

Interfacing Language Research with Policy: The Case of Language in Education in Malawi

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1. PREAMBLE

This paper addresses the interaction between language research and the formulation of language policy in the education sector of Malawi. It is widely agreed in the literature of language planning that research (i.e. fact finding) is one of the most important inputs to a language policy formulation process (e.g. Rubin 1971; Chumbow 1996; Bamgbose 1991, etc.). Normally one would normally expect the fact finding process (which can be done through language surveys) to be followed by the formulation of a policy, then the implementation of the said policy, and finally an evaluation of the implemented policy. This, unfortunately, is not what normally real life situations offer. It is no surprise to hear about a policy that lacks research support. This paper highlights the relevance of research findings to the recent review of language policy in education in Malawi. Specifically, the paper reviews four sociolinguistic surveys (on Chiyao, Chitumbuka, Chilomwe and Chisena) and how they have shaped or influenced the language policy review process. These surveys were conducted by the Centre for Language Studies at the University of Malawi between 1996 and 1998, with financial and technical assistance from the German Technical Cooperation Agency (GTZ).

2. SOCIOLINGUISTIC SURVEYS AND POLICY FORMULATION

Sociolinguistic surveys gather information which can be of great use to policy makers or policy implementation groups. Besides these categories of people, academics, politicians, journalists etc. will find information extracted from language surveys quite useful in their daily undertakings. What kind of information then can we get from sociolinguistic surveys? A well planned and properly

executed sociolinguistic survey should be able to come up with most of the following details¹:

1. Identification of the languages of a country. This process also involves the identification of the various dialects of these languages and their mutual intelligibility.
2. Geographical distribution of the languages identified. To this end, linguistic maps or atlases can be made. Core areas where the languages are spoken are then identified.
3. Demographic information, i.e. the estimated number of speakers of each language or dialect.
4. Domains of language use, etc.

The information received from the language surveys will then assist the policy makers to answer questions such as:

1. Which are the dominant languages which can be used in the country's education system?
2. What roles will the languages play in education, i.e. as media of instruction or curricular subjects?
3. Which zones of the country need certain specific languages as media of instruction?
4. Is there a national lingua franca which can be used as a medium of instruction in all parts of the country?
5. For which languages are teachers already available, and for which languages is there a shortage of teachers?
6. Is there need for further training of teachers, and if so, what kind of training do the teachers need?
7. Do the languages have literary traditions?

Despite the glaringly important role sociolinguistic surveys play in language policy formulation or policy review, it is not always the case that survey findings or recommendations are taken seriously by either policy makers or their political masters. Sometimes policy decisions are made before the fact finding process has been done. For example, in 1996, the Ministry of Education in Malawi issued a directive which stated that from then onwards mother tongues or vernacular languages would act as media of instruction in the first four years of primary education. Before this directive, Chichewa (Malawi's national language) was the sole officially recognized medium of instruction in grades 1 to 4. The new policy came in a top-to-down style (i.e. with no consultation with the stakeholders) and with no locally done research to support it (Kamwendo 1997).

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 8th BOLESWA International Research Symposium, Maseru, Lesotho, 26th – 30th July, 1999.

Let us give another African example of policy decisions that were arrived at and implemented before the fact finding process had been accomplished. Between 1967 and 1971 a massive language survey was undertaken to determine language use and language teaching in Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. What actually happened was that:

before the surveys were completed, decisions on these issues were already taken. Some decisions had been taken even before the surveys started. Ethiopia had Amharic as its official language for years before the survey. Kenya had chosen Swahili as its official language along with English sharing aspect of that function. Tanzania had declared Swahili as the national language and actively embarked on the standardization and language development process. Uganda had already decided to continue with English as its official language and also the main language of education. Zambia had also decided on English as official language and language of education at all levels (Chumbow 1996: 6-7)

The massive data collected from the language surveys, then, did not serve as worthwhile input to language planning and policy formulation. This situation led Bamgbose (1991) to postulate three types of fact finding patterns observed in the practice of language planning in Africa:

1. Initial fact finding that precedes policy formulation and serves as input to policy decisions.
2. Fact finding during the implementation process as a result of which original policy may be modified or abandoned.
3. Post-policy fact finding: a policy decision is taken and at the point of implementation experts are called upon to carry out necessary fact finding.

To which of the above three categories then does Malawi's case belong? First, let us note that Malawi's mother tongue instruction policy was announced on 28th March 1996 before any language survey had been done. In actual fact, the first language survey (which was on the Chiyao language) was carried out from 9th to 28th April 1996 in the Chiyao speaking areas of Malawi. The main objective of the Chiyao survey was to investigate whether Yao speakers in Chiyao speaking areas would favour the introduction of the language as a subject and a medium of instruction in primary schools. After the Chiyao survey, other surveys followed, for example, the Chitumbuka survey (carried out in 1997) and the Chilomwe and Chisena survey, carried towards the end of 1998. So the surveys came after the new language policy had already been declared by government. The mother tongue instruction policy for Malawi's first four years of primary education has remained unimplemented up to now due to the many problems that stand in the way. These problems include:

1. Negative attitudes towards mother tongues or vernacular languages as either curricular subjects or media of instruction.
2. Lack of adequate sensitization/publicity about the policy's goals, objectives and merits.
3. Non-availability of resources, e.g. lack of teaching/learning materials (readers, teachers' guides, etc.)
4. Non-availability of a teacher training programme whose special emphasis would be on mother tongue instruction.

The question we may pose now is: why did the Ministry of Education in Malawi rush into announcing the mother tongue instruction policy before adequate consultations and fact finding had been done? There are three or more possible answers: political pressure, funding problems, and lack of meaningful dialogue between researchers (academics) and policy makers (government officials). First, it appears that the Ministry was in a hurry to introduce the mother tongue instruction policy. This can be explained by the fact that in the 1994 multiparty general elections, the United Democratic Front (UDF) won and took over power from the late Banda's Malawi Congress Party. In its draft policy on Education and Culture of 1993, the UDF had pledged that if elected into government, it "will ensure that vernacular languages are used as media of instruction in standards 1- 4" (UDF 1994: 12). At that time (i.e. 1993) the standard practice was to use Chichewa as the medium of instruction in the cited classes, something which:

created lots of problems in areas where Chichewa was not the mother tongue like in the Northern Region. The use of Chichewa in these areas proved to be a hindrance to effective teaching and learning in schools (UDF 1994: 12).

So when the UDF came into power in 1994, it was only natural to expect the new government to go for the mother tongue instruction policy. Without caring to find out the sociolinguistic and technical realities of Malawi, the Ministry of Education rushed into announcing the new policy, arguing that research elsewhere (outside Malawi) had shown that pupils learn more effectively when the medium of instruction is a language they use predominantly in their day to day life. Whilst UNESCO (1953) has recommended the use of mother tongues or vernacular languages in early education, it must be noted that "models cannot be transferred from one context to another" (Kishindo 1999: 9) Each country offers unique opportunities and challenges to mother tongue education, hence there is need to go into fact finding before making decisions. With lack of funding for research being one of the realities in Malawi, the issue of fact finding was quickly brushed aside.

A culture of dialogue between researchers and policy makers (who are high ranking government officials) is something that has to be cultivated in Malawi. The University of Malawi has the relevant research experts who could have been consulted by the Ministry of Education. However, this expertise was ignored, and was only recognised when the general public started questioning the relevance and merits of the new language policy. At this stage, researchers were called upon to do a number of things: to justify, modify and improve the policy. This led the Ministry of Education to request the University of Malawi's Centre for Language Studies to organise a national symposium on language policy review, which was scheduled for late 1996. Due to funding problems faced by the Ministry, the symposium had to wait until March 1999. The 1999 symposium was jointly financed by Unesco and GTZ.

At the national symposium on language policy review for the education sector, the following events took place:

1. Linguists and language education experts from the University of Malawi and other tertiary bodies presented a wide range of academic papers focussing on language planning and policy formulation.
2. The Centre for Language Studies presented findings and recommendations from the four sociolinguistic surveys it had carried out.
3. The existing language policy was reviewed and amended, taking into consideration important facts raised by the four language surveys. As of now, the newly proposed language policy is being drafted by a task force which is led by the Centre for Language Studies. It is expected that in near future the draft policy will be presented to Government for consideration and approval.

The symposium clearly demonstrated that language policy in education, just like any other kind of social policy, requires a reasonable amount of research and consultations with the major stakeholders. Language issues can be politically delicate, hence decisions made on languages need to be acceptable to the majority. Therefore, the language policy formulation process should be carefully administered to ensure that in the end a good policy is arrived at. But what is a good language policy, or what are the features of such a language policy? According to Lo Bianco (1991), a good language policy has the following features:

1. It can be defended, with the use of evidence from research. The case for Malawi in 1996 was that the Ministry of Education was struggling to defend the mother tongue instruction policy given that no local research had been undertaken.
2. It must be realistic, taking note of the available resources. In other words, the policy must be down to earth. In the context of Malawi, the mother tongue instruction policy was declared against a background of meagre and diminishing resources, making the implementation of the policy impossible.

3. It must be humanitarian, just and democratic. In other words, a good language policy promotes the culture of good governance and respect for human rights. It has to be mentioned that nowadays it is commonly demonstrated that language rights are part of the human rights debates. Whilst the mother tongue policy in Malawi was geared towards facilitating learning and teaching, and also elevating the status and functions of the previously marginalised language, some skeptics saw the policy as a barrier to their acquisition of high quality education, especially education through the English language. The misconception was that education acquired through the mother tongue medium is of inferior standard. This misconception came from the generally negative attitudes which many people in Malawi have for local languages. To this end, the new language policy was regarded by some Malawians as unjust, and aimed at curbing their efforts to gain good education.

4. A good language policy must adequately address national interest, without compromising the linguistic needs and opportunities of the various social or linguistic groups in a country.

3. SOME KEY FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH

We now present some of the key findings from research which have influenced the scope and shape of the newly proposed language policy. But before we do that, it is important to state that all the four surveys had the central objective of determining the relevance, practicality and acceptability of using mother tongues or vernacular languages in education. The specific objectives for each language survey were:

1. to establish teachers' competence in using language X as a medium of instruction or subject of study.
2. to establish teachers' training needs
3. to determine the availability of teaching/learning materials to support the use of language X as a curricular subject and a medium of instruction.
4. to establish the attitudes of pupils, teachers and parents/guardians towards the use of language X as a medium of instruction and a curricular subject.
5. to establish pupils', teachers' and parents'/guardians' attitudes towards Chichewa, the national language as a medium of instruction and a curricular subject.
6. to confirm/disconfirm the claim that certain Malawians (e.g. the Lomwe and Sena) are embarrassed to speak their mother tongues in public (cf. Boeder 1984; Matiki 1996/97 for the case of Chilomwe).

As can be detected from the above details, the sociolinguistic surveys brought out information relevant to areas of language planning or policy formulation, such as: teacher training, the development of teaching and learning materials, deployment of teachers across Malawi, etc.

Generally, the key findings or recommendations of the survey were as follows:

1. There is a general acceptance and positive attitude towards the use of Chiyao, Chitumbuka, Chilomwe and Chisena as media of instruction as well as curricular subjects. Of particular interest is the change from negative to positive attitudes exhibited by the Lomwe and Sena towards their respective languages, thereby disconfirming earlier claims made by some researchers that Chisena and Chilomwe are embarrassing languages.
2. Whilst there is a positive welcome to mother tongue education, there is also a call for the strengthening of the position of English, i.e. to continue to have it as a curricular subject throughout the 8 years of primary schooling. Currently there is a misconception that the mother tongue policy means doing away with English as a subject of study.
3. The Ministry of Education should develop teacher training programmes to cater for the mother tongue teaching given that the current programmes only cater for English and Chichewa.
4. Since the installation of Chichewa as Malawi's national language in 1968, the language has made big inroads into areas that are traditionally non-Chichewa speaking. To this end, Chichewa should continue to serve as an important part of the national curriculum, being offered as a subject of study.
5. Dialects of Chiyao, Chitumbuka, Chilomwe and Chisena which were considered to be the best for use in schools were identified.
6. In general, there are no teaching/learning materials for the four languages, namely Chiyao, Chitumbuka, Chilomwe and Chisena; hence the need to develop such materials.
7. With special reference to the Northern Region, where Chitumbuka is assumed to be the regional lingua franca, it was noted that there are smaller but prominent languages such as Chindali (in Chitipa); Chinkhonde (in Karonga); and Chitonga (in Nkhata-Bay). This means that it is a fallacy to impose Chitumbuka as the only medium of instruction for the whole Northern Malawi.

4. CONCLUSION

Participants at the national symposium on language policy review I have referred to earlier found the above findings or recommendations quite useful in their task of proposing a new language policy. The same findings or recommendations will also be useful in the actual implementation of the proposed policy. In this paper we have attempted to show the interface between language research and education policy formulation in Malawi. It has been noted that a step was made towards instituting the mother tongue policy before research and adequate technical preparations had been done. The policy has remained unimplemented up to now, and it is expected to be triggered into action when Malawi formally adopts the language policy document which is in preparation now.

The Commission on Education Policy Research in Africa at the 10th World Congress of Comparative Education Societies in 1998 did note that “policy makers often have a crisis approach and call upon researchers when things go wrong” (ADEA 1998: 3). This is the unfortunate situation which researchers and policy makers should avoid. The Commission then recommended, among other things, that:

1. “Education policy research should be stimulated and promoted through the creation of special centres of excellence established specifically for that purpose”. In this regard, Malawi has the Malawi Institute of Education (for developing materials), the Centre for Language Studies; and the Centre for Education Research and Training.
2. “Cooperation between universities and ministries should be encouraged”. This cooperation has started to bear fruits in Malawi. A good example is the national symposium on language policy reviewed which was jointly organised by the Centre for Language Studies of the University of Malawi and the Ministry of Education on one hand, and donor agencies, GTZ and Unesco, on the other hand. The symposium was part and parcel of the “high level seminars to promote dialogue and greater understanding between researchers and policy makers”. (ADEA 1998: 3)

One only hopes that the newly developed dialogue between education researchers and policy makers can be sustained. There is need to continue doing research in the field of mother tongue instruction, and research of an interdisciplinary nature is called for. There is also need to resist the temptation of believing that what has worked in context Y should be able to work in context Z. Whilst recognising the crucial role research plays in the area of language policy planning and policy formulation, we are also aware that in many African countries money allocated to research is inadequate. Language research, in particular, is not favoured by some governments and donors. Language issues, so it is sometimes claimed, are not important for national development. To this end, research in health, economic, agricultural and environmental issues is given prominence, and it enjoys good donor support. What is missing here is that language touches on all of the so called important sectors, such as health, agriculture, economics, etc.

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