Prestige Planning for Indigenous Languages in Africa
Insights from Language Economics

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Abstract: This talk addresses the perennial question of defining the role of Africa’s indigenous languages in juxtaposition with ex-colonial languages (English, French, Portuguese, Spanish) in the higher domains, especially in the educational system. Traditionally, African countries have addressed this question (OAU, 2000) in view of the production but with little or no attention at all to the reception of language planning (Haarmann 1990). Haarmann in his framework of prestige planning describes the former as legislation or official policy declaration about the status of languages in a polity, and the latter as the population’s attitude toward the policy -- i.e., whether the people accept or reject the policy. Essentially, prestige planning entails raising the status of any given language so that members of the target speech community develop a positive attitude toward it (Haarmann 1990). In Africa, there is evidence that the traditional practice of giving official recognition to selected indigenous languages has not necessarily translated, in practice, into prestige and higher status for those languages (Bamgbose 2000, Koffi 2012). On the contrary, it has provided a cover for what Pennycook (1994) called the planned reproduction of socioeconomic inequality. In this talk, I break with the traditional approach to language planning in Africa. In particular, I address one issue that has generally been overlooked or simply ignored in the literature on language planning in the continent, namely, the linkage between an education through the medium of an African language and economic returns for the target populations. Following Haarmann (1990), I propose prestige planning involving both the production and the reception of language planning – an approach that has hardly been explored in the discussion of language planning in Africa – as the way forward to addressing this issue. I argue that any language policy designed to promote Africa’s indigenous languages in such higher domains as the educational system must demonstrate economic advantages if the intent is to succeed (Kamwangamalu 2010, 2016). This argument, linking as it does an education through the medium of an African language with economic returns, avoids the pitfalls of postcolonial language policies which pay lip-service to the empowerment of African languages while, by default, strengthening the stranglehold of the dominance of imported European languages. It is premised on the idea that legislation giving official status to selected indigenous languages must simultaneously create the demand for these languages in what Bourdieu (1991) calls “linguistic marketplace,” that is, the context in which language is used. I explore how the demand for indigenous languages can be created in the light of Bourdieu’s notions of capital, social fields, and markets, and of theoretical developments in language economics – a field of study whose focus is on the theoretical and empirical analyses of the ways in which linguistic and economic variables influence one another (Grin, 2006; Grin, Sfreddo, and Vaillancourt, 2010).

References


