Multilingualism and Problems of Choice of Indigenous Official Language in the West African Sub-region

A. E. Sosu*

Résumé: *A partir des années 50 le préjugé contre les langues locales étaient considérées primitives et indignes d'une analyse et d'une étude scientifiques, a commencé à céder la place à un intérêt qui se témoignait à ces langues et qui allait grandissant. Le problème de choix d'une langue officielle locale dans un environnement multi-lingue n'est pas un problème facile à résoudre. Le choix et la planification de la langue, ainsi que leurs conséquences, sont tels qu'il convient de prendre les décisions avec la plus grande prudence. Est-il souhaitable de promouvoir au plus haut niveau toutes les langues de la sous-région? Cette option est-elle faisable? Chaque pays peut-il survivre en tant que unité socio-politico-économique, avec toute cette multitude de langues et dialectes très développés? Des facteurs tels que la structure de la langue, le climat socio-politique, de même que les différents besoins de pays particuliers nécessiteront des solutions différentes. Au regard de la complexité socio-économique et politique qui doit informer le choix de la politique de langue, sa planification demande une équipe pluri-disciplinaire soucieuse de préserver l'intérêt national d'un pays donné au-delà des considérations personnelles et ethniques.*

Introduction

One does not need more than a cursory look at the linguistic map of the West African sub-region to be struck by the multiplicity of languages spoken in the area. History has implanted French, English and Portuguese in this Sub-region such that, irrespective of the existence of a great number of indigenous linguistic communities, some of whom, like the Yoruba, the Wolof, the Hausa and the Mande communities are relatively large, we have formed the habit of talking about Francophone, Anglophone and Lusophone West Africa as if the three corresponding European languages are the most widespread languages in the sub-region. In fact habits die hard, we therefore intend retaining those very terms in our paper, while referring to native West African languages as local or indigenous languages without any pejorative connotation; we shall also call such languages L1 in respect of those for whom they are mother tongues, and L2, L3 or L4 for those who speak them as second, third or fourth languages. French, English and Portuguese will be

Africa Development Vol. XVII, No. 1, 1992, pp. 113-128

L2, for nationals of former French, British and Portuguese colonies, respectively.

In this paper we shall examine briefly the status of local West African languages during the colonial area, their richness and power of adaptability, the linguistic decolonization movement and, without forgetting to touch on the reality of the linguistic situation, we shall propose some criteria for the choice of indigenous official languages.

Colonial Policy with Respect to Local Languages and its Effect

Some 25 years ago, studies conducted in Senegal revealed that though the Wolof ethnic group represented only 36% of the population, the language was spoken by about 90% of young Senegalese and that it was only 12% of Senegalese who had declared being able to read and write French[1]. This reality where the number of those literate in the L2, is small in relation to that of speakers of some indigenous language, is still true to-day of many areas in the sub-regions; for example, Hausa continues to spread not only in the Moslem areas of Nigeria but also in the essentially Moslem areas of a number of countries to the West of Nigeria. In Ghana, Akan is spreading throughout the country.

The 3 European languages in the sub-region enjoyed an enormous prestige, not in relation to the number of its speakers, but particularly in relation to the linguistic policies of the colonizers, the level of development of those languages and the socio-economic status they conferred on those who use them fluently. As a rule, the Anglo-Germanic powers tended to encourage the use of local languages in their colonies and the Latin powers the diffusion of their own languages[2]. According to the French policy of assimilation:

> *only one language is taught in the schools, recognized in law courts, and used in administration; French... All other languages belong to the realm of folklore... and are signs of disintegration of the French Republic*"[3].

Consequently the study at school of local languages, which would lead to their development, was, on no account, to be encouraged in the former French territories. This position was confirmed in unequivocal terms in 1944 at the Brazzaville Conference where it was declared that instruction must be

---

1 Houis, M. 1971, *Anthropologie linguistique de l'Afrique Noire*, Paris PUF, p. 196.
2 Alexandre, P. 1972, *An Introduction to Language in Africa*, London, p. 71.
3 Alexandre, P. 1972, Ibid.

given in French, the use of local dialects in teaching was strictly forbidden in private as well as public schools[4].

Students who dared to use a word of their own language at school were punished by making them carry around their necks or on the chest a disgraceful showcard indicating their "offence". The direct result of such a policy is no surprise to anybody:

> *Today, many literate Africans in former French territories know more French and have imbibed more of the French culture than they know their own language and cultures*[5].

Similarly the use of local languages in official interactions and at school was forbidden in the former Portuguese colonies. Thus the African child went to school with a specific language and therefore cultural heritage which, within the confines of the school, were totally disregarded[6].

But the picture was different in the former British colonies: in general the British Government accepted the use of indigenous languages in West African schools; in some respects Britain even encouraged the development of those languages by training in her universities, eminent British scholars like R.C. Abrham, John Spencer, J.S.W. Spencer, P. Currey, I.C. Ward and D. Westerman, interested in African languages and cultures, and by proposing such languages as secondary school leaving examination subjects, at least in Ghana since 1931[7]. As far as the use of local languages in African education was concerned, Britain proposed two principles; the first is that "when possible education should begin in the language of the tribe or sub-tribe, that is to say, in the mother tongue"[8]. This directive though straightforward, often proved difficult and sometimes impossible to apply, where a single school served a multilingual zone without a single dominant language. So in some cases, in the face of the least difficulty the local language was brushed aside especially in non-missionary schools, with the complicity of some influential indigenous people. Some of their arguments were, that after all the majority of West Africans were going to school in order to avoid manual or agricultural work in future; and those new employment perspectives were open only to those who knew how to read and write in the language of the colonizer. Thus on the linguistic plane what mattered to many administrators on the spot and many Africans, was

---

4 Hargreaves, J. D. 1969, *France and West Africa*, London: Macmillan, p. 238.
5 Awoniyi, T.A., 1982, *The Teaching of African Languages*, London: Hoddar and Stoughton, 1982, p. 23-24.
6 Houis, M., 1971, op. cit., 1971, p. 196.
7 Awoniyi, T.A., 1982, p. 24, op. cit.
8 Hussey, E. R. J., 1932, "The Language of Literature in Africa", *Africa 5* p. 169.

knowledge of the European language perceived as a sign of enlightenment and modernity.

> *The second principle is that except where the mother tongue is a widely spoken and developed language, there should be introduced during the elementary school period a second language which is capable of developing a literature and is spoken over a wide area*[9].

It is obvious that the second directive was a little vague. That made it easy for it to be conveniently interpreted by some people as an implicit or subtle proposition to forget the indigenous languages and introduce the colonizer's or another European language. We can say therefore that despite the relatively favourable disposition of Britain towards the use of African languages in education, the application of her two language directives depended largely on the administrators, their African collaborators and to some extent on the linguistic environment.

The majority of the colonial administrators considered the local languages as too inferior to English and in cases where a number of such administrators allowed the use of local languages, it was only meant to be taught up to a level which would enable the African to read the Holy Bible[10]. For example, in his report to the British Colonial Office, Mr. Metcalfe Sunter, first British Inspector of Schools in Anglophone West Africa wrote:

> *I consider those languages as interesting only to the comparative philologist and never susceptible to attain practical utility in civilization, at least as far as possible interests of Great Britain are concerned*[11].

And in his memorandum to the same office in 1949 on "The Vernaculars of Africa and their Future", Mr. D.P. Abraham also hostile to the use of local languages in education, like Sunter above, stated the following specifically about the Twi language of the Gold Coast (presently Ghana):

> *In the Gold Coast expense and time are involved in the attempt to unify the Twi dialects. If the same energy had been devoted to the rapid and efficient propagation of both spoken and written English throughout the*

---

9 Hussey, 1932, op. cit. p. 169.

10 Ajayi, 1976, *Christian Missions in Nigeria: 1841-1891*. London Longmans Green and Co., 1965, quoted by Obiri, J. O. O. "Preparation of the Secondary School Mother Tongue Teacher, *West African Journal of Education*, 20 No. 1, 1976, p. 76.

11 Wise, Apud C. C., 1956, *A History of Education in British West Africa*, London: Longmans Green and Co. p. 22.

Colony during the period we have been installed there, this problem of unification would never have arisen...[12].

These quotations clearly show that there were occasions when the development of local languages was officially encouraged by the Home Government much to the dislike of some people in high positions in the colonies; but in spite of the unsystematically uniform application of the two British directives relating to the use of local languages in education in the former British territories, it is undeniable that Britain did much more for the development of local languages than its French and Portuguese counterparts.

But because mastery of an indigenous language alone did not and still does not warrant any social advancement in life, African languages were relegated to the background and almost exclusively reserved for the masses; besides where adult literacy in those languages was encouraged the target groups did not always perceive very clearly the functional basis and the cultural reasons for such literacy drives. In addition they were even surprised to be made literate in a local language while schools taught their children in French, English or Portuguese, leading at least to the procurement of some employment[13].

Those colonial administrators who despised local languages succeeded in "poisoning" the minds of many Africans in relation to their own languages, considered as uncouth and primitive and unworthy of scientific analysis and study. The resultant inferiority complex that set in has marked many nationals even today, over a quarter of a century after independence, from colonial rule; some educated nationals, for fear of being labelled, among others, as uncivilized, unenlightened or uncultured, still look down upon indigenous languages[14]. We find even today Africans who prefer using a foreign language at home though the couple may belong to the same linguistic community; there are still today African parents who teach their children the colonial language prior to exposing them to the indigenous languages. Furthermore many highly placed nationals especially from minority linguistic communities, who go about promoting without any circumspection and without taking into account the level of development or the potential of other local languages, that it is only the colonial language which is fit to be retained as an official language.

---

12 Asamoa, E.A., 1955, "The Problem of Language in Education in the Gold Coast", *Africa*, 25 pp. 63-64.

13 Houis, M., 1971: op. cit. p. 194.

14 Awoniyi, T. A., 1982: p. 25, op.cit.

Modern linguistics affirms that there is nothing like "primitive" languages, that almost all languages reveal a high level of subtlety, flexibility and complexity[15]. And according to UNESCO there is nothing in the structure of any language which precludes it from becoming a vehicle of modern civilization[16]. In fact many languages which did not have a vocabulary adequate to the needs of higher and, especially, technical education. Some, like the Arabic, the Hungarian, the Finnish and the Estonian made up the deficiency by undertaking planned vocabulary expansion programmes[17]. West African linguistic communities can do likewise in addition to adopting other forms of vocabulary enrichment procedures.

Richness and Power of Adaptability of African and some European Languages

The status of many African languages during the colonial era could be likened to that of French, Italian and English for example, at the end of the Middle Age when those languages were in fact considered more or less as vulgar dialects for peasants to use in discussing the price of livestock[18]. Culturally therefore, they were considered far inferior to the almighty and highly respected Latin. Later on however, they too became very rich and subtle, and even succeeded in dethroning Latin from its lofty position and becoming a *lingua franca* in their respective countries. Many factors contributed to that situation.

In the case of the French language for example, let us note very briefly, among others, the following four factors: direct royal intervention, the reformation, literature and word borrowing. In 1539, the Villers - Cotterets Ordinance of Francais stipulated that, in order to avoid difficulties of interpretation, all arrests and other proceedings would be pronounced, recorded and delivered to the parties concerned in French, their first language.

The Reformation also made its contribution: the reformed Christians wanted the religious books published in French. Thus in 1523 the *New Testament* was printed in French, and twelve years later the entire *Bible*. In 1541 Calvin 'a French Reformation Movement leader' had his *Institution of*

---

15 Verbeke, R., "Problems Concerning the Choice of Vernacular Languages", *Présence Africaine*, 32, No. 60, 1966 p. 103.

16 Bull, W. E., 1964, Review of "The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education" (*"UNESCO Monographs on Fundamental Education"*, No. 8, 1953) Hymes. D. ed. *Language in Culture and Society*. London: Harper and Row Publishers, p. 528.

17 Bull, W. E., 1964, Ibid. p. 528.

18 Verbeke, R., 1966: op. cit. p. 104.

the Christian Religion published in French after its original Latin publication in 1536.

In fact the role that literature played in popularizing the use of French was very significant. Particularly noteworthy were the publications of the great Pleiade Poetic School, with Ronsard, du Bellay and others; important translations of ancient authors like Amyet's *Plutarque* translated into French from Greek in 1559, Montaigne's Essays, Rabelais' *Pantagruel* 1532 and *Gargantua*, 1534[19].

Bull cites a UNESCO study which argued that, all actively spoken languages, including English, French, German and Japanese, respond to new situations in relation to vocabulary in the same way:

> *by word borrowing, by coinage, by giving new meanings to existing words, by extending the meaning of existing words, or by compounding new words from existing material taken either from the language or from it and some other tongue*[20].

We shall now look at a few examples of word borrowings in French with the original sources of the words.

Source	Borrowing
Celtic	alouette
German	bière, boulevard, halte
Spanish	bizarre, adjudant, camarade
Latin	occulaire, père, grand, sang, long
Italian	balcon, colonel, banque
Greek	philosophie
Arabic	café[21].

An ever increasing number of studies reveal the richness of African languages in vocabulary, morphology and syntax, their easy adaptability and varied possibilities of expression. According to Senghor:

> *One finds ten words to describe the same object, according to when it changes its form, its volume, its weight, its colour and its use..." (U'Tam'si, 1964: 164).*

Vincent Monteil quotes Amadou Hampate Ba who estimates as 60,000 the number of derivatives theoretically possible from some 3000 word roots

---

19 Cohen, M., 1967, *Histoire d'une langue: le Français*. Paris, Editions Sociales, pp. 159-161.

20 Bull, W. E. 1964: op. cit. p. 530.

21 Galichet, G., 1964, *Physionomie de la langue française*, Paris: PUF pp. 27-44.

analyzed from the Peulh language by H. Gaden. And, in support of the thesis that:

> *the introduction into African languages of terms and modes of expression capable of expressing scientific and philosophical ideas of the modern world is possible.*

Cheikh Anta Diop, a Senegalese writer, in his "Nations Negres et Culture" devotes a whole chapter to a Wolof-French vocabulary, translating into that Senegalese language a number of scientific terms relating to the concept of chemistry, geometry and thermodynamics... In conclusion he does a wolof translation of a summary of Paul Angevin's theory of relativity[22].

Linguistics is undeniably a scientific discipline, and Akan and Ewe linguistics are being taught in Akan and Ewe respectively, both of them Ghanaian languages in the University of Cape Coast, Ghana for many years now.

In 1988 a study on Ewe adverbs undertaken by third year students of Ewe in 1988 in the Department of Ghanaian Languages of the University of Cape Cost revealed that, the language has an enormous stock of adverb to describe, for example, the manner of walking, depending on whether the person walking is tall or abort, hefty or feable-looking, fat or slim, depending on whether his clothes are ample or sight depending on the nature and the noise of his footsteps... About fifty different words were recorded and most of them had their diminutive forms as well.

Referring specifically to the Twi language, a study made the following observation just before Ghana's independence in 1957:

> *Already a comprehensive system of theological thought has found adequate expression in this language. The old Based Missionaries, with the help of African teachers, succeeded in making accurate translations into Twi of words on Church History, dogmatics and Christian ethics. An attempt was also made, with promising results, to build up a system of mathematics - arithmetic and algebra - in Twi"*[23].

All these goes to prove that contrary to the stand taken by many administrators of former colonies and some indigenous collaborators, many languages of the sub-region are lexically very rich and possess a high potential for adaptation and response to new situations, new concepts.

---

22 Verbeke, R., 1966, op. cit. p. 103.
23 Asamoa, E.A., 1955: op. cit. p. 71.

Linguistic Decolonization

In the 50s the African continent witnessed the birth of a remarkable linguistic awareness: the indifference to or the disdain for indigenous languages has generally metamorphosed into an unprecedented interest in those neglected languages; and with that began an ever increasing improvement in their status; various groups of intellectuals started to raise the question of linguistic decolonization; thus one or more indigenous languages would be systematically developed, and would be made to play the role that the European languages were and are still playing in the sub-region.

Governments of the different countries have developed more and more interest in the idea and have given it their official support in diverse ways; through scholarships, increased subventions, policies favourable to the development of such language, establishment of specialized bodies and institutions; for example a number of local languages like Hausa (Central and West Africa), Yoruba, Igbo, Efik, Akan, Ewe, Mossi, Wolof (West Africa) are not only taught at various educational levels, but also have their use encouraged in trade, commerce, politics drama, religion, radio, television and the newspaper[24]. In Burkina Faso for example a "Commission Nationale des Langues Voltaïques" (National Commission on Voltaic Languages) constituted in Ouagadougou, codified the Mossi Language in 1969[25]. And in Ghana, the Bureau of Ghana Languages formerly the Vernacular Literature Bureau established in 1951, has also made its impact on a number of local languages: so has the Hausa Language Board done for Hausa in Nigeria. At the sub-regional level, the activities of the West African Linguistic Society and, at the regional level those of UNESCO and of the International Institute of African Language and Culture founded in 1925, publishers of the scholarly journal *Africa*, deserve special mention.

Universities and institutes in the sub-region have established departments or sections of linguistics and African language where conferences, workshop, research activities and seminars take place and where different types of publications come from outside the continent. Universities in England, the USA, Germany and USSR have stepped up their studies of African languages[26].

Many African countries now organize regular cultural festivals to encourage national culture and languages. The successful Festival of Art and

---

24 Awoniyi, T. A., 1982: op. cit. p. 23.
25 Houis, M., 1971: op. cit. p. 192.
26 Awoniyi, T.A., 1982: op. cit. p. 28

Cultures (FESTAC) held in Nigeria in 1977 was for the same purpose, but on the continental level.

The national mass media too have not been left out, more and more newspapers and periodicals are being published and more and more time is allocated to radio and television programmes in local languages. The British Broadcasting Corporation, for some years now, has encouraged the use of Hausa, Swahili and some other African languages in its overseas (African) service.

We see from the above that indigenous languages in the sub-region now enjoy a high level of prestige generally unknown during the colonial era.

Reality of the Language Situation

Though the level of efforts made in the various countries may differ, we can see that the question of linguistic decolonization is a great concern to governments in the sub-region. However, that linguistic renaissance has brought to light problems inherent in language planification in a multilingual environment.

Every language is important to its speakers and every country in the sub-region is multilingual. To take just a few examples, the Republic of Togo has about 40 languages and dialects; in the People's Republic of Benin 52 languages have been recorded to date; Ghana boasts of more than 80 languages and dialects, Sierra Leone 18 distinct languages and Nigeria about 400 linguistic communities (Awoniyi, 1982: 24). As a matter of fact those figures differ from one source to another confirming that the number of languages and dialects really spoken in every country, at the present state of research, is unknown. This uncertainty about the number is due to many factors including the scarcity of information available and in many cases the absence of sufficient linguistic descriptions[27] the lack of agreement among specialists on the general criteria distinguishing a language from a dialect, and the fact that until recently most of the studies were undertaken by amateurs[28].

Now that practically all countries are convinced that every language can be developed to a high degree, the time has come to ask a few questions like the following:

- Is it desirable to develop all languages of the sub-region to the highest level possible?

---

27 Lacroix, P. F., 1964, "The Problems of African Languages", *Présence Africaine*, 23 No. 51 p. 82.

28 Alexandre, P., 1972, op. cit., p. 1.

- Taking the realities of the situation into account, will every country be able to develop all its languages, for them to be used as a medium of instruction at all levels of formal education?
- Are there qualified teachers to undertake this teaching task in L1 in all subjects up to the higher education levels?
- Is there an adequate number of Africanist linguists to conduct serious studies in all aspects of the languages and come out with reliable results?
- Can every country survive as a socio-politico-economic unit with all this multitude of language and dialects developed to a high degree?
- Can the discrepancies in the inventory of the various languages be settled soon enough for the exact number of languages and dialects to be known and for early and satisfactory language planifications to be done?
- Are there, for all languages listed, authoritative descriptions that can serve as a reliable starting point for serious future studies?

We doubt if anybody can claim to have appropriate answers to all those questions.

Members of a linguistic community tend to be emotionally attached to their language; the first language is said to play an important role in concept formation and intellectual development, and also in the moulding of the personality and cultural outlook of the individual; a common language promotes a feeling of belonging, of oneness among its speakers. For these and other reasons it is desirable to develop each language to the highest possible level. But in the countries of the sub-region, there is a serious scarcity of reliable documents and qualified human and material resources; there is inadequacy of dependable linguistic descriptions of and other pertinent references on each language; a significant number of those languages do not have the written form yet, and there are very many which are spoken by only a small number of people. Besides the exact number of languages and dialects is still unknown. We can say therefore without running the risk of being proved wrong that it is utopian to conceive the idea of developing every language to the highest possible level. Such an effort which will tend to renew and strengthen ethnic boundaries, will also form ethnic rivalries and ill feelings and provoke national disunity. Let us for a moment, think of the inextricable situation that will face a country in the sub-region if, for example, all the laws, all the official information or directives, all textbooks, all national newspapers should be published and all radio and television items of news should be broadcast in every single language of the country. Obviously there is need for a choice.

Some Criteria for Selection

We do not have the slightest pretension to say that we are capable of proposing a comprehensive list of time tested criteria that are true for all occasions and at all times. We just want to advance a few humble suggestion; but before these, a few questions that all language planners in a multilingual setting may be called upon to answer and which confronted the participants of the 2nd Congress of Black African Writers and Artistes in Rome in 1958:

What language(s) to choose and what dialect(s)? On what criteria to base the choice? From the very beginning should the choice be made at the national or a the sub-regional level?

The difficulty of finding satisfactory answers to those and related questions obliged the Congress participants who had intended in their linguistic resolution to select only one African Language and propose its compulsory adoption as a *lingua franca* on the whole continent, to finally settle for a list of six possibilities, namely Swahili, Hausa, Yoruba, Mande, Fulfulde and Wolof[29].

Naturally the Congress thought of the whole continent, even though the language needs might not be the same from one sub-region to another, nor from one country to another in the same sub-region, especially as the level of awakening was not the same everywhere. In fact, the delay in ratifying some conventions of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) by some member countries, has made us believe that the time is not ripe for a collective linguistic solution. Consequently, in our opinion, it is premature to think of a unique solution for all countries.

Every country in the sub-region therefore will have to study its own peculiar case and take decisions accordingly. However, to avoid dispersion in research, unnecessary duplication of efforts, wastes of funds and other scarce resources, it is in the interest of the different countries to coordinate their activities, and exchange information in the sub-region. Thus, as a first step, the planning will be done at the national level without however ignoring the very significant fact that many languages spoken along the borders of a good number of countries, spill over into neighbouring countries; but whether or not the decision is taken at the national or at the sub-regional level, one will find certain factors pertinent such as the geographical area a language or the languages occupy, the history of the language(s) in a country, its/their current status, the structure of competing

29 Alexandre, P. 1972: op. cit. p. 83

languages, the writing tradition and the affinity the speakers have for their respective languages and dialects[30].

We shall now take each of those points one after the other beginning with the one relating to the geographical area: a language can be spoken by a small group of people and can occupy a relatively small area in a country but having a long tradition of education, due to an early contact with traders and/or missionaries. Such a community may have produced powerful men who may want to use their privileged position to influence a national decision in favour of their minority language. Naturally such attempts have to be strongly resisted since they are not conducive to harmony in the country. A language that has hardly expanded beyond its traditional frontiers over the years cannot be accepted by the majority of the population as a *lingua franca.* Some language, like Yoruba and Hausa, have not only expanded beyond their traditional borders but constitute the first language of people in more than one country. Consequently decisions taken about such languages are bound to have some impact on speakers in neighbouring countries; this factor, as hinted earlier, cannot be ignored.

As for the history of the language and its present status, it is important to have some idea about the number of speakers for whom the language is a first, second, third or even a fourth language; in other words it is necessary to know whether the language is in full natural expansion namely without its being imposed on the people for, the more a language is widespread in a country the easier it will be for it to play the role of a *lingua franca*, and for a government to plan its development and further promotion; this is so because a language whose expansion is natural tends to enjoy some kind of genuine preference and prestige among its indigenous speakers as well as among other speakers for whom it is not a first language.

The structure of competing language brings our discussion to the structural similarities and differences among languages. It is normally believed that the more a language is structurally similar to another, the easier it is for speakers of one to learn the other. Consequently among a number of possible languages to select as vernacular languages, if there is one whose structure bears similarities with many other languages in the country, it is most likely to win the toss.

Among the key variables noted is that of the writing tradition. It is necessary to know whether or not a given language has a written form. If it has, the type of alphabet is important. Most of our interactions are with the West and all the Western countries have practically the same type of alphabet. Besides Western colonial powers have already introduced us to

30 Wallwork, J. F., 1981, *Language and People*, London: Heinemann Educational Books, pp. 157-158).

their alphabet through their language and have helped us to transcribe these alphabets to our languages. In any country the languages which have a written form are likely to have had a good number of studies done on them, and therefore likely to be more documented and to be generally richer in reference materials than those languages where basic research in phonology, morphology, syntax and vocabulary is yet to be initiated with the aim of establishing its transcription. Because of the numerous problems some of which have already been indicated above, that type of work will be very long and exacting.

The four factors we have just discussed concern the languages themselves. Now the fifth one namely the sentiment or loyalty one has towards one's language is rather psychological. It is a very delicate factor susceptible to become a very powerful political weapon. It could be described as a protective and defensive attitude, a kind of pride, esteem and respect for one's own language, a unifying force which pushes speakers of the same language to defend the interest of their language often at any price, or to constitute a formidable pressure group whenever they have reason to believe that the security of their language is threatened. This is so because that threat is often interpreted as a threat against the whole linguistic community and can result in serious political unrest like the violent reactions of the Baganda in Uganda and the Kikuyu in Kenya, against the generalized use of Swahili[31]. And also the bloody uprising in Nigeria when, shortly after independence, the Tiv of the then northern region, learned that Hausa was to be imposed on them[32].

The choice and the planification of language and their consequences are such that the decisions have to be taken with the greatest circumspection.

A government in the sub-region planning to choose a local official language from a number of languages will not be the first to have taken the step. Outside Africa, Switzerland, Belgium and the USSR, and in Africa at least Tanzania have already taken the lead. It will therefore be of utmost importance to collect as much information as possible on the subject from such countries, for careful study prior to adopting a language policy.

After those preliminary considerations, we come to the decisive moment of making the choice. Different conditions relating, for example, to different socio-political climates or needs of given countries will naturally call for different solutions. Sometimes one or more fast spreading indigenous languages can be selected and declared as languages to be used for all official purposes including education and the law.

---

31 Verbeke, R, 1966: op. cit., p. 109.
32 Alexandre, P., 1972, op. cit., p. 88

Where all the languages are localized and therefore hardly spoken beyond their traditional confines, one among the lot can be retained as an official language, while granting the same status to the language inherited from colonization. If however such a decision is likely to cause some unrest among the majority, the government can put in place the necessary mechanism for encouraging the learning and teaching of as many of the local languages as possible, but will declare an international language, preferably that of the former colonial power, as an official language.

The rivalry between competing local languages may be such as to render any choice impossible. In a situation like that the language of the former colonial power may be a more readily accepted compromise solution[33].

It is not impossible in certain circumstances to let the choice fall on a widely used local language which though it may be the first language of a minority group, it owes its privileged position to the fact that it is the commercial, religious or political language[34].

A country, for all sorts of reasons, may consider itself as one country but made up of two distinct zones. The choice can therefore fall on the most widely spread language in each zone while the same status of official language is conferred on the language of colonization; because the latter is neutral in the sense that it is not the language of any local linguistic community, it will play the role of a uniting force for the two zones. We wonder whether the official policy should not be such that in addition to the language of one's own zone, and that of colonization, one should not be encouraged to learn that of the other zone. That is obviously a heavy burden on the individual but it looks like one of the prices to be paid in order to guarantee free interaction, mutual comprehension, peace, unity, stability and the development among the citizens, of the sentiment of belonging to the same national community.

Having made the choice of an official national language, we then have to tackle the problem of harmonization of the writing system, which should take into account the exigencies of the modern world, relating particularly to typewriters and typesetting machines for rapid and economical reproduction of educational materials[35]. To encourage literacy and facilitate learning and reading, harmonization or standardization in spelling should conform to contemporary pronunciation and phonemic system; thus the same sound will be represented in the same manner in the different languages under consideration. If standardization in spelling had been taken into account, Ewe in Ghana and in Togo on one hand, Akwapim, Fanti and Asante, the

33 Wallwork, J.F., 1981, op. cit., p. 158.
34 Alexandre, P., 1972: op. cit. p. 79.
35 Bull, W. E. 1964, op. cit., No. 8, p. 529.

three best known Akan dialects in Ghana on the other, would not have complicated matters by each developing its own individual spelling system.

Conclusion

From all that has preceded, we can conclude that the problem of choice of an indigenous official language in West Africa and therefore in multilingual environments, is not very easy to resolve. Consequently those understanding research and devising policy on this matter should be independent from the powers that be, those whose interest in it is not motivated by personal political reasons. They should not either be people with fixed ideas on this type of problem, people who inwardly despise local languages, or those whose attachment to their first language is such that they would do everything for it to be adopted as an official language at the expense of peace, national unity, stability and accelerated development. They should not be citizens drawn essentially from among the most privileged communities of the country either. It is obvious that language policy and planning really need the combined wisdom of dedicated politicians, economists, sociologists, psychologists, linguists, legal experts and educators (Wallwork, 1981: 158), who will put national interest over and above personal and ethnic considerations.

---

* Faculty of Education, University of Cape Coast