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ABSTRACT

The paper draws attention to communication in multilingual states which may be said to exist at three levels: sub-state, state, and inter-state level. Communication at the sub-state level may involve an "in-group" language or a regional one, and hence a multilingual model is required at this level. At the state level, on the other hand, there will be one or more languages, to the effect that the whole population may be involved in the "effective functioning of the nation-state". The advantages of a unilingual model as compared with a multilingual one at this level are examined, and it is suggested that for many African states, the latter model may be inevitable. At the inner-state level, a unilingual or multilingual model may be required. Where an exoglossic language is both the language of communication at inter-state and state levels, the gulf between the educated elites and the masses tends to be widened. It is suggested therefore that a realistic policy must involve a narrowing of this gap through an increasing use of the indigenous languages. (Author)

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Models of Communication in Multilingual States

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It is customary to make a distinction between unilingual and multilingual states.[1] A state may be considered unilingual in one of two senses : firstly, in the sense that only one language is spoken within its borders, and secondly, in the sense that one language is spoken as a mother tongue by an overwhelming majority of its citizens. In the former sense, it may be said that there are no unilingual states anywhere in the world, since in any given state there are bound to be stranger elements (for example, members of the diplomatic corps) who speak languages other than the state language. Unilingualism in this sense is therefore trivial and no further account will be taken of it in this paper. The other sense of unilingualism is the generally accepted one. Estimates may vary as to what constitutes "an overwhelming majority". For instance, Kloss (1967:7) regards a community as unilingual if the core of the community (which represents 97 per cent of the whole community)

shares one mother tongue. In contrast to a unilingual state, a multilingual state is one in which two or more languages are spoken by a sizable proportion of citizens in the state.

Defined as above, it might appear that unilingual states are completely different from multilingual ones. But this is not really the case. It is well known that in any unilingual state, varieties of the same language are used by different groups, and the same speaker may move from one variety or register to another, depending on the situation or social function of his utterance (Hymes 1972:38; Whiteley 1971:122). In the same way, this type of functional switching from one code to the other may be practised by a speaker in a multilingual state who can control more than one language (Hymes 1972:39). It is possible, therefore, to see language difference as an extreme case of variety difference within the same language, with speakers making a choice between languages for much the same reasons as they make a choice between varieties or registers of the same language (Gumperz 1969: 230-231; Fishman (1971:16-17).

In terms of communication, the really important difference between unilingual and multilingual states is that whereas in the latter, speakers of the different varieties of the language have access to a standard form (written or spoken) which is understood by all, in multilingual states, on the other hand,

there is no such standard form that all the citizens have recourse to. To operate in a language other than one's own mother tongue, one would have to learn that language, and in many African countries, not many people are bilingual or multilingual in this sense.

In considering the nature of communication in multilingual states, it is necessary to point out, following Whiteley (1971:122), that

> "The label 'multilingual' as applied to countries or societies, however, is deceptively comprehensive: Kenya may be described as such, in the sense that it comprises a number of sub-societies each speaking a different first language, yet in many of these sub-societies there are a majority of people who are unilingual, and many bilinguals may spend much of their lives speaking a single language. Again, a country may be designated multilingual where several languages are used officially for different purposes, even though specific sectors of government may remain unilingual".

Give this nature of a multilingual state, communication across language boundaries does constitute a problem. It is to be expected, of course, that non-verbal communication in form of gestures, nods, facial expressions,

postures, etc. does occur in societies (Abercrombie 1968: 64-69 Malmberg 1960:3), but such communication by itself cannot be relied upon for the complex social interaction that goes on in the modern world.

It has also been observed that a certain amount of communication across languages does occur. For instance, Haugen (1967) after observing the way Danes, Norwegians and Swedes are able to carry on a sort of 'semicommunication' came to the conclusion that "Communication does not require the participants to have identical languages". (Haugen 1967:152). Wolff (1959:442) gives the example of interlingual communication between Nembe and Kalabari, even though speakers of the latter claim not to understand the former. Gumperz (1969) also cites examples of inter-language communication from India. These examples are impressive, but three factors must be mentioned here. Firstly, the languages involved in this type of interlingual communication must be related. In fact, in the case cited by Wolff (1959), we are told that the two languages are "so similar as to justify their classification as dialects of the same language". Secondly, the degree of communication possible must in some way be related to the degree of similarity or relatedness between the languages; and thirdly, the type of haphazard communication that is

possible between languages cannot sustain an elaborate exchange of information, and may lead to frequent breakdown in communication. Effective communication in a multilingual region therefore requires a shared language.

Communication in a multilingual state may be seen as existing at three levels : the Sub-state level, the State level, and the Inter-state level; and each level is characterized by a model or models of communication.

(a) Communication at the Sub-state level

In every multilingual state, there must be two or more languages spoken by certain groups. Grimes (1974: v - vi) reports that for African countries, the number ranges from two (for example, in Mauritius, Malagasy) to over one hundred (e.g. in Nigeria, Cameroun, Zaire, and Tanzania).[2] Some languages such as Hausa, Swahili, Luba, Akan, Yoruba are spoken by millions of speakers while many others are spoken by only a few thousand (for example, Alege in Nigeria 1,200, Vagala in Ghana 4,000).

Irrespective of the number of speakers, one would expect intragroup communication to take place in any language. Even in Tanzania where there is a definite policy of encouraging Swahili as the major language of communication, it is reported that the local languages are used even in the ujamaa villages (Whiteley 1973:16).

The point here is that a person's native language has its own role to play in his social life, either as a symbol of familiarity or ethnic solidarity or as a vehicle for certain cultural activities, such as rituals and other traditional ceremonies.

In addition to the "in-group" language, there may be one or more languages used within the state between groups, for example, for trading purposes. Such languages may involve only restricted groups within the state. Hence, in the same state, there could be several of them e.g. Hausa, Yoruba, Efik and Pidgin English in Nigeria. It is because such languages need not involve communication at the national or state level that there is need to make a distiction between communication at the sub-state level which may involve only sections of the population, and communication at the state level which ideally should involve all the citizens.

It follows from the above sketch of communication at the sub-state level that the only possible model at this level is the multilingual one. The local languages are used for intra-group communication and beyond this, other languages may be used as internal regional media of communication between restricted groups.

(b) Communication at the State level

Given that the "effective functioning of the nation-state is an essential task to which all members of the system are expected to contribute" (Kelman 1971:22), it follows that a system of communication at the state level must be capable of involving the whole population. It is generally agreed that there are two possible models of communication at the state level : unilingual and multilingual. The unilingual model could involve a foreign language (exoglossic) or an indigenous language (endoglossic). The multilingual model involves two or more languages, whether foreign or indigenous, having equal status at the national level.[3]

The unilingual model is the one that is generally held out as the better model both on nationalistic and linguistic grounds. Thus Kelman (1971:30-31) sees a common language "as a potentially powerful unifying force for a national population because it strengthens both sentimental and instrumental attachments and, furthermore, because it plays a major role in the mutual reinforcement of these two processes" and Brosnahan (1963:2) says that "the use of one language as a medium of communication, accordingly, has a dual effect: it not only provides a common framework of terms and relations for that communication; it also

predisposes its users to think along lines laid down by its characteristic and common patterns of expression. Both the framework of language and the congruence of thought are of course lacking to speakers of different languages, and neither survives the distortions of translation".

In contrast to the unilingual model, the multilingual one is seen as less efficient and more wasteful, and possibly potentially divisive. Kloss (1967a:42) says of multilingual states that "complete equality of status seems possible only in countries which have two or at most three languages. No country could conduct its affairs in four or more languages without becoming hopelessly muddled"; and Kelman (1971:47-48) draws attention to the fact that "the lack of a common language in a multiethnic society may increase divisiveness and conflict by producing resistance and threats at both the sentimental and instrumental levels". Attention is also sometimes drawn to the difference between appearance and reality in the so-called multilingual states. Whereas, in theory, such languages are supposed to be equal in status, in practice, one of the languages tends to be dominant either on account of population or economic factors (Kloss 1967a:42; Kelman 1971:46).

A discussion of models in the abstract without re-

ference to the purpose of language choice at the national level is, however, pointless. In this connection, two factors appear to be relevant. Firstly, the nation itself must have its goals which, according to Fishman (1968:44), could be sociocultural integration and authenticity (nationalism) or political integration and efficiency (nationism). Secondly, whatever means of communication is decided upon at the national level must meet the needs and interests of the entire population, and the different groups must have equal access to the system and opportunities to participate in it (Kelman 1971:40).

In considering the claims of efficiency and also the need to communicate with the outside world, it has been suggested that the situation now prevailing in most African countries south of the Sahara (i.e. the use of English or French as an official language) will tend to persist (Fishman 1971a:50-51, Whiteley 1971b:548-549). Such suggestions, however, lose sight of the fact that strong nationalist claims may offset the advantages of a foreign unilingual model. Besides, the adoption of a foreign language for communication at the national level is bound to widen the gap between the elite and the masses, unless such a policy is coupled with a massive programme of literacy, presumably in the local languages as well

as the language of wider communication.

Again for reasons of efficiency (for instance, the need to have a language that can be used for technology and higher education), and the difficulty of making a choice between competing claims of different languages, a unilingual model involving one indigenous language does not appear to be a practical possibility for most African nations at the moment.[4] It is, however, a possible long-term goal which should satisfy the claims of authenticity as well as unite the masses with the elite.

In spite of the disadvantages of the multilingual model, it seems that it will have to be an interim policy for most multilingual African nations. There is likely to be a language of wider communication in use with one or more indigenous languages. One of the indigenous languages may, in some cases, emerge and take over the national communication functions of the language of wider communication which will then be reserved for international communication. Alternatively, two languages (one exoglossic or both endoglossic) may emerge as the national languages, and, where both of them are endoglossic, there may be a continuing need for a language of wider communication particularly for use in international communication.

In spite of the above prediction, it is important to emphasize that the choice of a language for national communication must depend in the final analysis on the particular situation in the nation or state in question. (Stewart 1970:532; Kelman 1971:48-49). What has been said above about the inevitability of the multilingual model is based on three factors : an increasing tendency towards cultural awareness and the need to preserve the nation's culture through a genuinely native medium, the need to involve the whole population in the national system, and the need to conduct technological and higher education (at least for the moment) and international contacts through a language of wider communication.

(c) Communication at the Inter-state level

Communication at the inter-state level may be conceived of in two ways: through an indigenous language that is spoken across national boundaries or through a language of wider communication such as English or French.

In Africa, there are indigenous languages spoken across national boundaries. Examples of such languages are Swahili in East Africa, Hausa in West Africa, Zande in Sudan, Central African Republic, and Zaire (Alexandre 1968: 120; Samarin 1962:56-57). While it is true that such languages are used as a means of communication, particularly

for trade purposes, they are rarely exploited for formal inter-state communication either because the area of overlap involving the languages concerned is marginal e.g. Ewe in Togo and Ghana or Yoruba in Nigeria and the Republic of Benin, or because the established conventions of inter-state communication preclude the use of such languages at the official level. Hence, diplomatic and other official communication is generally conducted through a language of wider communication such as English or French.

It follows from the above that inter-state communication boils down to the choice of one language from two or so languages of wider communication. Where the same language is selected between two or more states e.g. English between Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, this unilingual model will suffice for inter-state communication; but since groups of states may select a different language, the implication for inter-state communication at the continental level is that a multilingual model will necessarily be required. For example, the Organization of African Unity (O.A.U.) has English, French, and Arabic as official languages, and hopes in the (unforseeable?) future to replace English and French with Swahili and Hausa.

The summary of the model at each level is as follows:

Level	Model
Sub-state	Multilingual
State	Unilingual/Multilingual
Inter-state	Unilingual/Multilingual

These models imply that in a multilingual state, a citizen should ideally be bilingual. He should be able to communicate in the language, or one of the languages, used at the state level, as well as in his local language which is used at the sub-state level. Where a person is able to operate only in a local language which is not used at the state level, he is necessarily cut off from participation in national affairs.[5]

For most citizens, it would not matter much if they are unable to participate in inter-state communication. In any case, very few people do have an opportunity of taking part in such communication, particularly at the official level. However, the situation that exists today in most African countries south of the Sahara, is that the language of inter-state communication such as English or French is also used as the language of state communication. In this type of situation, the monolingual citizen who can only communicate at the sub-state level is at a double disadvantage. Not only can he not participate in inter-

state communication, he is also barred from the more crucial state communication. The resulting gap between a minority that can manipulate the 'magic' language and the masses that cannot (Alexandre 1972:86) is one of the major problems of contemporary Africa. It is partly in recognition of this problem that a policy that will enable this mass-elite gap to be closed will be inevitable; and any such policy, if it is to be realistic, must involve increasing attention to and exploitation of the indigenous languages.

Notes

1. In this paper a state is taken to mean a nation-state in the sense of Kelman (1971:22) with the three generic features of being representative of the population, having paramount authority and independence.

2. The actual figures for the number of languages spoken in these countries according to Grimes are Nigeria 513, Cameroun 183, Zaire 206, Tanzania 113. The only reported cases of unilingual states in Africa south of the Sahara are Rwanda, Burundi, Botswana and Losotho. See Alexandre (1972:88-89). Note, however, that, this conclusion is based on the fact that Kinyarwanda and Kirundi though spoken in both Rwanda and Burundi are considered to be as closely related as "dialects of a single language" (Alexandre 1972:89).

3. Various possible combinations of exoglossic and endoglossic languages are given in Kloss (1968: 71-77).

4. For the factors to be considered in choosing a national language, see Spencer (1963:129-135; Nida and Wonderley 1971:65-66).

5. Note that effective communication at the national level also implies a certain amount of literacy. Thus, even if a citizen can speak a language that is used at the state level, his participation in national affairs will be severely curtailed if he cannot read or write that language.

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