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# INCONTRI LINGUISTICI

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# THE TENSION BETWEEN LANGUAGE DIVERSITY AND STATE BUILDING IN AFRICA\*

MAURO TOSCO

## 1. A DIFFERENT KIND OF LANGUAGE SHIFT

IT is generally accepted that a great deal of language shift and reduction of language diversity is taking place in Africa as elsewhere, but often as the result of strictly local and small-scale processes, and generally in favor of a locally or regionally powerful (or not-so-powerless) language. In other words, African minor languages tend to fall prey to other African languages, rather than to any of the world's linguistic "big fish." Both Grenoble and Whaley (1998: 42) and Mous (2003: 157-158) agree on the markedly different situation of language endangerment in sub-Saharan Africa in respect to the more dire perspectives of other continents, and much the same, *mutatis mutandis*, is repeated in the chapters devoted to Africa in Brenzinger (2007).

The limited role of exogenous languages as the target of shift in Africa is a function of their limited impact on everyday language use, and notwithstanding the status of official language which a few European languages enjoy in most African countries: just as in Europe well until the first stages of the nation state, officialdom alone does not bring about language shift in Africa today.

And just as in pre-contemporary Europe and well into the nineteenth century, the number of citizens of the modern African states who master the official language of their country remains extremely small (cf., e.g. Laitin 1992), while still smaller is the number of those who adopt it as their everyday and first medium. Although African countries greatly differ in this respect, the penetration of the European languages which are the official languages of most African countries remains therefore negligible, at least in the private domains (cf., e.g., Mansour 1993: 125, 134 fn. 12 on Senegal).

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And, just as it happened in Europe with the advent of the mature nation state, it can be argued that an official language must become a true national language in order to bring about massive and wholesome language shift: the official and national languages must become one and the same. Such a “nationalization of language” is a key component of nation building: as the latter is by definition the shaping of a common identity within the state borders, the imposition of a common medium is one of its main ingredients. Successful nation building legitimizes the state institutions and is therefore in the best interest of the power holders. It seems therefore safe to say that the reduction of language diversity in the contemporary world is positively correlated with nation building (cf. also Tosco 2011a, 2011b).

If we measure the success of a state by its ability to create and impose nationhood, most African countries have failed in that specific aspect of nationhood which implies the reduction of language diversity. They have failed in transforming their official language into the national language of the country: they have failed *qua* nation states, not *qua* states.

But how do political scholars cope with the issue of nation building insofar as language matters are concerned? How are language and cultural diversity balanced against nation building?

The general answer, it seems to me, is: rather poorly. The following pages will offer a few critical remarks on three selected points of contention: mother-tongue education, language and democracy, and the choice of the official language. Needless to say, they are not meant to provide an exhaustive treatment of the subject matter, let alone alternative solutions.

## 2. THE TROUBLE WITH MOTHER-TONGUE EDUCATION

That education is one of the first concerns of governments is a *non sequitur* in contemporary political thinking. Easily forgotten is the historical data (cf., e.g., the historical and contemporary experience on the extent of education provided before, alongside and against the government and its agencies). Just as easily forgotten is the active role taken by compulsory, state-controlled education in the eradication of language diversity, as noted by Phillipson in the following passage:

‘One of the consequences of the universalization of education in Western societies over the past century has been the reduction of linguistic variety, or polyglossia, and the marginalization both of other forms of the dominant language, that is, of dialects, and of other languages.’ (Phillipson 1999: 100).

In Africa, faced with the double problem of multilingualism and language standardization, two practical solutions are commonly envisaged by political scientists: either the continued use of a European language (usually inherited from the colonial times, although a shift in allegiance is also possible, as shown in Section 4 with the case of Namibia), or the promotion of a single local language to the role of national and official medium. When language pluralism is advocated, it usually concerns the primary school (and usually, in the first schoolyears only).

Both technical and ideological considerations favor the use of a single language and work against mother-tongue education. Technical considerations concern the costs and difficulties inherent in the development of a multitude of languages, but also the primacy of efficiency in administration and economic development against language diversity. Ideological considerations are obviously linked to nation building. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the opponents of mother-tongue education come to advocate the development of (a selected number of) African languages. A typical example of this trend was Gerda Mansour's *Multilingualism and Nation Building* (Mansour 1993). Here the author, after expressing the opinion that '*socio-economic integration is the key to linguistic unification*' (Mansour 1993: 64; emphasis in the original), opposes mother tongue education arguing that it 'could increase, or permanently rigidify linguistic heterogeneity. The strict application of the principle of mother tongue education could arrest the natural process of language shift away from minority languages to the lingua franca of the district or country' (Mansour 1993: 79):

'literacy in the various smaller mother tongues might counteract any spontaneous convergence or prevent the adoption of a common national language. Even if such tendencies could be avoided with appropriate political education, there can be no doubt that linguistic fanaticism and separatism are more easily aroused in a literate society.' (Mansour 1993: 88)

The solution, according to Mansour, lies in fostering the loyalty of the citizens to their state:

'To develop such sentiments [of loyalty to the state; MT], he [the citizen; MT] demands that governments be responsive to the needs of the people, and this means, among other things, to recognize their primary loyalties. Only then will the citizens of a country begin to realise that their own personal welfare and that of their ethnic group are linked to the future of the state.' (Mansour 1993: 127)

Pluralism is paid lip service when the author states that:

'there is no contradiction between the promotion of a single African language to official status and an otherwise pluralist language policy.' (Mansour 1993: 126; emphasis in the original)

Sadly, what this 'otherwise pluralist language policy' may consist of remains unclear. Mansour mentions in this connection Tanzania as a relative success story. Tanzania is even more interesting given that its government has not been particularly successful in economic development. What reduction of language diversity may be observed in Tanzania stands therefore a better chance of being the result of the successful implementation of a nation-building ideology than the result of social and economic advancement. As is well-known, nation building in Tanzania had as one of its strongest tenets the officialization and the generalized use of Swahili, implemented to the role of a *national-cum-official* language. Tanzania has been quite successful in its imposition of Swahili; unsurprisingly, Batibo (1992) notes the high number of Tanzanian languages which are endangered, and precisely by the spread of Swahili: Swahili did spread and is still spreading at the expenses of the other African languages of the country – maybe a side effect of an 'otherwise pluralist language policy?'

### 3. DEMOCRACY, BUT NOT TOO MUCH OF IT

Things do not go better when we turn from education to democracy – arguably the core interest of political scientists – and its relation to language matters.

There is a distinct flavor of benign autocracy in much literature on language loss and language ecology, and the safety of the state seems to be at least as important as language diversity. Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas' article *Language rights in postcolonial Africa* opens with the lines: 'Language policy is of vital importance for the political stability and legitimacy of the state. Most contemporary African states are experiencing acute economic, social and political problems' (Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 1995: 335). According to the authors, just as *the political stability and legitimacy of the state* are of paramount importance, so is the *communication between rulers and ruled*, whose energies must be harnessed:

'Increased use of African languages would promote better communication between rulers and ruled, harness the energies of the rural population to the development of their environment.' (Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 1995: 344)

A paradigmatic example of this line of thought may be seen in Laitin's *Language repertoires and state construction in Africa* (Laitin 1992). Commenting on Siyaad Barre's régime in Somalia (1969-1990) – arguably one of the worst in the recent history of Africa – the author contends that the Somali experience demonstrates 'an association between language policies in which the lower strata's voices can be officially heard in their own language and a government that is *attentive to the needs* of those strata' (Laitin 1992: 59; emphasis mine).

Laitin bemoans the 'high linguistic barriers [which] separate the citizen from the state' (Laitin 1992: 149) as an obstacle to development, pleading for the use of vernaculars as a means through which 'leaders who seek to induce change [...] would have an easier time communicating with the people whose behavior is targeted: Promotion of the vernacular might create what I called an "institutionalized audience" [...] capable of reacting to the subtleties of the ideological and technological information sent (usually through radio) by the center' (Laitin 1992: 55-56).

Leaders are further advised that 'vernacular promotion (for example, giving all technical education in indigenous languages) would help to plug the brain drain, since moderately well trained Africans would no longer have the credentials easily enabling them to get comparable jobs in Europe and North America at higher wages' (Laitin 1992: 56). That individuals may prefer, *ceteris paribus*, to get higher wages and better jobs is clearly an obstacle to the illuminated leadership in its attempt to foster the progress of the populace.

Although he pays lip service to market forces and the rationality of the individual choices (as well as the potential "private subversion of a public good"), Laitin remains a firm believer in state "rationalization" (Weber's "iron cage", as Laitin remembers) applied to language. Laitin refers to this process as "linguistic rationalization". Given the derivation of "rationalization" from "rational," the term acquires an obvious positive connotation (certainly voluntary on the part of Weber, one of the great apologists of the modern state). As a part of this rationalization process, 'writers *would be asked* to develop material in a language in everyday use' (Laitin 1992: 155; emphasis mine) and citizens must be *required* to know the national language (Laitin 1992: 158) and *zoned* according to their vernaculars (Laitin 1992: 135; emphasis mine). Being nevertheless a benign rationalizer, Laitin advocates 'welfare payouts to those citizens who have to pay higher language costs [...] in the form of scholarships,

affirmative-action rights in the job market, or the use of a “curve” to score civil service examinations’ (Laitin 1992: 156). Much to the taxpayers’ relief, Laitin remarks immediately afterwards that ‘[T]here is the problem of determining how much compensation should be paid and out of whose pockets it should come’ (Laitin 1992: 160).

Finally, the leader is informed that ‘[L]anguage chauvinism, however, may be far less powerful in Africa than is often assumed’ and that ‘[I]ndigenous-language policies would not destabilize African countries.’ Great stress is laid upon the hypothesis that ‘[A] resurgence of language politics does not necessarily mean the breakdown of frail multinational states into tribal homelands’ (Laitin 1992: 163), emphasizing that ‘fragile governments’ have been brought down by language issues in Belgium, Canada, or India, but ‘the integrity of state boundaries’ has not.

It hardly comes as a surprise that Laitin’s (1992: 159-163) idea of democracy is equally peculiar: democracy seems to be equated with “tolerance” and law’s order, rather than with a specific form of government having the people as the source and repository of authority. It is argued that regionalism (but no secession!) can enhance – although not ensure – “democracy” through the competition of different centers of authority – the regional and the central government, each competing for clients: ‘[R]egional competition within a state could well be a motor for economic growth’ (Laitin 1992: 161). Laitin’s appeal for regional competition may look *prima facie* as a plea for federalism and the recognition of differences. Lijphart’s (1995) concept of consociativism comes to mind here: consociativism, examples of which are among others the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Lebanon, is defined by Lijphart as based upon four principles: broad and inclusive coalition cabinets, segmental (ethnic) autonomy, proportional electoral system, and minority veto.

Laitin’s regional competition remains nevertheless subject to redistribution at the national level:

‘[T]he principle of equality requires not only that social stratification be kept at a minimum, but that regional disparities in wealth, participation, and political influence be minimized as well. Language has a bearing on the issue of regional inequalities because linguistic competence often sets the limits to political participation and, therefore, to access to the government by the citizenry.’ (Laitin 1977: 12)

In short, while language is a possible object of scientific debate, planning and reform, the existence of the state is not. One can easily imagine that, e.g., in Ivory Coast, ‘many of the languages would disappear, perhaps in a century’ (Laitin 1992: 144). What could never disappear is Ivory Coast itself (i.e., a government controlling that portion of the planet conven-

tionally called Ivory Coast). Indeed, Laitin foresees that '[S]ome dialect of French could well become the sole necessary language for social, political, and economic life in the Ivory Coast by the late twenty-first century' (Laitin 1992: 144).

Laitin can well be right on this point: states are more and more resilient to change and their borders are more and more unchangeable, so that it is more and more difficult to create new states. As the entire surface of the globe is divided upon a definite number of states, any new entry can only mean the curtailment of a previous, bigger state.

It is not surprising at all that a human construction, such as a state, is conceived of as more resilient to change than language – and for all practical purposes as an eternal (and therefore supernatural or maybe preternatural) entity. The reason for this fallacy lies, probably, in the hypostatization of political structures as the perfect embodiment of social engineering.

The next section will take a further, closer look at the hypostization of the state and its consequences in language matters in Africa.

#### 4. CREATING A STATE, IMPOSING A LANGUAGE: THE CASE OF NAMIBIA

Namibia is a paradigmatic example of language policy and state building in Africa.

First of all, the unity of the country, being regarded as a “good,” is declared as immutable. As for most African countries, this happened even before the state was born. In the case of Namibia, the unity is defined by the borders of former South-West Africa, and ultimately goes back to the German colonial empire in the late 19th century. Germany established a protectorate over much of present-day Namibia in 1884, with its borders being demarcated around the turn of the century. After the First World War South Africa was awarded a mandate over the country by the League of Nations. South Africa annexed the country and continued to rule it after the Second World War, with the United Nations refusing to accept the annexation and the International Court of Justice failing to reach an agreement on its juridical status. In 1966 the United Nations General Assembly voted to assume responsibility for South West Africa, and in 1968 it ruled that the territory should be renamed Namibia (after the Namib desert along the Atlantic coast). Independence was declared on 21 March 1990. In this case we have, therefore, a state whose very name is decreed from above, and from the highest planetary authority: the United Nations.

Preliminaries to the Namibian language policy are presented in de V. Cluver (1991), while the history of its elaboration is summarized by Phillipson (1992), and its post-independence implementation is described in many articles in Pütz (1995). A very recent, albeit short, treatment is found in Ndjoze-Ojo (2013).

As early as 1975, the *South West Africa People's Organization* (SWAPO) had stated that English should be the official language of the country, and this stance was strengthened when, in 1981, the United Nations Institute for Namibia published *Towards a Language Policy for Namibia*. As noted by Harlech-Jones (1995: 186), 'the use of English for formal and public purposes came to identify organisations on the "progressive" side of the political spectrum' and 'a complex symbolism accreted around English: it was regarded as the language of resistance, the language of national unity, the language of success'.

So, just as '[P]ropagation and development of Afrikaans was integral to the establishment of dominance by white Afrikaners' and that this domination was legitimated by '[T]he myth of cultural and political separation and particularism, in part based on discreteness of language' (Harlech-Jones 1995: 187), no less ideological were the reasons behind English: 'English has been posited as instrumental in fostering unity, by not encouraging jealousies and rivalries as the privileging of other languages might', and as 'exemplifying in itself new modes of affinity' (Harlech-Jones 1995: 191). Or, as an "expert" interviewed by Anke Beck on the Namibian language situation put it: "English was chosen to create the new Namibian citizen by embarking on a new solidarity between an independent government and free citizens" (Beck 1995: 210).

Just as language diversity is equated to particularism, self-rule is associated to cultural and political separation: language unity must work hand in hand with political centralization in the strive to create a new citizenship and "a new solidarity" between power and people (remember Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas's plea for political stability and communication between rulers and ruled in the preceding section).

As a typical instance of Jacobinism (in the historical sense of the word) this is of course far from novel. What makes it interesting is the overtly stated link between nation building and language unity.

As Harlech-Jones notes, the nationalism (for which Gellner's 1983 definition is quoted) of the modern nation state is based upon 'a new construction of putative shared experiences and identity' (Harlech-Jones 1995: 189). We can note in passing how the author forgets (or carefully avoids) using here the word "myth," which instead figured

prominently when dealing with “separation and particularism” (cf. “[T]he myth of cultural and political separation and particularism” quoted above).

The Namibian Prime Minister (both in the wake of independence and at the time of writing these lines) Hage G. Geingob is explicit on the political aims of the decision: after the usual gibberish on ‘a world where distances have shrunk, and the global village is a reality’ and a bit of historical phantasy on the necessity to choose a language ‘that would remove the isolation imposed by the colonisers’ (Geingob 1995: 176), the Prime Minister comes to facts and discusses possible alternatives. While Afrikaans (actually the most widely known language in the country) was excluded on ideological grounds as the language of racial discrimination, to select a native African language ‘would have created fissures, and it would not have broken the parochial boundaries to help us *mould an integrated nation*’ (Geingob 1995: 178; emphasis ours).

The Namibian Constitution, Article 3, states:

1. The official language of Namibia shall be English.
2. Nothing contained in this Constitution shall prohibit the use of any other language as medium of instruction in private schools or in schools financed or subsidised by the state subject to compliance with such requirements as may be imposed by law, to ensure proficiency in the official language, or for pedagogical reasons.
3. Nothing contained in Sub-Article (1) hereof shall preclude legislation by Parliament which permits the use of a language other than English for legislative, administrative and judicial purposes in regions or areas where such other language or languages are spoken by a substantial component of the population.’ (quoted from Ndjoze-Ojo 2013:149).

The Namibian case is exemplary for the clarity with which it highlights language choices and their ideological underpinnings. To use a “small” European language (in this case, Afrikaans) is “to impose isolation,” to develop local languages is to preserve “parochial boundaries,” and to choose one among many ‘would have created fissures.’ Against this, a foreign language is chosen in order “to mould an integrated nation” and overcome ethnic solidarities (“the parochial boundaries”).

There is therefore much more in the choice of English than mere “instrumental purposes,” as suggested by Ndjoze-Ojo (2013: 150).

Namibia’s Prime Minister words quoted above find an echo in former French President Georges Pompidou: ‘L’histoire nous montre que notre peuple, voué par nature aux divisions et à l’individualisme le plus extrême, n’a pu, au cours des siècles, constituer une nation que par l’action



de l'État' (1st January 1972). The political actors may diverge on the best way to implement the program, but not on its goals, which proceed from one another along the following logical steps:

1. unity is good, disunity is bad;
2. unity is to be created (as in Namibia and in Africa in general) and, when attained, preserved (in France as elsewhere);
3. diversity fosters disunity;
4. hence, language diversity is negative, while
5. language unity is positive – as it may offset diversity.

Needless to say, ethnic, historical, economic, or, if any, linguistic considerations never played a role in the decision of any of the actors, including the United Nations and the South West Africa People's Organization to establish a *united* Namibia. Nor, of course, was conceived it possible that the inhabitants of South-West Africa (or a part thereof) could object to become "Namibians" – or even that an opinion on the matter had to be voiced. While nineteenth-century Europe's kings, ministers and useful intellectuals of the nationalist persuasion went out of their way to devise a national mythology, imaginary ethnic and linguistic unities, and an even more imaginary aspiration to unity on the part of the would-be citizens, this is completely absent in the contemporary African nation state: states are literally created and must be enforced and preserved; nations are derived from them. The order of elements is reversed, and while the nation was the object of hypostasis in nineteenth-century Europe, the state is now.

Writing on the wake of Namibian independence, Phillipson (1992: 297) concluded his survey affirming that '[W]hile struggling for the liberation of their country, there is substantial evidence of leading SWAPO educationalists forming policy in an informed, sophisticated way [...]. As victims of oppression, they are in a better position to understand the workings of linguisticism and to resist it.' Later, Phillipson (1999) expressed much the same hopes about the future linguistic situation of post-apartheid South Africa. In language matters as elsewhere, reality often disproves political scholars and sociolinguists. Or, maybe, politicians do form policy 'in an informed, sophisticated way:' they do it in order to boost their factional and personal interests, which prominently include national unity and the reduction of language diversity. Just as often, sociolinguistics and political scholars fail to notice.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The preceding sections have shown, with a few examples from the African scene, how the approach to language matters in political science is often marred by an uncritical acceptance of the nation state and the effort to squeeze the reality of multilingualism and multiethnicity in its rigid mould. When political stability and the unity of the state are let occupy center stage, little if any room is left to the discourse on language diversity and its global demise.

The upshot is evident: a critical, radical look at the nation state, its historical foundations and its ideological underpinnings is a prerequisite to any serious analysis of global language endangerment.

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