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The place of the English language in contemporary Africa is changing. English has spread rapidly, but, at the same time, the indigenous languages have remained and have grown in strength because of an increase in population and an awakening of national consciousness. A developing country must have a national language, whether English or native, to achieve (1) national unity, (2) contacts with other nations, and (3) an effective educational system. Due to contacts with English-speaking countries and the information available in English-language books and journals, over a dozen African nations have adopted English as the major language or as a second language. The future educational and economic growth of many parts of Africa may lie in the ability of the citizens to master English thoroughly. The imposition of a new language, however, must be handled carefully, for the language native to a particular group seems to symbolize the distinctiveness of the group; its history, traditions, rituals, and politics are preserved in the richness of the language. The full expression of the African personality may require that a delicate balance be maintained between the vernacular and English. (LH)

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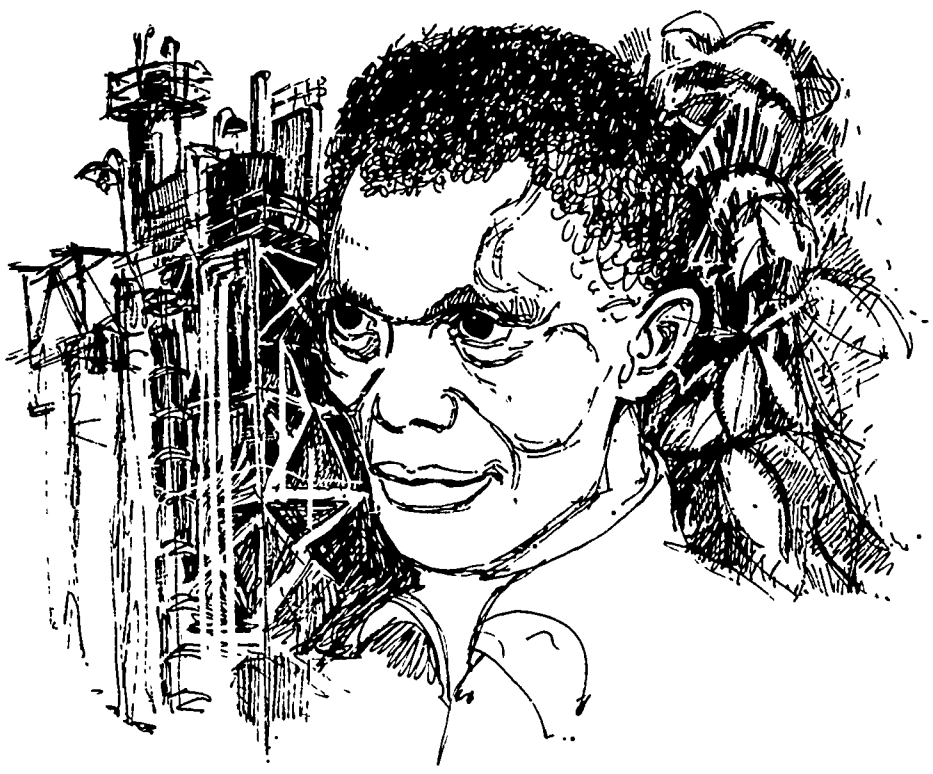
. . . in most developing countries, the ability to speak a foreign language is limited almost entirely to males and, even then, only to a small proportion of the urban population who have advanced education . . . . European languages are considered necessary political and professional tools . . . but they are certainly not thought of by the learners as means to an understanding or appreciation of European culture.
Monika Kehoe, ed., *Applied Linguistics* (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1968), p. 4.

English in Africa: The Perspective of a Canadian Teacher

Mary Ashworth



English in Africa: The Perspective of a Canadian Teacher

I had been with the class only a few days when one of my students, a Ugandan elementary school teacher, asked, "Why do Canadians say 'wahder' (water) instead of 'watah' as we do?" There, in the middle of Africa, he posed a basic question about the spread and change of the English language. In English which itself displayed varying degrees of sophistication and a variety of accents we explored the problem, turning eventually to examine the situation in that great continent of Africa.

What will be the fate of English in Africa? Will it spread like elephant grass and smother the indigenous languages; will the rise of an African consciousness drive it out; or will it settle down with true British compromise into peaceful co-existence and evolve in time into its own form of African English? World history can provide a number of examples where conquering nations have imposed their language on a subject race for the purpose of trade and administration, only to see the indigenous language spring into life the moment the conqueror's hold was loosened. The English, who stubbornly hung onto their language during the Norman conquest, have in turn watched with some bewilderment the Welsh, Irish and Scots cling tenaciously over many hundreds of years to their old Celtic tongues.

In spite of our own dual linguistic legacy here in Canada, it is not always easy for the North American brought up in what is for him virtually a unilingual society to recognize the power and tenacity of language. But why should he? The historical circumstances surrounding the spread of English and French in North America bear only partial resemblance to the spread of the major languages in Europe, Asia or Africa. Our two main languages were brought to this huge, sparsely-populated continent first by the early explorers and missionaries, then by traders, settlers, and administrators, all of whom multiplied rapidly until they soon outnumbered the native Indians whom they looked upon as naive children. Opposition to French and English has been negligible. But in Africa the story is different.

The white man's first important contact with Africa occurred along its coast when slave traders pulled in to fill their holds with black brawn. Then came the explorers such as Burton and Speke, Stanley and Livingstone, who were followed in increasing numbers by missionaries and traders during the 1860's and 1870's. With the increase in trade came the need for law and order—really, protection for the white man in the midst of a large black population—and so the British government moved into certain areas and began its administration—in English, of course. By necessity English soon became the language of education, and ten or twenty years of recent independence have not changed the picture: England has remained the lingua franca of many parts of Africa. Out of this resumé of history emerge two important facts: first, that the white man tended to look upon the black man as an inferior being and therefore to despise the black man's culture and his language; and secondly, that at no time have white settlers outnumbered the Africans, nor does it look as if they ever will.

Although this general pattern governing the spread of English holds good in many areas of Africa such as West Africa, East Africa, and South Africa, there are some interesting exceptions. One of these is Liberia, which was founded by freed slaves from the U.S.A. under the auspices of The American Society for the Colonization of Free People of Color of the United States. The first group of eighty-eight negroes arrived in the area in 1820, and after many setbacks they eventually

acquired land near what is now Monrovia. As more settlers arrived more territory was incorporated into the new country of Liberia. Today Liberia is struggling with the many problems that face African nations, not the least of which is education. The official national language is, of course, English, brought over by the early settlers whose descendants are often referred to as Americo-Liberians.

The Republic of Cameroon has a history somewhat like our own, with a double linguistic and cultural inheritance, French and English. In 1961 as the result of a plebiscite, English-speaking West Cameroon and French-speaking East Cameroon united to form the Republic of Cameroon. Newspapers, official decrees, and public notices are printed in both languages, and the government has decreed that in time all Cameroonians shall be fluent in both French and English. What a tremendous challenge for a young nation, and what an interesting multi-lingual experiment! However, while the ties with France are increasing, the ties with England are decreasing, and it could well be that English will die a natural death—ignored and unwanted.

But while English has spread rapidly over vast areas of Africa, the indigenous languages—and there are many—have remained, growing in strength rather than declining as modern science has brought about an increase in population. More and more of these languages have been reduced to writing, enabling the orally-preserved literature and wisdom of the groups to be recorded, and studied as an aspect of behaviour which unites a tribe—but alienates tribes.

Whereas the last century in Europe heard many cries for national boundaries to be set along linguistic lines, Africa is just awakening to this aspect of national consciousness. During the last decade a number of African countries have obtained their independence, and it is during this post-colonial period with its release of pressures built up during occupation that the linguistic conflict may turn out to be the spark of a greater conflagration. The status of English in India has proved to be an inflammatory problem. The Congo and Nigeria have been badly scorched. Can Africa escape greater trouble?

Africa is a continent of many languages—figures vary from six hundred to a thousand—and some of them are very different. The task of choosing from that number the relatively few indigenous languages which could and should become a national language is intractable. The pressures influencing the choice of a national language by a young, financially unstable African country are varied and immense. If the business of the young nation is to be carried on at all, a national language is essential. The choices are two: either an indigenous tribal language can be raised to the status of a national language, or a foreign language can be imposed on all citizens. That most African countries have adopted a foreign language suggests that for the moment anyway the indigenous languages are not capable of fulfilling the needs of the people.

An overwhelming need of any emergent state is for national unity and this is often seen to centre around a common language. Unfortunately any tribal language brings with it the history of the area, its wars and treacheries, its hates and humiliations. While I was in Uganda during the summer of 1966, tension was high due to the overthrow of the King of Buganda, a large and relatively wealthy area of southern Uganda, by the central government. A curfew was in effect in Kampala and we were warned on no account to be out on the streets after midnight. "They shoot first and ask questions afterwards," we were warned, and I decided not to test the truth of the statement. More people in Uganda speak Luganda, the language of Buganda,

than speak any other tongue, but in the light of past history to attempt to impose it on the northern region would divide the country rather than unite it.

The history of the country also influences the choice. Years of occupation by a foreign power have stamped a language into the administrative structure of the country. Frequently the new culture taught in English has been worn like a cloak by an educated native minority, often the leaders of the country, who are naturally reluctant to throw off their garb until it can be seen that the garment beneath, their African culture, is at least as acceptable as the borrowed cloak.

Many small nations have discovered the truth of the saying "There is safety in numbers" and have joined a bloc; often membership in the bloc will result in financial assistance. For a number of African nations that bloc has been the British Commonwealth of Nations which conducts its business in English.

In fact, many practical considerations enter into the choice of a language. Externally, independence brings with it an increase in international contacts which demand the use of a major European language. Internally, technological and scientific know-how are vital to the economic growth of the country. This knowledge is available in a major language; the task of translating technical and scientific books and journals into an African language for the benefit of a few thousand people would be expensive and time-consuming.

As a result of these various pressures, English has been adopted as the official language in more than a dozen countries in Africa, while in two or three others it shares its place with another language such as French or Afrikaans. In terms of population this means that about one hundred thirty million people may eventually have to master English if they are to progress as individuals, for increasingly an individual's livelihood may come to depend on his ability to speak and write the major language of the area. The man who can speak only his vernacular will not be able to leave his village and seek job opportunities in the nearby town. Here I cannot help remembering Valentino, intelligent and friendly, crippled physically through polio so that one leg was twisted and shortened, but crippled also economically through his inability to speak English. He seemed to be doomed to 55¢ a day, when he could get it, cutting grass outside the home of an English-speaking expatriate, instead of the 75¢ or more a day he might have earned inside the home had he been able to take instructions in English.

While, through their choice of English as the official language, African nations have avoided some of the possible consequences of choosing an indigenous language, the imposition of English may have grave long term results in creating large groups of culturally displaced persons.

Language is an integral part of culture. The language native to a particular group seems to symbolize the distinctiveness of that group and therefore to create that important feeling of belonging. The history and traditions of the group are bound up in the language in which they are expressed. The rituals of religion and politics are preserved in that language. The individual's deepest emotions, all the things he considers true and beautiful and worthwhile, all his experiences, are intricately bound up with his language. His language is not just his own voice, it is the voices of the past speaking to him through song and poetry, and the voices of the present speaking to him through his family and friends.

The imposition of a new language must be carefully handled, for

if a man ceases to respect his own language he may cease to respect both himself and his family and tribe and all the wisdom that has been stored in that language. And so the culturally displaced person comes into existence: a man who has thrown off one culture without being absorbed by another. A restless, highly intelligent Ugandan of my acquaintance seriously questioned the value of an education that has cut him off from his people. "I can't go back to my village," he said. "I don't belong. I see my uncles and cousins happy there, but I'm not happy." Perhaps this is part of the price emerging nations must pay if they wish to buy our Western culture. But is the price too high?

The loss to a country of its own culture is a tragic one; no man can live with dignity if he lacks self-respect. Fortunately an awareness of the value of their own cultures seems to be growing in parts of Africa, and many adult education programs are stressing the old traditions, song and poetry, dance and crafts, as well as examining the moral codes and religious beliefs on which the old tribal life was based. Our students, one hundred and fifty elementary teachers from four major areas of Uganda, put on a concert for us one night, singing their local folksongs. The pride of the men from Busoga and those from Busigu and Teso and Bukedi in the traditions of their own areas was both evident and moving. As one African teacher said to me, "We are slowly realizing that not all that is British is good and not all that is African is bad." The search for dignity goes hand in hand with the search for cultural roots, which are inextricably meshed with language.

As in the past we have failed to recognize the richness of the African cultures, so we have failed to recognize the richness of the African languages. There was a time when the belief held that most African languages were either far too simple, making it impossible for an intelligent man to convey all his ideas in an African language, or far too difficult, consisting of sounds that no self-respecting Englishman could get his tongue around. The falsity of both ideas has long been established. Unfortunately the misconception about the simplicity of African languages was applied by some to the African mind. What nonsense! If many Africans today are ignorant and illiterate it is due to lack of opportunity. Education is eagerly sought by millions of young Africans, but by necessity in English rather than in their vernacular.

It will be many, many years before all the children from these multilingual countries speak the same language from birth. Consequently a vast education program in teaching English as an additional language (for it is often a third or fourth language rather than a second language) must be carried on in the schools.

It is an educational axiom that instruction is most effective when given in the mother tongue, but what is most effective is not always practical. East Africa contains about one hundred and fifty different languages, some spoken by relatively few people. To accommodate every child in his own tongue would call for more schools, more teachers, more texts than the economy could afford. Instruction is therefore usually given in the vernacular for the first year or two while English is taught as a subject, but transition to English as the medium of instruction is made as soon as possible, the time usually depending on the availability of teachers proficient in English. In order to keep a proper relationship between English and the vernacular, study of the vernacular and its literature continues as a subject in areas where an enlightened approach to African culture pertains.

The magnitude of the task facing the various educational systems in Africa is staggering. In May, 1961, thirty-four African nations—excluding South Africa, Angola, Mozambique, and those lying along

the Mediterranean coast—met in Addis Ababa to prepare a plan of educational development. They set the following goals:

1. Universal primary education for all children by 1980 compared to an enrollment of less than half in 1961.
2. 20% of all children completing primary school to be enrolled in secondary school by 1980 compared to 3% or 4% in 1961.
3. University enrollment to reach 300,000 by 1980 compared to 31,000 in 1961.[1]

A report given in 1966 showed that already the number of children in primary and secondary school had shown an encouraging improvement; at the university level the increase was smaller.

A program of this size puts heavy demands on the educational systems throughout Africa. The supply of teachers must increase rapidly; there must be a steady improvement in each teacher's own proficiency in English which from P.3 or P.4 on (roughly our grades 3 and 4) is usually the medium of instruction; efficient methods of teaching English to small children must be devised; modern technology must be utilized; textbooks which do not take all their examples from England or America but use an African context are being written, but more are needed. An educational system imposed by England and based on her own curricula must be changed to fit a situation far different from that pertaining at Eton or an English village school. The whole, examination system, too frequently tied to Oxford, Cambridge or London Universities, is under fire from many quarters.

It would, I think, be foolish for Africa to refuse outside help in this great task, and we would be foolish to refuse to give it—"No man is an island." A number of Canadians serving in C.U.S.O. or working under the External Affairs Department are teaching in schools throughout Africa, particularly in secondary schools and teacher training colleges. The Canadian Teachers Federation also helps by sending teachers during the summer months to various parts of Africa to put on refresher courses in specific subject areas for practising teachers. It was this scheme, "Project Africa", that sent six of us to Uganda to teach mathematics, science, geography and English. We were barred at first from teaching English because an official in the Department of Education "wasn't going to have those Canadians with their accents contaminating the Africans." When it was pointed out that I was a "de-tribalized Londoner" who even after seventeen years in Canada had retained a pure (!) British accent, he let us go ahead and teach English. The Ugandan teachers, far from feeling contaminated, were intrigued by the Canadian dialect and became conscious that perhaps they were playing midwife to yet another brand of English—African English.

Within Africa the universities are aware of their responsibility in the field of English teaching, but they suffer in many instances from a lack of well-trained linguists and, of course, money. There is so much research that could be undertaken, for example:

1. What are the linguistic, psychological and sociological problems involved in making the transfer from an African language to English?
2. What language skills must a child have mastered before he can undertake the study of certain levels of subject matter?
3. What effect are both mass media and mass education having on the indigenous languages of Africa?

The economic future of many parts of Africa may lie in the ability of the citizens to master English with such competence that the language becomes more than a clumsy tool but is sufficiently honed to produce high quality abstract thought, to encourage creativity and inventiveness.

But the life of a people is more than the sum of its material achievements and already a number of Africans are using the medium of English prose and poetry to express themselves in the context of the new Africa.

The following copyrighted poem has been removed:

G. Okara, "Piano and Drums," Modern Poetry from Africa, ed. G. Moore and U. Beier (London: Penguin African Library, 1963), p. 93.

Perhaps as Gabriel Okara suggests in his poem "Piano and Drums" the full expression of the African personality requires that a delicate balance be maintained between the vernacular and English, between

African and Western culture. The problem is complex; the future uncertain.

As challenging as this task seems, the problem of teaching English in Canada is no less so. We have Indian children who are in the same unhappy position as the African children, stretched between two languages and two cultures; we have thousands of immigrants struggling to build new lives for themselves through the medium of an unfamiliar language; and we have many, many children, English-speaking from birth, who enter our schools from language-impoverished homes. If these Canadians are not to remain on the fringes of our society, they must have truly professional help. Teachers of English must know about human language. And yet courses in applied linguistics and psycho-linguistics are hard to find in even our major universities. Our piano needs tuning.

References

[1]R. Greenhough, *African Prospect: Progress in Education* (Unesco Publication, 1966), p. 14.

[2]G. Okara, "Piano and Drums," *Modern Poetry from Africa,* ed. G. Moore and U. Beier (London: Penguin African Library, 1963), p. 93.