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African Dynamics in a Multipolar World

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ATTITUDES TOWARDS MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION IN UGANDA: “YOU TRY TO MAKE SURE THAT OUR CHILDREN REMAIN BACKWARD”

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Abstract

Mother tongue¹ education is said to be best to the child. But what do parents and people involved think about this practice and its consequences? The paper investigates language attitudes towards mother tongue education in Uganda and provides a new perspective on educational language policies in Africa.

Using language attitudes as heuristic enables to investigate people’s attitudes towards mother tongue education and argues that some approaches might be considered paternalistic.

Keywords: Linguistic anthropology, language attitudes, language policy, language rights, mother tongue education, Uganda

¹ The term “mother tongue” refers to the first language a child learns. In monolingual families it is the language of the parents. In bilingual homes a child has more than one “mother tongues”. I do refer to the term “mother tongue” in the sense that it is the language(s) a child is raised with. In multilingual context like in Africa the child will speak more than that one or two languages. In this paper, the mother tongue is defined as the language the child feels most comfortable and familiar with.

Introduction

As stated in many official documents of the United Nations and other educational policies, mother tongue education is widely considered to be best to the child’s progress and development in school. “A child learns best in its mother tongue, especially at the early stage in education, and among linguistic minority groups” (UNESCO, 2012). It is stated that “knowledge and skills gained in the mother tongue can transfer across languages and (...) multilingual children perform well at school when the school teaches the mother tongue effectively“ (Tembe & Norten, 2008 p. 33). Further, the mother tongue is seen to be an important part of one’s identity. But, reality shows that children in multilingual countries are confronted with a “foreign” language in primary school. These findings had influence on national and international educational policies: the United Nations Organization for example states that, “[s]tates should take appropriate measures so that, wherever possible, persons belonging to minorities may have adequate opportunities to learn their mother tongue or to have instruction in their mother tongue” (UNO, 1992). Educational and language policy are part of the political domain. Therefore, the focus of language rights is highly intertwined with political discourses and actors.

Academic research has also focused on mother tongue education in depth. The language rights discourse, for example, sees mother tongue education as a fundamental right to everyone and wants it to be implemented or supplemented to the human rights agenda: “My conclusion is that we still have to work for education through the medium of the mother tongue to be recognized as a human right” (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000: 8). But to this day, there seems to be a lack of these postulated rights and claims.

Undoubtedly, mother tongue education enables the child to master the curriculum much better. Using the child’s mother tongue he or she will feel more comfortable – especially in the

new situation as a pupil. At the same time, research in Africa has revealed that such policies have not been implemented successfully (Tembe & Norten 2008, p. 34). This is because many parents assume “that mother-tongue policies have been imposed for political rather than sociolinguistic or demographic reasons“ (ibid.). The case of Uganda, where mother tongue education was put on the agenda in 2006 shows similar tendencies. There, a pilot programme – initiated by the Ugandan government – was carried out to introduce the mother tongue as language of instruction in primary education².

Language attitudes on mother tongue education in Uganda

Uganda

Uganda lies within East Africa and is a former British colony (1884-1962). Uganda counts approx. thirty million inhabitants with a total of about 43 languages spoken (Lewis, 2009). These languages are mainly divided into two major language phyla: the Bantu languages in central and South-Western Uganda and the Nilotic languages in the North and North-Eastern parts of the country. The White Nile can be seen as the physical borderline between these two phyla. Furthermore, some Central Sudanic and Kuliak languages are spoken in Uganda as well.

Being a former British colony, English is widespread. It is official language and common as medium of instruction in educational contexts.

² The Ugandan educational system comprises of seven years of primary education (P.1 to P.7). Then secondary school takes four more years (S.1 to S.4).

Educational policies in Uganda

The development of the school curricula was linked to the national language policy, which highlights the importance of local languages. The constitution states: “[t]he State shall encourage the development, preservation and enrichment of all Ugandan languages” (Republic of Uganda, 1995, XXIV (b)). It is argued that Ugandan local languages are important to sustain the different cultures and tribes and their identities.

Furthermore, due to the poor outcome of an evaluation of the educational progress of Ugandan pupils, the government decided to implement a programme to improve the educational standards. The National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) who is in charge of the school curricula in Uganda, developed a programme to improve children’s performance at school which ties up to discourses on mother tongue education. Its main goals are:

The thematic Curriculum has been developed for P.1 to P.3. Focus is on improving pupils’ performance levels in literacy, numeracy and life skills. The policy recommends the use of the local language as a medium of instruction and that English be taught as a subject. For P.4 to P.7, the local language selected by the school authority is taught as a subject. The medium of instruction is the English language (NCDC 2006)³.

This strategy of mother tongue education from P1 to P3 was initially implemented as a pilot programme in 11 districts in Uganda⁴: in rural areas local dominant languages are used as language of instruction. In urban and multilingual areas English is given preference (Tembe & Norton, 2008, p.35). This paper focuses on the Nakasongola District in Central Uganda and its

³ In accordance with the programme the government implemented so-called “Local Language Boards” who were mandated to develop teaching and learning materials in the languages of the pilot regions.

⁴ “The districts include Kampala, Iganga, Kumi, Moroto, Rukungiri, Kasese, Rakai, Gulu, Arua, Nakasongola and Kabarole” (Nakutenda 2006).

regional capital Nakasongola. The largest ethnic group are the Baruuli⁵ (Ugandan Bureau of Statistics 2011). Their mother tongue is Ruruuli, which is a Bantu language (group J.10, Guthrie, 1948). Since colonial times the Nakasongola District belonged to the Buganda Kingdom, the largest and most influential kingdom of Uganda. Since then, at school, Baruuli children have been taught in Luganda⁶ or English. The most dominant language of the district, Ruruuli, was neither medium of instruction nor subject. Ever since, the Baruuli tried to free themselves from the Bugandan suppression to maintain their culture and language.

In 2006 Nakasongola was incorporated in the National Curriculum Development Centre’s pilot programme for primary education in mother tongue. Together with the Baruuli community and the newly initiated Language Board, learning and teaching materials in Ruruuli were developed. Since then, Ruruuli has been used as medium of instruction from P1 to P3.

The empirical data used in this paper was gained during two field trips to Uganda in 2008 and 2009. The data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions in various regions of Uganda.

For the methodological analysis of the data a content analysis (Maying 2000, 2008a, 2008b; Mayring & Brunner 2009) and a (critical) discourse analysis (Deppermann 2000, 2001; van Dijk 1997 a, 1997b) were conducted.⁷

⁵ The prefixes mu-, ba-, bu- and lu-/ru-/ki- are class prefixes from respective Bantu languages indicating the following: mu- and ba-/wa- are prefixes of class 1 and 2, indicating people. A “Muganda” is a single person from the Buganda tribe. “Baganda” are two or more people stemming from the Buganda ethnic group. The prefix “Bu-“ indicates the kingdom and the ethnic group of the “-ganda”-people. And last, “lu-/ru-/ki-“ indicate the language: Ruruuli (language of the Baruuli), Luganda (language of the Baganda), Kiswahili (language of the Waswahili).

⁶ Luganda is also a Bantu Language and classified by Guthrie also as J.10.

⁷ Both field trips have been funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). The data encompasses six focus group discussions and 63 semi-structured interviews (more information on the methodology: Becker, 2013, p. 53ff.).

Language attitudes as heuristic approach to people’s opinion on mother tongue education in Uganda

Language attitudes are what lay people think about languages and language related phenomena. Language attitudes are inherent paradigms and people’s attitudes, which influence their behaviour and their way of thinking about languages. In a way they are closely linked to the field of stereotypes and prejudices and very often part of them (Becker, 2013, pp.47ff.). Fairclough argues that people reflect on languages and their meanings: “[the] critical awareness of language [...] arises within the normal ways of people reflect their lives as part of their lives” (cited through Mooney, 2011, p.2). Language attitudes belong to the academic field of linguistic anthropology, which concentrates on questions of how linguistic phenomena can be used by a specific cultural group to comment and judge other ethnic, cultural and social entities and groups (Blot, 2003, p. 3): “how are the marks of language, specific linguistic features, linked to ethnicity, to gender, to race, and to class? How is language employed on conveying one’s group identity?” (ibid.). Further questions of interest are, *what* and *how* do people think about languages or language related phenomena such as dialects, sociolects and registers of languages (Seargeant 2009, p.348f.).

Language attitudes are closely related to the field of language ideologies, which “envision and enact ties of language to identity, to aesthetics, to morality, and to epistemology” (Woolard, 1998, p.3). Niedzielski and Preston (2000) also work with lay people’s opinions on languages and call the field “folk linguistics”. They state that “folk linguistics is an integral part of the ethnography of a speech community” (2000, p. 324).

In sum, folk linguistics, language attitudes and language ideologies are characterized as everyday phenomena, which unconsciously influence people’s linguistic and language behaviour.

Used as heuristic, language attitudes in this paper serve to find out, *what* people think about mother tongue education and *how* they talk about it. Approaching mother tongue education from this point of view, we’ll get an insight on parents’ and teachers’ opinions on these programmes.

Thus, the results will reveal some obstacles to successful mother tongue education and will offer suggestions for successful approaches of (educational) language policy in Uganda.

In the following, the empirical data will be presented to emphasise the people’s perspective on mother tongue education in Uganda in order to contrast it with the academic approach of language rights and international educational policies.

Justice in education – justice for identity!

The empirical data on language attitudes made clear, that many people in Uganda see a linkage between language and identity. Being multilingual, the mother tongue is mostly considered as the linkage to one’s ethnic affiliation or tribe (Becker, 2013, p. 85ff.). The mother tongue is seen as “a tool” to identify with one’s ethnic group, one’s “people” as the following interviewee explains:

Example 1⁸ (female participant, interview, 2008)

First, first and foremost, ehm, language means identity.

identify with my people [JB: ok] you know, by speaking

y language, my mother tongue that’s when you know

yone can know I am coming from that part of the country [JB: ok]

⁸ (The transcripts follow the rules of GAT2 (Selting et al., 2009). Original transcript in Becker, 2013, p. 89 (3). The number in brackets indicates the number of example in Becker (2013).

Using a language displays immediately one’s ethnic affiliation: As the interviewee says here, one can regionally classify people by their language. Analysing her way of speaking, one can clearly see that by using the possessive marker “my” thrice, the speaker intensifies her argument. Language – as the sample shows – can thus be seen as a marker of regional and/or ethnic identity. Thus, the mother tongue plays a vital role in everyone’s life.

Being instructed in another language, English or a regional dominant language, children are disadvantaged in their educational career, and estranged from their cultural roots. This has also been the case in Nakasongola. Whilst children speak Ruruuli at home, at school their language of instruction had been Luganda. Luganda is the regional dominant language – a fact that dates back to colonial times: then, the British reigned indirectly⁹ through the Baganda. So, the Luganda was widespread and also reached Nakasongola¹⁰. As a consequence, people had to change their names and children were punished at school, if they used Ruruuli: “that was how the colonisti (sic!) brought the Baganda here (...) giving their (the Baganda’s, JB) names, not the indigenous names we had” (conversation Nakasongola 2008; Becker. 2013, p. 279 (84)).

Referring to these experiences, thus, many citizens of the Nakasongola district appreciate the government’s initiative on mother tongue education and praise the advantages:

Example 2¹¹ (male participant, interview, 2008)

[...] when we are teaching we are using Luganda but at times we explain in the loCAL LANGUage, that is within the mother tongue, that is the Luluuli [ok] and eh when you explain they understand more [of course] ja

⁹ For more information on the so-called „indirect rule“ of the British, please see Young (1994).

¹⁰ Furthermore, the Baruuuli were given to the Buganda kingdom, although they originally belonged to the Bunyara-Kitara Kingdom (Doyle 2006). The reallocation was condemned by the Baruuuli and still is a controversial subject.

¹¹ Becker, 2013, p. 266 (80).

and going on:

[...] how we can be united as one (.) united tribe [mh] and that's how we came up then we sorted to that it was really wise to improve on our language because it is our mother tongue. So, we are trying to find ways of how we can put down in paper then begin teaching it in primary.

The interviewee, a teacher from Nakasongola, explains his daily routine in the classroom. Because children learn more easily in their mother tongue, he already used Ruruuli as medium of instruction on occasion. Thus, he appreciates the pilot programme and supports it. He elaborates that the mother tongue is essential to one's identity and thereby agrees with the position presented above (example 1). He concludes that the development of teaching materials in Ruruuli is mandatory to enforce this development.

Besides, there are more arguments for mother tongue education in Uganda:

Example 3¹² (male participant, interview, 2008)

First, it is the context, where they come from [mh] these are children who are in rural areas [mh] where communication is in the mother tongue [yeah, of course] at home with their peers, even at school ((laughing)) when they get out of the classroom and begin playing [mh] it's in the mother tongue [yeah] so why divorce it also from instruction, the main instruction? So, feel that it that was an injustice

¹² Becker, 2013, p. 264 (79).

The speaker refers to an urban-rural bias: for children in rural areas, he claims, it was even more important than for children in urban areas to be taught in the mother tongue. By using the demonstrative pronoun “these” he makes clear, that he does not include his family and children to this group. He is speaking as a Ugandan living in Kampala, the capital of Uganda, and thereby distances himself from the local people. The interviewee refers to an often mentioned language situation: people in urban areas are said to be multilingual to a greater extent, especially in English and Luganda (because Luganda is the language of the people of that urban area). On the other hand it is said, that the people from rural areas retain their mother tongue. At the same time, they are said to be less educated. This is where the interviewee ties in with the implementation of mother tongue education in order to give justice to the rural population.

He makes his point saying, that the language of instruction and the language used everyday should not be different because children will otherwise be disadvantaged. Claiming that children use language intuitionally, the speaker refers to the present educational policy as “injustice” (08) and constructs the necessity of mother tongue education also as a (human) right. He thereby refers to the language rights discourse in the sense of Skutnabb-Kangas, whereby everyone should have “the right to learn the mother tongue, including at least basic education through the medium of the mother tongue [...]” (Phillipson, Rannut & Skutnabb-Kangas 1995: 2). Interestingly enough, speaking of local or rural people, the interviewee distances himself from mother tongue education. In doing so, he refers to the local acceptability of language (Becker, 2013, p. 265): that means, the mother tongue is only useful for educational purposes in specific regions and not for Uganda as a whole. He “downgrades” the indigenous languages, being only advantageous for uneducated people.

At this point, it already falls into place, that mother tongue education is attached to different aspects: on the one hand it is discussed positively, as already seen in the empirical data. As marker of ethnic identity it is necessary to support and to facilitate the teaching and learning process.

On the other hand, mother tongue education is construed as necessary for the “rural population” and thus not being appreciated for the whole country. This is an indication for the obstacles the policy is challenged with. In the following, more critical positions will be illustrated.

The use of mother tongue – a sign of “backwardness”?!

To improve the learning conditions is a first step to a child’s upward mobility. This is, to sum up, what scientists and academia predict for children being taught in their mother tongue. But, against all odds, parents do not necessarily support and appreciate the NCDC’s programmes:

Example 4¹³ (male participant, interview, 2008)

[...] because one of the biggest challenges is again parents as you are asking also asking those very questions. For you you speak English [ja] it's the language of power [ja] it's the language of opportunity. You want our children to start in these languages and and you try make sure that our children remain backward that sort of thinking so, first and foremost advocacy is very very important [mh] to make parents aware of the importance of the mother tongue [mh] [...]

¹³ (Becker, 2013, p. 268 (81))

Addressing the interviewer here, a young German woman, the interviewee refers to the power of the English language. Being able to speak English is a sign of power and also gives access to a better world, it’s the “language of opportunity” (04-05) and the language of the educated elite in Uganda. By using English in this interview this aspect is actually emphasised.

The interviewee, himself working in the field of mother tongue education, depicts typical discussions with parents: The instruction in the mother tongue, instead of English, is seen as a threat to the development of their children. He imitates a typical conversation with worried parents by saying, “you want our children to start in these languages”. By using the pronoun “these” instead of “our languages” or “indigenous or local languages” the imitated speaker distances himself from the local languages. He goes on, “and you try to make sure that our children remain backward”. This statement shows the parents’ fear and their language attitudes towards the local languages: these are attached to backwardness and – as already mentioned above – the rural population. Considering the data one recognizes that in most cases only English is attached to education. This can be easily retraced in Uganda’s history because the Ugandan elite received special treatment from the British and were sent to Great Britain for higher education. Since then, being fluent in English is seen as an entry to a better life. Hence, there is a distinction being made between English and the local languages: English on the one hand is created positively as language of power, education, success and opportunities. Again, the local languages are construed in a negative manner: as the languages of rural and uneducated people. In this regard, it is no surprise that parents oppose the new policies and are frightened that their children might be disadvantaged in their occupational advancement. The speaker – taken as one representative – concludes that advocacy is needed to change parents’ minds. The language

attitudes reveal the parental worries and give an insight to societal structures and interethnic hierarchies.

Why not ours?!

Besides the resistance to the programmes on the part of the concerned parents, there is also a political layer to this problem. Using language attitudes as heuristic approach one can reveal that people also fear political and interethnic conflicts, in case the educational policy is implemented. It is the question of social and interethnic (in)justice in a multilingual country such as Uganda:

Example 5¹⁴ (male participant, interview, 2008)

- JB: (...) that means that Chiruuli will be ahm LANguage of instruction
- here in this district [mh] what do you think about that?
- M1: ok! For my I like it very much it is better because now we are
- learning a foreign language (...) if they are trying theirs why should we
- try theirs we also want to our language!

The interviewer asks an elderly gentleman from Nakasongola about his opinion on mother tongue education. The man highly appreciates this development: “if they are trying theirs why should we try theirs we also want our language” (06-07). The statement reveals that there seem to be interethnic tensions between the ethnic groups, which influence the use of language.

¹⁴ private conversation, unpublished, 2008, Nakasongola.

Furthermore, it shows that language policies have a high prestige: implementing one’s language improves also the social status of the speech community. This is why the interviewee makes his point saying that he wants his own language implemented as well. Some Ugandans criticize these developments and describe them as “tribalism” (focus group discussion 2009. In: Becker, 2013, p. 303, example 93 (01-02)). The problems of languages in educational policies are highly intertwined with language policy in general which is a delicate issue in Uganda.

Example 6¹⁵ (male participant, interview, 2009)

M1: [...] ah ONE why maybe I start from the most interesting why not a Ugandan language? The history of Uganda has been a history of struggling for dominance and superiority now you need to know that there are two key (2.3) battlefronts there's Lwo HERE [mh] and then there is the Bantu you know [ah] led by the Baganda. The Lwo would wish their language as a sign of dominance you know the function of a language domineering as well the Baganda won't use the Langi as a representation of the Bantu (1) and the war is now between the two big region SO you can NO:: longer talk about ah Luganda without necessarily causing a fight North would outragefully say "NO" (1.5) [mh] (1.6) same for would also outragefully say "no"

The young man refers to Uganda’s past, which was (and sometimes still is) affected by severe conflicts. He points to the linguistic “battlefronts” between the Bantu languages in South-

¹⁵ Becker, 2013, p 296 (90).

Western Uganda and the Nilotic languages in the North-East. Since (pre)colonial times their ethnic groups were fighting for dominance (Becker, 2013, pp.108ff.). The colonial rule has interfered in these power structures and created an imbalance (Okuku, 2002, p. 12). The interviewee refers to a question of language policy in Uganda and argues that if a Ugandan language would be implemented as national language¹⁶ these old conflict between the “battlefronts” could be ignited again. Language in political contexts is highly influential and important and often (mis)used as instrument of power. This has already been the case in Ugandan history: “[the] very strong idea amongst the Baganda is, that once get the Banyoro to talk Luganda and they are morally putting themselves under the rule of [B]Uganda” (British correspondence 1901 cited through Doyle, 2006, p. 99). Since then, the question of language in Uganda has played an important role, as the interviewee illustrates here as well. No ethnic group wants to give up its own language in favour of another Ugandan language (14-15). The interviewee refers to this issue using a terminology that depicts the tension (“battlefield”, “struggling”, “dominance”, “fight” etc.) and thereby highlights the gravity of the problem.

Conclusion

As seen from the empirical data, people position themselves to languages and language policies. Using language attitudes as heuristic has shown that people do have very concrete conceptions of languages: in Uganda English is perceived as a language of upward mobility, success, and high educational standards. In this way it is construed as antagonism to the local languages. Local languages – in regard to mother tongue education – have a bad reputation in Uganda: they are attached to backwardness, hindrance to children’s progress and rural origin. In

¹⁶ The national language, in contrast to the official language, serves as national means of communication and is used to facilitate the sharing of information between the citizens on the one hand and as means of national communication and identification on the other (for more information & definitions, please see Becker, 2013).

this sense, it is obvious, that mother tongue education faces challenges in Uganda and in Africa in general (Tembe & Norton, 2008, pp. 34ff.).

At the same time, mother tongues are valued for people’s (ethnic) identity. The data in Uganda showed that language and identity are highly intertwined.

Having discussed the matter from a people’s point of view, using language attitudes to find out, what people think about mother tongue education, it becomes clear, that there is a gap between the political, the scientific and the folk’s position. (Educational) language policy therefore needs rethinking. The implementation of the postulated language rights and educational policies often works in a paternalistic manner. Eurocentric concepts are applied to the African multilingual context and neglect cultural and historical characteristics.

And, there is another aspect of mother tongue education in Uganda (and in many other Africans countries) that should not be neglected: if mother tongue education is – besides its educational claim – considered to bring justice to multilingual communities, the programme will fail. In Uganda 43 languages are spoken. Up to now, teaching material for only a small percentage does exist. In addition, there are regions, where two or more languages exist side by side. The decision for the language of instruction is hard to find. Nevertheless, the NCDC has commented on these problems: in cases, where a predominant language exists, this will be medium of instruction; otherwise “the curriculum will be delivered and assessed in English” (NCDC, 2006, p.6). That means, that not all children will be instructed in their mother tongue. In this way, linguistic injustice will still exist. Justice is only served up to members of dominant speech communities. Thereby, a new bias is created, new interethnic tensions arise and the original demand of the language rights will be foiled.

To make educational language policy successful and to bridge the gap of social and linguistic injustice, policies on mother tongue education needs advocacy that starts with the people. As recipients, they have to be convinced of mother tongue education and its values to their children. Parents need to be informed about the effectiveness and therefore their language conceptions have to be turned “up-side-down”. Only if policy makers succeed to change the image of local languages, the prestige of English as the “one-and-only” language of education will be modified. The (existing!) image of the mother tongue as language of ethnic or family identity has to be strengthened and thereby the parents’ fear will be decreased until finally erased.

At the same time, the programmes have to arbitrate between the different speech communities in order to avoid ethnic tensions and conflict.

Therefore, it is necessary to make policy makers aware of the importance of language attitudes.

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