

Linguistic Diversity in Uganda

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Abstract:- Uganda needs a national lingua franca to link all citizens to overcome the present situation. Language and power interconnect; therefore, power is the principal factor in using the language as an official language among thirty-six indigenous languages. Another critical basic need is to educate the population with their indigenous bits of knowledge. If their official language and medium of instruction differ from their indigenous language to some extent, there are Western and indigenous knowledge conflicts in Ugandan education (Bredlid, 2013). Also, participation in social activity depends on the participatory language; however, most Ugandans cannot do because of linguistic barriers such as parliamentary debates and media coverage in such a way. Uganda's linguistic identity is challenging due to many languages and ethnic groups, so language is a powerful determinant of social identity. In this short article, the investigator distillates linguistic problems related to power politics, education, participation, identity dispute, and how to overcome identity issues.

Keywords:- indigenous, power, identity, participation, linguistics.

I. INTRODUCTION

After a long (about 90 years) of British rule, Uganda became independent in 1962. At that time, English and Swahili were designated the official languages¹; this selection was heavily influenced by the politics of that time since only a tiny percentage spoke English and Swahili the population. So, the language difficulty in Uganda is an old one. Uganda has forty-one² different African languages in addition to Swahili; its linguistic diversity is extreme even for Africa. Uganda libels on the intersections of various main language groups of Africa. The linguistic diversity had been united during the colonial era by the variety of economic, social, and political methods among the inhabitants of Uganda, creating a conflict-prone condition. The south and West, comprising Luganda, Acholi, Konzo, Tooro, and Nyoro, are Bantu-speaking areas, and nearly two-thirds of the population of Uganda speak one of the narrowly related Bantu languages. The Eastern Bantu languages (Luganda, Nyole, Soga, Lugisu,

Langro, Lugbara) are expressed by a third of the country's population. At the same time, almost an equal quantity speaks the Western Bantu languages (Nyole, Rukiga, Ruuli, Aringa, Rutoro, Nyoro, Amba, and konzo). The most significant language, Luganda, is spoken as a first language by only eighteen percent of the population. No other language is spoken by more than half of this population. Many words are spoken by a small but almost equal number of people, and four language subcategories exist. The continued ambivalence over language policy is characteristic of the Ugandan language situation ever since the nuisance of colonial rule.

However, one of the early colonial languages is used as the official language instead of the mother tongue, and sometimes it may affect students' education and create identity conflict. Many Ugandan pupils need help understanding the language of instruction, and they fall into a problem in learning maths and social sciences, for example. Kaahwa (2011) says, "Using a second language as a medium of instruction introduces learning difficulties in mathematics. These are especially the case in rural Uganda, where English, the second language to all learners, is the language of instruction at all stages" (p. 54).

English was the former colonial language for government officials and aristocrats during the colonial period, and it was associated with a higher social class, status, and prestige, for example. Although, there is no recent census on the use of English. According to Ladefoged et al. (1972), only 21% of Ugandans could converse in English. English remains the principal medium of instruction despite introducing a local language policy in primary schools. Above all, Ugandans consider English the way to success and a better life. Brock-Utne's (2015) statement may be correct about Uganda,

A study of 28 countries in Africa finds that more than one in three students (23 million primary school children) can not read or do fundamental maths after multiple years of education. No reference is made to the language in which the students cannot understand or do basic math. It is most likely a foreign language, and a speech child does not speak or hear

¹ UNICEF (2016). *Uganda: The impact of language policy and practice on children's learning: Evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa 2016*
[https://www.unicef.org/esaro/UNICEF\(2016\)LanguageandLearning-Uganda.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/esaro/UNICEF(2016)LanguageandLearning-Uganda.pdf). Accessed 20 December 2017

² <http://theconversation.com/english-rules-in-uganda-but-local-languages-shouldnt-be-sidelined-49381>. Accessed 17 December 2017

around them. The medium of instruction is a powerful mechanism for social stratification, increasing inequalities (p.2).

This paper will explore the opportunities and challenges presented by linguistic diversity in Uganda and interconnected with power, education, human rights, identity, participation, and culture. Geographically, the central emphasis of this paper will be on Uganda; however, examples from other areas will also be comprised to highlight that debates regarding linguistic diversity in today's globalized world are a universal diversity issue.

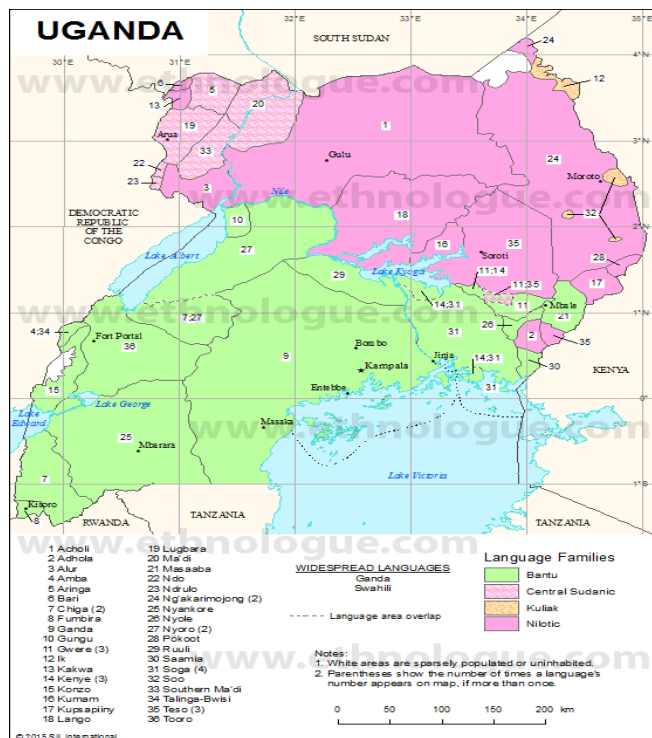


Fig 13: Linguistic Map of Uganda shows 36 languages (numbers like 1, 2, 3, ..., 36) and diverse regions, and four language families (varied colors).

Words and the world are tightly interconnected; language is not only a word; it is an integral part of people's education, identity, participation, power, culture, and human rights, and all these are interlinked.

II. LANGUAGE AND POWER

Who decides what will be the language of instruction or official language is a matter of who is in power. So, power politics and language are intently related, leading to the language of instruction (LoI) and the official language.

From the perspective of Uganda, there is usually a wide variety of linguistic groups living within the same borders. A former colonial language is used as an official language and given a higher status than the indigenous languages, even

though the latter is spoken by the majority (Brock-Utne, 2015). Similarly, the function of languages is related to the power of the social classes using them (Biseth, 2008). Likewise, Brock-Utne (2015) criticizes power politics and language as a significant and politically explosive problem. Brock-Utne (2015) mentions Rwanda, but I can see its similarity to Uganda; power dynamics play an essential role in Uganda's language policy, and English stands for political power. Using English as the official language in the post-colonial era is a way of continuing with western hegemony for creating the global market (Holmarsdottir, 2009). Breidlid (2013) calls it the West's epistemological colonization, which has impacted global knowledge production (p. 16).

On the contrary, languages often enjoy varying degrees of status within a country. Some are official, some are national, and some are not officially recognized. South Africa is a country with 11⁴ official languages for South Africa's diverse people, and Zimbabwe has 15. A language classified as an official is used in proper administration, official communication, and national institutions. There is no guarantee that multiple official languages within a country are automatically accorded equal status. In many African nations with several official languages, the former colonial language often enjoys a higher rank than the African languages.

Languages of inter-ethnic communication use Luganda and Swahili. All formal conversations in education, the judiciary, politics, and government are dominated by English because of hegemonic power.

III. LANGUAGES AND EDUCATION

To some extent, Western epistemology and indigenous knowledge conflict in Ugandan education. Most of the Ugandans' primary discourse and secondary discourse are different. So, the functional literacy rate needs to be higher (Breidlid, 2013). Education is related to the mother tongue and the language of instruction; instead of the mother tongue, education will not be successful. Brock-Utne's (2015) argument is very logical in this field:

When we argue for using the mother tongue, or at least a familiar language, as the language of instruction, we do this mainly based on educational reasoning. Pupils who need help understanding what the teacher is saying will not be learning. When a foreign language is used as instructed, the children will learn the subject matter and develop their language well (p. 2).

Moreover, in Uganda, mentioned here by Brock-Utne (2015), the education system in African countries is like teaching dead stones. A subject that should educate a new generation into liberal thinking and citizenship, that an issue they cannot master because the language of instruction is a barrier to learning the subject matter.

³ <https://www.ethnologue.com/country/UG/maps>. Accessed 18 December 2017

⁴ <http://theconversation.com/english-rules-in-uganda-but-local-languages-shouldnt-be-sidelined-49381>. Accessed 17 December 2017

Most African countries follow the top-down process in pedagogy. However, they need to implement top-down and bottom-up combinations—Indigenous discourses, on the one hand, and epistemological discourses, on the other hand. Nevertheless, Biseth (2008) says, firstly, they need solid academic and conceptual skills in their mother tongue, which is crucial for achieving good skills with an additional language.

The education organization in Uganda is progressively experiencing employment of the 2007 curriculum reform, authorizing the use of indigenous languages in Grades 1 to 3. English is the language of instruction from Grade 4 forwards. UNICEF (2016) describes the justification for this policy: "The rationale behind the new policy was primarily to use local languages in order to develop an intelligence of belonging to and pride in indigenous cultures, but also to improve literacy results and academic learning results in general, which had been rather poor under the English-only language policy of the past" (p. 2).

Another critical discussion is multilingualism in this regard. It is positive thinking, just not in a situation like Uganda. Multilingual people get more facilities in the post-modern world than their monolingual counterparts. According to Biseth (2008), in the case of individuals, multilingualism often arises from the need to communicate within a range of different contexts. For example, a person may be exposed to one language within the family, another in school, and another in the marketplace. The investigator wants to mention from Brock-Utne (2015):

The term multilingualism can also describe the situation within a nation-state. On a worldwide scale, monolingual people represent a minority. There are approximately 200 countries worldwide, but roughly 6,500 different languages, although the number is contested. Thus, multilingual states are standard, while monolingual nations are the exception. (As cited Brock-Utne 2015, p. 3)

So, Ugandan people can pick up their official language and mother tongue to gear themselves up as standard.

IV. LANGUAGE AND PARTICIPATION

The study previously mentioned 41 ethnic languages in Uganda, and one former colonial language is the primary official language. In 2005, the Ugandan parliament selected Swahili as a second official language, but it still needs to be ratified. If it becomes the second official language, other ethnic groups cannot understand the official languages. General people of Uganda cannot understand parliamentary debates and the media's language and cannot participate in many public spheres because of the colonial language. Brock-Utne (2015) narrates the use of English in African countries, the languages used at the highest educational stage in the parliaments of Africa; the languages used by the leaders to

interconnect with their voters, used in the courts and the press bear verification to the inequity in most African nations and the power of the African elites and their international allies (p.1).



Fig 2⁵: Use of English in Uganda in each sphere of life.

Brock-Utne (2015) criticizes the parliamentarian's language use; debates carried out in Swahili are immediately grasped by most of the population, and members who would otherwise be benchwarmers in the House transform into first-class orators. How can freedom of expression, a part of living democracy, be exercised if parliamentarians are forced to use a language neither they are nor even less the people they represent?" (p.9)

Another meaningful partaking way in participation is mass media. People in African countries cannot understand the language of mass media because of their colonial language. 'Most newspapers in most African countries are published in the languages of the former colonial master in English and Afrikaans, in Rwanda in French and lately also in English' (Brock-Utne, 2015, p. 16).

After independence, most of the colonial countries decolonized their mind. As a result, they cannot be free from colonialism, and they nurture their notion as a colony.

V. LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

On the social level, identities are shaped in the open conversation has made the politics of equal recognition more significant and tense. It has significantly raised the stakes. Similar recognition is not just the appropriate mode for a healthy democratic society. According to a widespread modern view, its refusal can inflict damage on those who are denied it. The projection of a destructive or demeaning image on the other can distort and oppress to the extent that the image is internalized. The politics of the exact identification has come to play a more significant and more prominent role. This identification is based on the politics of equal dignity. What is established is meant to be universally the same, an identical basket of rights and immunities; with the politics of difference, we are asked to recognize the unique identity of

⁵ Joshua Wanyama/Africa Knows.

<https://theconversation.com/english-rules-in-uganda-but-local-languages-shouldnt-be-sidelined-49381>

this individual group, their distinctness from everyone else. The idea is that this is precisely this distinctness that has been ignored and assimilated into a dominant or majority identity (Taylor, 1994, pp. 36-38).

From the perspective of Uganda, how many languages will be the official language or the language of instruction, and how will it be solved? These are big questions. If one language becomes the official language, other speakers will not be happy. So, Uganda needs a standard language or mother tongue policy so that people can learn in their mother tongue and create a linguistic and cultural identity. In this field, Biseth (2008) claims:

National language policy is one way in which national identity is formed. People define themselves through the material and the social world through language. In this sense, the people with the leading language as their mother tongue tend to be those most enabled to define the factors of a shared national identity. In addition to language, shared values, symbols, historical heritage, and other factors create a sense of belonging and a collective "national culture" necessary to preserve a nation (p. 6).

Maalouf (2003) provides a new approach to identity, and current developments might favor the emergence of a new approach to identity in the long run. Identity would be seen as the sum of all our allegiances. Within it, allegiance to the human community would become increasingly important until one day; it would become the chief allegiance without destroying our many individual affiliations.

Ugandans' linguistic identity is challenging because of many languages and ethnic groups. Comparatively, cultural and religious identity is more accessible than linguistic. However, language is a key to identity. Heidi Biseth (2008) also stresses that 'language is a powerful determinant of social identity' (p. 7).

VI. HUMAN RIGHTS CORRELATE WITH LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

United Nations (UN) Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states that humans are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Everyone is allowed all the rights and free states in the declaration without division, for example, race, color, sex, language, religion, or political belief. Donnelly (2003) maintains that human rights are the rights one has only because of a human being, and human rights are equal rights: one is or is not a human being and therefore has the same human rights as everyone else. Human rights empower the people and inspire them to acquire their rights; they authorize and empower citizens to act to indicate their rights; to insist; to struggle; to create a world where they enjoy their rights. Human rights have come into existence by force of language use.

Dembour (2006) relates to politics and human rights; human rights have become fact by being repeatedly invoked in politics, law, and ordinary discourse; she does not believe that they would continue to exist when we cease to talk about them (p. 235). Human rights ensure that the people of a

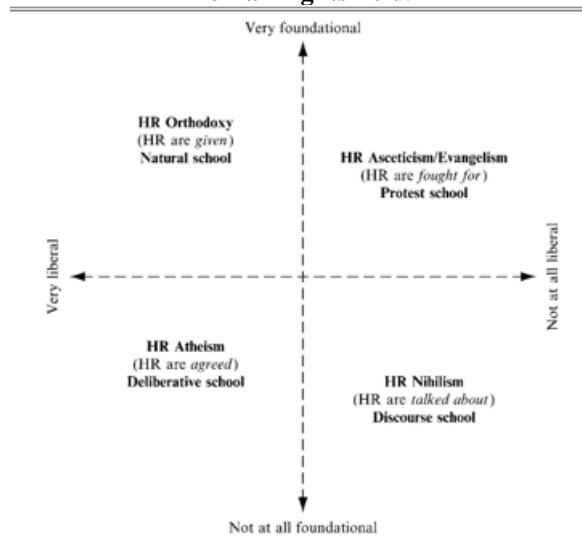
country can get equal rights in all fields, for example, politics, education, participation, the question of identity, religion, and culture, in such a manner. Moreover, with proper education, people can understand their human rights.

It is only sometimes observed equally in the world, for example, in many African countries. Mutua (2002) exemplifies African phenomenon is different from others; the African state is not a "natural" sensation, though the crisis of the African nation is not insoluble; both Human Rights and the African state needs to be rebuilt. The World Conference on Human Rights held in 1993 in Vienna was a remarkable document to stipulate that human rights as universal (UN, 1993), as stated in article 5:

All human rights are widespread, indivisible, interdependent, and interrelated. While the importance of national and local discriminations and various historical, cultural, and religious backdrops must be borne in mind, it is the responsibility of States, notwithstanding their political, economic, and cultural arrangements, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Dembour (2006) divides the present human rights discourses into four schools. She mentions Donnelly's Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice in the natural school, and Haarscher is in the protesting school.

Table 1: The relative position of the schools in the human rights field.



VII. CONCLUSION

The researcher wants to repeat Brock-Utne's (2015) statement about social stratification and inequality; the medium of instruction is a powerful tool for social stratification, increasing inequalities. So, the language of instruction creates identity conflict, and its more significant impact demoralizes their mother tongues and education; they cannot understand the parliamentary debates, cannot participate in democratic processes, and cannot comprehend their human rights also because of linguistic shortcomings.

Uganda needs a national lingua franca to link all citizens to overcome this situation. However, Uganda is the only country in Africa that has struggled with the question of national languages or the language of instruction. In the meantime, South Africa and Zimbabwe have gone the multi-language route, and South Africa has 11 official languages; similarly, Zimbabwe has 15. The investigator thinks Uganda could do the same to include significant languages as the official languages. It would be helpful and judicious. The principal languages in Uganda are reasonably representative of all people.

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