

Language Empowerment as Panacea for Social-Cultural and Economic Development in Africa in the 21st Century

Linguistic diversity is perhaps the best illustration of Africa's diversity. Over 2,000 endogenous and exogenous languages are linked to and central to the identity and quotidian existence of Africans. This heralded linguistic diversity brings benefits and challenges. Debatably, most challenges facing post-colonial Africa centers on the development or underdevelopment of human and material resources. Language is a vital and useful lens for engaging and analyzing these multifaceted challenges. This is especially true with Africa where a deeper understanding of the entire linguistic landscape and issues are germane to an understanding of the socio-political, cultural and historical system of the people. As Webb and Kembo-Sure (2000) justifiably postulated at the onset of the twenty-first century, Africa's development challenges can be classified in relations to the centrality of language in the society into language problems and language based problems. This paper focuses on the instrumental and emblematic functions of language in Africa in order to achieve two specific goals. The first is to make the case for the critical importance of African languages on the continent. This advocacy will go beyond an plaintive treatise on the contracted functionality of African languages into a philosophical consideration of their importance for African unity and advancement. The theoretical impetus for this are the structuralist discourses on Africinity, cultural identity, and the social responsibility of (African) linguist in the works of Oyekan Owomoyela and Ayo Bamgbose respectively. These theorists make the substantial case that the progressive hope for Africa is to be found in valuing the continent's rich traditions as foundational stones for development. Speculatively, the adoption of African languages by Africans will entail an elevation of their African cultural identity.

The second objective is to propagate some of the ways in which African languages themselves can be empowered for socio-cultural and economic development on the African continent in the 21st century. The paper will productively engage works by scholars in the field of African linguistics, African language pedagogy, and other concerned individuals within diverse language professional associations and non-governmental organizations such as the continental wide agency of the African Union (AU), the African Academy of Language (ACALAN). The paper will provide an ardent case for the empowerment of African languages in the renewed era of globalization (increasing global trade and movement of people), the internet (the society altering technological innovation), and the emergent Global Africa (via its growing Diasporas). The challenges facing African languages notwithstanding, it is important to concentrate on their development to the extent that they will support basic literacy and daily survival of their users in addition to them becoming enriched and empowered to serve in almost any domain of human endeavor. The paper will be making the case for and accentuating some of the notable modalities for modernizing African languages in specialized domains for national and continental development.