

Linguistic and Cultural Considerations in Mother Tongue Education in Uganda

By Okaka Opio Dokotum

Primary level is a way of achieving the Millennium Development Goal of Universal Primary Education. It assesses respective government's promotion of a few favoured 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 which leads to the problem of loss of cultural context and translation leakages.

In this paper I argue that there is need for cultural relevance and authenticity in materials production. Without cultural context, mother tongue education becomes a farce since the very primary objective was for our children to move from the known to the unknown. Reading is the foundation for literacy; therefore, if pupils cannot comprehend what they are reading, they will definitely not develop literacy skills or even an interest in studying. I argue that mutual intelligibility among some Ugandan languages does not mean sameness. Apart from mutual intelligibility, there are different historical and socio-cultural contexts in which these languages operate. There are also very distinct differences between these languages in lexicon, phonology, and usage. I also argue that the colonial orthography forms that we inherited are not adequate for representing word, sounds and meaning in most Ugandan languages, especially Nilo-Saharan languages. It does not for instance mark vowel quality, neither does it take care of the functional load of tone in word recognition and grammatical shift.

Tone, word breaks, affixation and collapse, and vowel quality hold the keys to the complexity of our languages. If we don't represent them we risk losing the complexity of grammar, language processes and meaning, and representing our language as simple and incapable of expressing fine meaning and nuances. The way forward is equal opportunity for all Ugandan languages in mother tongue education and 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. This paper is relevant to the conference because mother tongue education and Universal Primary Education are key components of the Millennium Development Goals.