediate and long term consequences.
- This is a dangerous fallacy that will destroy not only our languages and cultures but also our education system. It is perhaps the greatest threat to mother-tongue education in Uganda. :

# Cross translation and cultural leakage

- The pragmatic morality of saving money is reflected in developing just a few texts and translating them into other languages or even translating non Ugandan books, or from one Ugandan language to another for teaching mother tongue.
- This brings in the challenge of context and translation leakage. You cannot develop a language fully without developing its writing from its cultural base.
- Economic considerations should not make us sacrifice people, their languages and their cultures. While text book production is expensive, ignorance and illiteracy is even more expensive for individuals and the country.

# Need for cultural relevance /authenticity

- Writing is also an economic activity. Our local writers cannot find inspiration by selling their talents and products if their exclusive primary market has been hijacked by foreign books which have their own market outside Uganda, or books written in English or another Ugandan language and translated back and forth. There is no way a writer and writing in our local languages can develop this way.
- Consequently, awareness of cultural context, mother tongue education becomes a contradiction in terms since the very primary objective was for our children to move from the known to the unknown.
- Lack of awareness of cultural context in materials production will not promote mother tongue education either at the teaching, reading or writing levels. Even more frightening, **reading is a critical skill that affects everything else; it is the foundation for literacy.** If our children cannot comprehend what they are reading, they will definitely not develop literacy skills or interest in studying.



“The ability to read and understand a simple text is one of the most fundamental skills a child can learn. Without basic literacy there is little chance that a child can escape the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Yet in many countries, students enrolled in school for as many as six years are unable to read and understand a simple text. Recent evidence indicates that learning to read both *early* and at a sufficient *rate* are essential for learning to read well. Acquiring literacy becomes more difficult as students grow older; children who do not learn to read in the first few grades are more likely to repeat and eventually drop out, while the gap between early readers and nonreaders increases over time” (EGRA Brief, 2010, p. 1).

# Mutual intelligibility and dialects

- The other problem is a rather scientific misconception about independent languages, mutual intelligibility, and dialects.
- Some Ugandan languages that happen to be mutually intelligible to a high degree, for example, Lango and Acholi. But mutual intelligibility does not mean sameness.
- There are different historical and socio-cultural contexts in which Lango and Acholi languages operate.
- Lango and Acholi are linguistically classified among the Lwo language family which as earlier stated include also Alur, Kumam, Dophadola (Uganda), Leb Thur, Anywa (Sudan), and Dholuo (Kenya); but these are all independent languages and share different degrees of intelligibility.
- There are also very distinct differences between Lango and Acholi in lexicon (including nomenclature), phonology (social and stylistic variations), grammar (morphology and syntax), and usage.
- **"A language is a dialect with an army and navy"** Max Weinreich.

# Orthography development

- At least 20 Ugandan people groups are still struggling with their orthography development (Rempel, 2010, 33).
- Where there are functional orthographies, the task of standardization/harmonization is daunting.
- Some Ugandan languages have also benefited from the CASSAS developed *Unified Standard Orthography for East African* languages clusters series. The Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) has been at the forefront of developing the orthography of marginalized people groups in Uganda.
- Even for Lango which has functioning orthographies, The colonial and Bantu orthography forms that we inherited are not adequate for representing word, sounds and meaning in Lango.
- It does not for instance mark vowel quality though it is contrastive and permeates Lango; neither does it take care of the functional load of tone in word recognition and grammatical shift.
- If we don't represent tone, word breaks, affixation and collapse, and vowel quality we risk losing the complexity of Lango grammar, language processes and meaning, and representing our language as simple and incapable of expressing fine meaning and nuances.

# Conclusion

- The elder Nwakibie said in Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*, "Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wing break." (Achebe, 1994, p.14.) The Ministry of Education should pursue a policy of equal opportunity for all because any language is a storehouse of its people's culture.
- The policy of survival for the fittest will not only destroy languages, but will damage the identity, self esteem and the self determination of many citizens of Uganda. This is a price for negligence that we cannot afford to pay.
- Scripture says, "If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do" (Psalms 11:3 NIV). The Ministry of Education needs to revisit the very foundations of its mother tongue policy and to correct the fault lines if we are to build a solid educational foundation for our children; an education that will eradicate poverty and bring prosperity and self determination for all Ugandans.