

The Bumpy Road to Mother Tongue Instruction in Malawi¹

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In 1996, the Ministry of Education in Malawi directed that in future Standards 1 to 4 would be taught through mother tongues. It took eight years before the pilot phase of the language policy could begin. The paper critically analyses this situation using Bamgbose's framework which says that, in Africa, language policies tend to follow one or more of the following patterns: avoidance, vagueness, arbitrariness, fluctuation, and declaration without implementation. The paper explains why the implementation of Malawi's mother tongue instruction policy has been a slow journey on a bumpy road.

Keywords: arbitrariness, avoidance, declaration without implementation, fluctuation, language policy, vagueness

Introduction

One of Africa's distinguished language scholars, Ayo Bamgbose, has observed that African language policies are generally 'characterized by one or more of the following problems: avoidance, vagueness, arbitrariness, fluctuation, and declaration without implementation' (Bamgbose, 1991: 111). The avoidance strategy refers to a situation whereby a government or any other institution avoids making a language policy statement. Second, vagueness in a language policy refers to a situation under which a language policy is phrased in vague or not-easy-to-pin-down language. Third, arbitrariness in a language policy means that a policy is not informed by expert opinion or other forms of fact-finding. Fourth, language policy fluctuation refers to changes in language policy that come with political or other types of leadership change. In Africa, it appears that new governments like to change substantially what previous governments had put in place. The fifth characteristic, declaration without implementation, means that a language policy is declared but it then fails to move into the implementation phase (Bamgbose, 1991).

According to Bamgbose (1991), declaration without implementation comes in three forms. The first form of declaration without implementation is when a policy is declared whilst the prevailing circumstances are such that implementation is actually impossible. An example would be declaring mother tongue instruction policy for pre-schools when such schools do not exist. Such a declaration is simply a matter of propaganda. The second form of declaration without implementation is a declared policy that has escape clauses built into it, 'thus effectively giving an alibi for non-implementation' (Bamgbose, 1991:

116). Third, a language policy can be declared but have no implementation procedures.

The slow progress towards the implementation of a new language-in-education policy in Malawi is the concern of the current paper. In 1996, the Ministry of Education directed that from then on, mother tongues would be used as the media of instruction from Standards 1 to 4. It was 2004 before the pilot phase of the new language policy started. The crucial question for this paper is: Why was Malawi quick to declare but rather slow to implement the new language policy? The paper discusses this situation using what Bamgbose (1991) calls the five problems associated with African language policies, i.e. avoidance, vagueness, arbitrariness, fluctuation and declaration without implementation. The paper is organised as follows. First, we provide a brief introduction to Malawi, i.e. the language situation in Malawi, and the directive on mother tongue instruction. The next section discusses some of the key factors that have contributed to the slow progress in implementation of the 1996 language policy. The following section concludes the paper.

The Language Situation in Malawi

Malawi, previously known as Nyasaland during British colonial rule, is a small, landlocked, country situated in Southern Africa. Malawi shares borders with Zambia to the west, Tanzania to the north and northeast, and Mozambique to the east, south and southwest. The population is currently estimated at 12 million. Similar to other African countries, Malawi is multi-lingual and multicultural. Determining the precise number of languages spoken in Malawi is a difficult issue given the lack of a uniform yardstick for classifying a linguistic variety as either a language or a dialect. In the absence of a comprehensive national sociolinguistic survey, the population census remains the best available source of language data for Malawi. The 1998 census (National Statistical Office, 1998) found that Malawi had 13 languages, and Chichewa was the most widely used language of household communication, followed by Chiyao and Chitumbuka.

When Malawi attained its independence from Britain in 1964, the new government, under the leadership of President Hastings Kamuzu Banda (and his Malawi Congress Party), kept the colonial language policy intact. Thus, English remained the main official language whilst Chinyanja (later named Chichewa) and Chitumbuka were used, to some extent, in some official domains such as schools, the print media and the national radio. From 1964 to 1994, language planning in Malawi was largely directed by President Banda's national unity philosophy. Language planning was motivated by the wish to use a single national language (Chichewa) as a unifying agent in an ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous country. As a result, the policy of linguistic and cultural assimilation was put in place, working in favour of Chichewa, but at the expense of other indigenous languages.

In 1968, the annual Malawi Congress Party convention reformed the language policy. Guided by the desire to forge national cohesion and unity, the convention passed three resolutions regarding the language policy. The first resolution adopted Chinyanja as the national language of Malawi. Second,

the convention resolved to change the name of the national language from Chinyanja to Chichewa. The third resolution was that 'Chichewa and English should be the official languages of the State of Malawi and that all other languages would continue to be used in private life in their respective homes' (Malawi Congress Party, 1985: 6). Following the policy change, Chichewa became the medium of instruction from Standards 1 to 4. This policy even applied to areas that are non-Chichewa speaking. English takes over as the medium of instruction from Standard 5 onwards. It is also important to mention that English is offered as a subject throughout all eight years of primary education (Kamwendo, 2001).

The Directive on Mother Tongue Instruction

Prior to 1993, Malawi was a one-party state. In 1994, Malawi's political system changed. The multiparty system that had been legalised in 1993 paved the way for general elections. President Banda and his Malawi Congress Party lost power through the ballot box. The new government, led by President Bakili Muluzi and his United Democratic Front (UDF) introduced some language policy reforms. A directive on mother tongue instruction is one of the language policy reforms that came with the change of the political system.

On 28 March 1996, the Secretary for Education issued a directive that from then on, Standards 1 to 4 should be taught through mother tongues. The directive (Circular Reference IN/2/14, dated 28 March 1996), read in part as follows:

With immediate effect, all Standards 1, 2, 3 and 4 classes in all our schools will be taught in their own mother tongue or vernacular language as a medium of instruction. English and Chichewa will, however, continue to be offered as examinable subjects in the primary curricula. In the past Chichewa was used as both a medium of instruction and a subject, making it very difficult for beginners to grasp ideas. However, English will continue as a medium of instruction beginning in Standard 5.

The new policy ignited a heated debate in a number of environments, such as academic circles (e.g. Chauma *et al.*, 1997; Kathewera, 1999; Msonthi, 1997) and newspapers (e.g. Kazembe, 1996; Phiri, 2002a,b; Saukani, 1996). A number of fears and/or concerns were voiced in relation to the new policy directive. First, there had been no consultations with the relevant stakeholders (see Kathewera, 1999). The language policy came in a top-to-bottom style. This was found to be out of step with the new political dispensation in which consultation and transparency are preferred. Second, it was feared that the new language policy would strengthen ethnic loyalties at the expense of national unity (Kathewera, 1999). It was also feared that the policy would be a revival of the infamous *kuanunkwanu* directive (literally, 'let everyone go to their home area') that the Banda regime had made earlier. President Banda had directed that all teachers should teach in their regions of origin. The presidential directive contradicted civil service policy, which states that a civil servant can be posted to any region of the country.

Third, there was concern that there were no teaching and learning materials for the many languages involved. For example, an educational linguistic survey covering Chiyao, Chitumbuka, Chisena and Chilomwe found that there was a scarcity of teaching and learning materials in these major languages (see Centre for Language Studies, 1999). The production of such materials in the many languages would be an economic burden for Malawi's fragile economy. It was argued that with a weak and aid-dependent economy, Malawi was struggling to keep the Free Primary Education (FPE) programme alive. The FPE programme (see Chimombo, 2005; Kendall, 2005 on evaluations of Malawi's FPE programme), which started in 1994, was so poorly resourced that it was felt that Malawi should not engage in yet another resource-demanding programme. The mother tongue instruction policy was that extra burden which the aid-dependent Malawi could not afford to shoulder.

Fourth, some critics (e.g. Phiri, 2002a,b) argued that what Malawi needed most was better teaching of English rather than instruction through mother tongues. Phiri (2002a,b) and other commentators feared that the mother tongue policy would lead to further deterioration of the already declining standards of English. In Malawi, as is the case in other African countries, English is sometimes erroneously treated as being equal to education. English is the language that is associated with upward socio-economic mobility. As such, parents would want their children to learn through English. It is against this background that the dissertation of Msonthi (1997) found that Malawian parents were generally not in favor of mother tongue instruction. Similarly, in the Chiyao language survey (Centre for Language Studies, 1999), parents favored a strong use of English in the curriculum. Some parents opted to send their children to private schools where English is the sole medium of instruction. Another English language-related argument against the mother tongue instruction policy was that Malawian languages lacked the terminology for science and technology; hence, English would be the best option as the medium of instruction (Kamwendo, 2001).

Fifth, the current author met some skeptics who questioned the sincerity of the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) that provided financial and technical support for the mother tongue instruction policy. It was argued that by supporting the development of indigenous languages, and not English, GTZ had no genuine interest in seeing Africans or Malawians, for that matter, acquire the international language(s) of socio-economic and political power. To this end, references were made to South Africa's apartheid era when mother tongue instruction was employed not to empower, but to disempower black South Africans (see UNESCO, 1967).

The Slow Progress Towards Implementation

The slow progress towards implementation of the mother tongue instruction policy was a result of the interplay of a number of factors. In this section, we discuss some of the major humps that slowed down the march towards implementation. These humps include the lack of accurate and adequate sociolinguistic and/or other data that could have guided policy proposal and its implementation, inadequate human and material resources, missed and/or

underutilised opportunities, a lukewarm approach to the language policy, frequent changes of personnel at the Ministry of Education headquarters, ill-prepared personnel, and inadequate sensitisation/publicity.

Lack of accurate and adequate sociolinguistic data

At the time the mother tongue instruction directive was being made, Malawi did not have reliable or accurate sociolinguistic data (Kamwendo, 2006). Malawi's sociolinguistic profile was under-researched during the first thirty years of Malawi's independence. This was not due to a lack of researchers. Rather, the political climate of the Banda dictatorship was very restrictive. Any research that questioned the effectiveness of Chichewa as a means of nationwide communication was deemed undesirable. Such research was regarded as a threat to national unity. As a result, no language surveys were conducted until after the demise of the Banda regime (Kamwendo, 2006).

The critical importance and relevance of language surveys and other forms of fact-finding to policy formulation can be emphasized as follows:

Planning needs a well informed database to inform and influence the decisions of policy makers. A casual relationship may be noted between research and planning and there is an assumption that research will influence policy in that information provided by the researchers will be automatically utilized by the policy makers to inform their decisions. (Prophet & Nyati-Ramahobo, 1993: 41)

However, as Bamgbose (1991, 2000) has argued, Africa has many examples of language policies that were not informed by research. The Malawian case is one such example. It is a language policy that can be described as being arbitrary, to borrow the framework of Bamgbose (1991, 2000). Prophet and Nyati-Ramahobo (1993: 41) caution us against narrow thinking in terms of 'the linear model of research application in which research has a direct impact on policy making'. As an alternative, we are referred to the political model of Husen (1984). The political model of research application refers to a situation whereby political decision makers use research findings either to strengthen or justify a policy decision that has already been made. This is cynical use of research findings. In the Malawian case, language surveys and other language policy-related studies actually came after the language policy directive had been issued. It was only after the general public had started to question the new language policy's research backing that local research (e.g. Centre for Language Studies, 1999) was initiated. This amounts to a crisis approach: 'Policy makers often have a crisis approach and call upon researchers when things go wrong' (ADEA, 1998: 3).

Inadequate human and material resources

Another setback to the new language policy was inadequate human and material resources (see Chauma *et al.*, 1997). For instance, it was noted by an educational linguistic survey that primary school teacher training colleges trained teachers of only two languages – English and Chichewa (Centre for Language Studies, 1999). This meant that Chichewa was the only indigenous

language catered for in the teacher-training programme. Therefore, there was a need to make the teacher training institutions include other indigenous languages. This was a difficult task and a costly venture. Another area of need was teaching and/or learning materials. The cost of developing teaching and/or learning materials to cover the numerous indigenous languages of Malawi was prohibitive.

Related to the production of learning and teaching materials was the fact that the indigenous languages had a low level of corpus development. Thus, there was a need to invest in corpus development activities, such as orthography review and standardisation, compilation of lexicographic materials, such as dictionaries, the writing of grammar books etc. (see Kamwendo & Kachiwanda, 2002). Only Chichewa has a high level of corpus development because as the national language, Chichewa has been the target of most of the indigenous languages' development in Malawi.

Missed and/or underutilised opportunities

There have been some missed and/or underutilised opportunities in Malawi. One such opportunity is the positive attitude Chitumbuka-speaking communities of the Northern Region displayed towards the new language policy directive (see Mchazime, 2000). The Northern Region can be correctly described as the most well-prepared for the mother tongue policy. Given the high degree of language loyalty that the Tumbuka have towards their language, it is not surprising that the Northern Region was the most enthusiastic about the policy directive on mother tongue instruction. This situation has historical roots. Until 1968, Chitumbuka was on the school curriculum. It was only after the 1968 declaration of Chichewa as the national language that Chitumbuka was removed from the school curriculum. The 1996 mother tongue policy directive, therefore, meant a much desired comeback for Chitumbuka.

Second, since the demise of Banda's one party dictatorship, the predominantly Chitumbuka-speaking Northern Region has witnessed some active community-based language development efforts undertaken by the Chitumbuka Language and Culture Association (CLACA) (see Kamwendo, 2005). CLACA was formed in 1994 with the aim of preserving the culture and language of the Tumbuka. Immediately after its creation, CLACA started to lobby government to reintroduce Chitumbuka in schools. Some CLACA members took a step further by producing manuscripts of Chitumbuka textbooks in readiness for the use of Chitumbuka in schools. At CLACA's secretariat in Mzuzu, the author saw a number of old books that were used in schools before the relegation of Chitumbuka. The presence of previously used Chitumbuka books was a significant opportunity. It meant that the task would not be to start from scratch, but to revise some of the old books.

Since there was no standard orthography of Chitumbuka, CLACA revised the existing orthographies, the aim being to produce a standard orthography (Kamwendo, 2005). Although the revision of the orthography was not guided by relevant scientific principles from linguistics, the effort remains commendable. Later, the orthography project benefited from technical guidance offered by the

Centre for Language Studies of the University of Malawi. The orthography benefited from GTZ's financial support.

The efforts of CLACA and some individuals in the Northern Region in terms of contributions towards status and corpus planning of Chitumbuka amount to what Kamwendo (2005) has described as language planning from below, whilst others would call it community-based language planning (e.g. Bangbose, 2000). However, the Ministry of Education did not immediately implement the policy directive in the Northern Region. It failed to take advantage of the enabling atmosphere that prevailed (and continues to prevail) in that region.

A lukewarm approach

The Ministry of Education took a lukewarm approach towards the new language policy. Upon realising that it was not an easy walk towards the implementation of the language policy directive, the Ministry took a back seat approach. For example, there have been lamentable delays in the approval of the new language policy. This new language policy was conceived at the first national symposium on language in education policy held in 1999. The symposium appointed a taskforce to produce a draft language policy covering pre-school, primary education, secondary education, adult education and tertiary education. The taskforce submitted the draft policy to the Ministry of Education for onward transmission to the Cabinet. Apparently, the draft policy never reached the Cabinet. At one point, the taskforce secretariat, the Centre for Language Studies at the University of Malawi, was asked to resubmit the policy document since the original document could not be traced at the Ministry of Education headquarters. At the fourth national symposium on language-in-education policy, participants expressed deep concern over the delay in the approval of the proposed comprehensive language policy (see Pfaffe, 2003).

The importance of efficient government machinery cannot be overemphasized. We cannot afford to ignore what Sam Nujoma, then President of Namibia, had observed about his own government machinery:

Our government, you will agree, is widely successful as far as policy formulation is concerned. We have been, on the other hand, less successful with regard to policy implementation, policy monitoring and evaluation. The transmission belt, that is our civil service, exhibits a delayed reaction in the policy implementation process. (Otaala, 2001: 202)

What Nujoma observed about slow government machinery in Namibia is equally true of Malawi. The reaction of government officials towards the mother tongue instruction policy was not handled with the urgency it deserved. In fact, talking to some officials, one got the impression that they had more serious issues to deal with than mother tongue instruction.

Frequent changes of personnel at the Ministry of Education

Another factor that hampered progress in the implementation of the mother tongue policy directive has been the frequent changes of Ministers and senior civil servants at the Ministry of Education headquarters. Malawi has a culture

of frequent changes of ministers and senior civil servants. A result of such frequent changes of personnel was that some important documents (e.g. the draft language policy) went missing. The Centre for Language Studies (as the language policy taskforce secretariat) and the language policy taskforce had to make arrangements to brief any new minister or principal secretary on the policy, and hope to get their sympathy and support. Some ministers and principal secretaries were supportive whilst others were not. This scenario amounts to what Bamgbose has described as 'lack of continuity in the personnel responsible for policy-making may limit the extent to which language policy may be influenced' (Bamgbose, 1991: 132).

Ill-prepared officials

As Bamgbose has observed, 'many officials whose responsibility is to take decisions on certain policy options are ill-prepared for such as a task. Sometimes an official is trained in a discipline far removed from language, and he is then called upon to decide on language matters' (Bamgbose, 1991: 131). For example, one principal secretary was a former science teacher and another principal secretary was an administrator by profession. The Minister of Education portfolio has been held by a lawyer, a former journalist, and a former neurosurgeon.

Against this background of senior ministry officials and ministers whose areas of professional specialisation do not come to language and education, it is not difficult to see how much an uphill task it is for such people to appreciate and support the mother tongue policy. Of course, it cannot be assumed that if a linguist became principal secretary or Minister of Education, the policy would have received better treatment. The argument being made here is that at least officials whose areas of professional specialisation are closer to language-in-education would be in a better position to understand and appreciate the theoretical and practical sides of the policy.

Inadequate sensitisation/publicity

The Ministry of Education did not put in place a good sensitisation/publicity programme concerning the new language policy. Details of the language policy were sketchy. As a result, many questions were left unanswered. This created a fertile environment within which misconceptions about the new language policy grew. One of the misconceptions was that the policy directive meant the demise of English. With appropriate and adequate sensitisation/publicity campaigns, such misconceptions and/or fears could have been erased (Pfaffe, 2000). The sensitisation strategy proposed for Malawi (see Pfaffe, 2000) is echoed by Swarts (2001) with reference to Namibia as follows:

The challenge, highlighted many times, is to educate, advise and convince parents of the pedagogical advantages and value of instruction in the mother tongue ... a national awareness campaign should be launched-involving political leaders, traditional leaders and influential members of society. (Swarts, 2001: 43)

Particularly worrying in Malawi was the fact that some of the senior officials at the Ministry of Education were unable to market the language policy efficiently since they did not know what it entailed. The sensitisation campaign, therefore, had to start at the Ministry of Education itself. The fact that some officials from the Ministry of Education were not conversant with the theoretical and practical sides of mother tongue instruction amounts to having ill-prepared personnel – a topic that we have discussed in ‘Ill-Prepared Officials’.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Malawi offers some important lessons for other countries contemplating the introduction of indigenous languages into the school curriculum. One clear lesson from Malawi is the lack of appropriate and adequate fact-finding. Therefore, it is advisable that before language policies are declared adequate, fact-finding should be done. Fact-finding can take a number of forms such as nationwide consultations with the major stakeholders, institutional visits (e.g. observations of classrooms), invitation for written and oral submissions from the general public, research and policy studies, external tours to countries that have had success stories, and so on. This, however, does not mean that once the policy is in the implementation stage, the fact-finding has to stop. Fact-finding during the implementation stage should feed into the evaluation of the language policy (see Rubin, 1971).

The Ministry of Education in Malawi had underestimated the tasks that were to follow from the language policy directive, i.e. the implementation phase of the policy. Referring to a similar situation in Namibia, Swarts (2001: 48) had observed that ‘it seems as if the Education Ministry at the time believed once the policy had been formulated, it could be implemented without much effort’. This observation is equally true for the Ministry of Education in Malawi with regard to the mother tongue policy. From our discussion in this paper, it is clear that Malawi was quick to declare the mother tongue instruction policy, but rather slow to implement it. It has been a slow journey on a bumpy road.

Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to the conference participants’ comments as well as the current journal’s anonymous reviewers’ constructive recommendations. I take full responsibility for any errors that remain in the paper.

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Note

1. An earlier version of this paper, under the title ‘The Slow March Towards Mother Tongue Instruction in Malawi: Another Case of Declaration Without Implementa-

tion?' was read at a regional conference on multilingualism in Southern African education, held in Gaborone, Botswana, 1–2 June, 2005.

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