



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

## Rethinking the Role of English in Multilingual Countries: The Case of Ethiopia

Muluken Yohannes Gurmessa

Lecturer, College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Haramaya University, Ethiopia

### **Abstract:**

*This article addresses the unspoken mantra of English in multilingual countries with a particular focus in Ethiopia. Moving a part from the everyday academic role of English in Multilingual country's educational system, this paper presents the untold unifying, reconciling, and mediating role of English in countries with linguistically diverse population. The cases of Nigeria and India were addressed in an effort to make a comparative analysis of the role of English, being a tribally neutral language, in reconciling linguistic diversity in multi-ethnic countries. The study also reveals that the question of language and power over media and education is escalating the high demand for English in multilingual countries. The question of having a national/official language in a linguistically diverse country is always the center of politics and power struggle. It seems apparent though that in order to minimize this political tension in multilingual countries such as Ethiopia, the very wise budge will be not to pick up the gun in a hurry and declare that one of the local languages is from now on acclaimed to be both the national/official and academic language of that country. Hence, relying on English is a politically safe move for now.*

**Keywords:** Ethiopia, english, multilingual countries

### **1. Introduction**

It may not sound bizarre to anyone who lives in this globally demanding English oriented academic world to accept English language as the language of academic communication. It appears that the whole global community seems to be convinced that English is the undisputed language of academic communication which we should keep on preaching. However, for no apparent reason, the global community seemed to be ignorant of the benefits English language can bring to the international community playing the role of intercultural as well as intra-cultural communication and most importantly reconciling linguistic diversity. Though in many parts of the world, English is being observed playing this role, much effort was not put onto promoting this mediating as well as intercultural communication role of English language. Current researches have revealed that the reconciling role of English is predominantly seen in multilingual countries. Similarly, Baldrige (1996) mentioned that English has the role of reconciling linguistic diversity in multilingual countries such as India.

In many of the multi-ethnic/lingual countries in the world, English, apart from its academic role, plays the role of intercultural communication, especially in countries where there is no official/national language. In these multilingual countries, if there is a need for intercultural communication, the choices are only two. Either they have to make one of the vernacular languages spoken in that country to be the national/official language, or else they have to make English, already assumed language of academic communication, to be the language of intercultural communication. To illustrate this, let us take a practical example in the case of Ethiopia. According to the first choice, a man from Gambela tribe in Ethiopia can use Amharic or Afan Oromo (the two assumed vernacular languages with large population of speakers) language to promote his own language as well as culture. Or if the second choice is made, that same man from Gambela can use English to promote his culture. Which one should we go with is really a question that brings many socio-political, and cultural controversies. The competition and suspicion among different ethnic groups speaking different vernacular languages is what really brings the notion of linguistic hegemony...the question of language and power. Because language is associated with power and hegemony, it makes it difficult to make an easy decision in the area of language planning in countries where many vernacular languages are spoken. This study, therefore, makes an attempt to rethink the role of English in multilingual countries highlighting the unspoken mantra of English in countries where many languages are spoken. The cases in Ethiopia, Nigeria, and India are meticulously addressed in the present study.

### **2. Present Research Problem Area in Focus**

There has been growing number of concerns that English should be held accountable for its marginalizing imposition in many part of the world including multilingual countries. Philipson (1992) in his work 'Linguistic Imperialism' argued that English diffusion all

over the world has an imperialistic nature. What Philpson seemed to be unaware of is the conception of mandate of the English language. Countries such as Nigeria and India are already no longer in a position to consider English serving the purpose of linguistic imperialism or hegemony. Parmenter (2005) also mentioned that if this is the case, English is less a 'foreign' language than an 'intercultural' language. English is so widespread that it does not 'belong' to anyone. No-one 'owns' English. It is a language that anyone can use as a means of accessing hundreds of other cultures and billions of other people. In this respect, it really is a key to the rich treasure box of the world (Parmenter 2005). This coincides with what Baldrige (1996) found in his study. He revealed that many Indians feel that English is no longer a foreign language—they have made it very much their own. The same thing was reported by Adedimeji (2004). This current trend reveals the very fact that English is not owned by one country or one group of people. Every country has its own share of property ownership as far as English as a language is concerned which actually is the very reason why there are many types of English in the world.

On the other hand, making decisions about language choice in multilingual countries has always been a matter of political agenda (Muluken 2011). Since language has a strong attachment with power, the issue of language choice has always been a center for conflicts and power struggle among different ethnic tribes. David (2003) asserted that in a multilingual country English is used as unifying force-reconciliation role. Hence, in these linguistically diverse nations, English, assumed to be tribally neutral language, will be considered as a remedy for the problem. Also, Adedimeji (2004) conducted a study in Nigeria that revealed the unifying role of English in Multi-lingual nation. In Ethiopia, where there are more than 80 ethnic and linguistic identities, the issue of nationalism/citizenship, language choice is really big part of the political scenario in the country.

This study, therefore, addressed the untold reconciling role of English in multilingual countries such as Ethiopia, India, and Nigeria. Special effort was put on issue of nationality/citizenship, language choice and reconciling role of English in Ethiopia. The present study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- What practical instances are there for the reconciling role of English in Multilingual countries?
- Is English really seen as tribally neutral language in multilingual countries?
- What are the contributing factors for the escalating demand of English in linguistically diverse countries?
- Do multilingual countries need a national/official language other than English?

### 3. Methodology

The study employed a descriptive survey based research methodology with particular emphasis on focus group discussion, and case review. Besides, documents related with the agenda at hand were also analyzed in line with theories underpinning intercultural communication. In addition to the case review analysis, 70 academic communities were involved in this study. Participants were included in the general subjects of the study through systematic random sampling technique. Among this, 60 are school and college teachers, and 10 are school principals. The collected data were analyzed qualitatively with a particular emphasis on focus group discussion and case review analysis.

### 4. Findings of the Study

#### 4.1. Case Review

A simple record of history can prove the existence of sociopolitical issues associated utterly with the issue of language choice in multilingual countries. Various researches conducted in the area of language choice in multilingual countries, such as the works of Baldrige (1996), Adedimeji (2004), and Muluken (2011) revealed the very fact that language choice has always been a political agenda. An interesting proof for this kind of claim can be attributed to the reason why English language is predominantly used in multilingual countries such as Nigeria, Ethiopia, and India. Some may assume that colonization is in the first place what brought English dominance in countries such as India and Nigeria. There is no doubt that colonization was responsible for the widespread existence of English language linguistic hegemonies across the world. For scholars such as Philpson (1942) addressed in his work "Linguistic Imperialism" this claim was also addressed. Nevertheless, it is my belief that this colonial attachment to the widespread existence of English language across the globe is no longer on the top of people's mind.

In countries such as Nigeria and India, viewing English language as a threat has already ceased. The old era of English, with its global influence, which was entirely associated with English being the language of academic communication had passed. We are now witnessing the untold mantra of English in multilingual countries. Though English language was playing the role of reconciling linguistic diversity and intercultural communication, there was little attempt in promoting this untold role of English in multicultural countries. In these two countries English is being observed to play this politically very significant role of mediating and unifying the entire population. In present day Nigeria and India, English language is the language of many government and local organizations. Similarly Dua (1993) cited in Fiseha reported that in India, although hindi was first recognized as an official language, owing to resistance from the non-Hindi languages speakers, English was adopted as an additional official language, though with a subsidiary role, in 1963. Moreover, the same report was addressed in Nigesria's case too. According to Adebile 2011, cited in Fiseha, the reason for adopting English as an official language was a lack of agreement among the speakers of the three dominant Nigerian languages (Yorba, Igbo, and Hausa). So, owing to the very fact that English is a tribally neutral language in India and Nigeria, it has become one of the most important reasons why these two countries are standing politically and economically strong. Had it been the case that dominant local language was given this same privilege of reconciling linguistic diversity or even perhaps maintaining intercultural communication, the political issue of language and power would have caused a very serious political crisis.

Ethiopia is no different from the above scenario. It is true that Ethiopia had not been colonized by any English speaking imperialist countries. But this didn't make the country free from the global influence of English. In Ethiopia, English since the imperial regime had been the most important instrument of academic communication. However, to say that English in Ethiopia has merely a pedagogical significance is really not a wise justification. Let alone the English case, the contemporary language policy of Ethiopia itself has more political significance than its pedagogical implications. Smith (2008 and 2004), in her work, "the politics of language policy in Ethiopia", has also confirmed that language choice in Ethiopia is political rather than pedagogical. It is therefore, not a reasonable conclusion to say that English has solely academic role. In fact, in the first place the very reason why English was used for academic purposes was actually politically motivated.

Even in Ethiopia, where there is no colonial attachment to the existence of English language in the country, it has becoming a normal thing to witness English playing the role of reconciling linguistic diversity. A very simple evidence of how a given dominant language can play this unifying, reconciling, and mediating role is to look at the case of Amharic, which is assumed to be long established predominant language in the country. Amharic, according to the country's language policy, is the working language of the federal government and with quotation, "the language of country wide communication". I put this in quotation because there is no significant evidence of Amharic playing this role in the country.

Ethiopia has more than 80 languages that are believed to be in existence. Among these languages the three widely spoken languages are Amharic Affan Oromo, and Tigrigna. There are political, social, and economic factors why these three languages are the predominant ones. The geopolitical structure of different regions in Ethiopia is very much linked to the type of language the inhabitants speak and ethnicity.

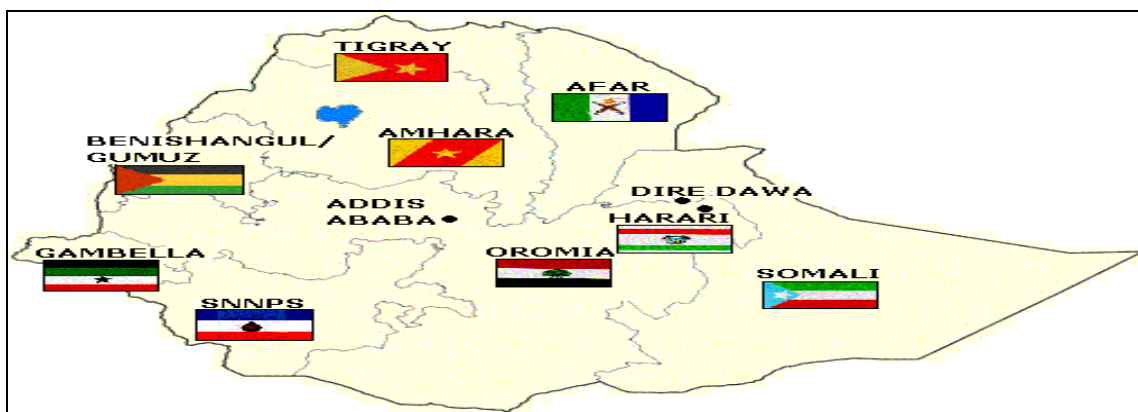


Figure 1: Regional map of Ethiopia

As it is depicted in the picture above, there are nine ethnically/linguistically based regions in Ethiopia. Tigrigna, Afarigna, Amharic, Benishangul, Affan oromo, Harari, Gambela, and somali languages are the languages that are predominantly spoken in the regional states of Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Benishangul, Oromia, Harari, Gambela, and Smoali respectively. This ethno-linguistic portrayal, of course, excludes the two federally chartered cities: Addis Ababa (the capital city), and Dire Dawa (an important industrial city) with Amharic being the predominantly used language. These cities are the only cities in the country which are not linked to any ethno-linguistic division.

Among the 9 ethno-linguistic geographical divisions, the south region, unlike, the Amhara, Oromia, Tigray, Gambela, Benishangul, Afar, Somali, and Harari regions which are more or less linguistically homogenous, has more than 40 different languages spoken in the region. This made it politically unthinkable to consider each of these languages in the making and naming of this ethnically and linguistically based region. So the current EPRDF government came up with a very ingenious name: the south nations and nationalities peoples region. Some inhabitants of the region are not happy with this naming. In fact, as far as I know, south is a direction not people's identity. The fact that this region was not politically and economically established made the inhabitants to be very quiet and reluctant.

The very astounding thing though is how this region has accepted Amharic to be the language of media and the government. The EPRDF government was very smart then and made Amharic which is out of the 40 predominantly spoken languages in that region to be the language of the public media. This was not an easy move. The government somehow knew that if any other language from the south is considered to be the language of media there will be a serious political crisis in that region as each of these 40 languages are voraciously competing over political supremacy in that region. Bourdeui's theory of language and power comes in handy here. Researches done all over the world also revealed that language is one of most important symbol of power. Hence, in this context Amharic is a tribally neutral language. However, it will not be long for Amharic to lose this privilege. As the economic and political status of this region grows there will be a concern of linguistic hegemony that will provoke the region to go for a country wide tribally neutral language which in Ethiopian context is English. It would be unthinkable for the government to advocate the use of Amharic in regions such as Oromia and Tigray. All of these and other case scenarios reveal that untold reconciling, mediating, and unifying role of English in multi lingual countries.

#### 4.2. Focus Group Discussion with Teachers and School Principals

The FGD addressed issues that are both pedagogically and politically sensitive. The first issue was whether or not students will prefer to learn in a vernacular language, which is not their native language. Respondents said it is useful if students can learn English instead of any other vernacular languages which are not their native language. It is, therefore, here that we see how English plays a reconciliation role in multi – ethnic countries like Ethiopia.

The other issue addressed the case of having English as an official language in multilingual countries. There was a wide spread existence of consciousness on this issue among respondents that for multilingual countries English which is tribally neutral language is politically safe to be used as an official language. This will not only contain the sociopolitical crisis of language and power that may rise in the country but it will also help the country's economic development. Fiseha (2006) also reported that recognizing English as an official language would contain potential violent conflicts over language use and maximizes economic benefits from global employment and business opportunities.

The third issue addressed in the focused group discussion was related to the view of using English as the only medium of instruction in high school and college level classes. More interestingly, the response obtained from school directors revealed that their schools have witnessed circumstances where students complained about some teachers' use of local languages in class. The scenario was like this; in some classes there are students who speak different languages and unfortunately teachers were using one local language as a remedy to solve students' difficulty of understanding some concepts. Those students, who don't speak that particular language, were in a kind of situation where they assumed themselves as being marginalized and not favored by the class room teacher. So whenever, this kind of situation exists, the school directors usually try to impose only English kind of class room environment. The same result was reported by Muluken (2011). So the very reason why English is used in Ethiopian classes is not because of its pedagogical simplicity but for the sake of maintaining power balance associated with language choice.

Regarding the controversy whether or not English is a threat in Ethiopia, the result from the focus group discussion also indicated that English has never been a threat in Ethiopia. There is no any practical instance that revealed the very fact that English is threatening other indigenous languages. In fact, many are convinced that Amharic is more threatening than English in Ethiopian context. Ethiopians are still so much fixated on their native language that English language proficiency level among both teachers and students is extremely low. The same mania was reported by Tekeste (1996) and Muluken (2011). It was further mentioned that the government and other nationalists are advocating this as one of the political game they started to play since now and then.

As to the view concerning the reconciling role of English, the result obtained from the focus group discussion also showed that English was, is, and will be observed to play the role of reconciling linguistic diversity in Ethiopia as also the case in many multilingual countries such as India and Nigeria. Respondents reported that in order to alleviate the problem that comes as a result of making one language more powerful, perhaps important, than other vernacular languages, English assumed to be tribally neutral language is the best option for reconciling such kinds of linguistically sensitive political issues. Similarly, Baldridge (1996) mentioned that English has the role of reconciling linguistic diversity in multilingual countries such as India. As the very fact on the ground depicts that Ethiopia, with more than 80 local languages, is a multilingual country. The same scenario was addressed in the research work conducted in Nigeria by Bisong (1995). Also, Adedimeji (2004) conducted a study in Nigeria that revealed the unifying role of English in Multi-lingual nation.

The other FGD issue addressed was related to participants' reflection of Tekeste Negashe's proposed solution of language choice in Ethiopia. Tekeste (1996) proposed that in order to improve the educational status of the country, it is good if Ethiopia declares one of its dominant vernacular languages, either Amharic or Affan Oromo, to be the politically acclaimed national language and language of education across the country. For Tekeste since the status of English not only among students but also among teachers is much deteriorated, advocating English language based curriculum will lead to the fall of education system in the country. However, what Tekeste didn't realize is what the socio-political consequence of such kinds of decisions will bring in multilingual countries such as Ethiopia. The respondents were, therefore, found to condemn Tkesste's suggestions believing that it will lead the country to political crises.

Respondents also reflected on the issue whether or not they are willing to send their children to a school where local languages are used as medium of instruction. Respondents forwarded that instead of sending their children to schools with vernacular languages, which are not native for the children, they would prefer to send their kids where English is used us medium of instruction. So this affiliation to English language is not simply a mere reflection of its pedagogical and or academic significance rather it is the issue of political dominance and linguistic hegemony.

#### 5. Conclusion

It can, therefore, be concluded from the findings of the study that the reason for relying on English language Academic system, in multilingual countries, is not really a question of pedagogy. English being a tribally neutral language is playing the political role of reconciling linguistic diversity in multi-lingual and multi-cultural countries. More importantly, the question of language and power over media and education is escalating the high demand for English in multilingual countries. The question of having national language in a linguistically diverse country will always be the center of politics and power struggle. It seems apparent though that in order to minimize this political tension in multilingual countries such as Ethiopia the very wise move will be not to pull up the trigger in a hurry and declare that one of the local languages is from now on acclaimed to be both the national and academic language of that country. Hence, relying on English is a politically safe move for now.

**6. References**

1. Adedimeji, M. (2004). The Unifying Role of English in a multilingual Nation: The case of Nigeria. Unpublished Thesis, University of Ilorin, Ilorin.
2. Baldrige, J. (1996). Reconciling Linguistic Diversity: The History and the Future of Language Policy in India. University of Toledo Honors Thesis.
3. Bourdieu, P. (1986). Forms of Capital. A review work, retrieved on September 2, 2009 from <http://books.google.com/books>
4. David, D. (2003). Roles and Impact of English As a Global Language. Module6, University of Birmingham.
5. Fiseha, G. (0000). Choosing a Working Language in Multiethnic Nations: Rethinking Ethiopia's Working Language Policy. Unpublished paper work. Accessed from [www.aigaforum.com](http://www.aigaforum.com) on the 17<sup>th</sup> of December 2014.
6. Muluken, Y. (2011), Attitude towards the Contemporary Language Policy in Ethiopia" with VDM verlag (Amazon Book Publishing Company) <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Attitude-Towards-Contemporary-Language-Ethiopia/dp/3639353102>
7. Parmenter, L. (2005). Teaching English Now. Volume 3.
8. Philipson, R. (1992). Linguistic Imperialism. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
9. Smith, L. (2004). The Political context of language policy in Ethiopia under the federal arrangement. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the mid-west political science. Association, palmer House Hilton, Chicago, Illinois on line. <pdf>, Retrieved August 31, 2008, from <http://www.allacademic.com/met/p8372/-index.html>.
10. Smith, L. (2008). The politics of Contemporary Language Policy in Ethiopia. Journal of Developing Societies, 24(2): 207-243.
11. Tekeste, N. (1996). Education in Ethiopia: From Crises to the Blink of Collapse. Nordic Africa Institute. 54p.