

The Place of Indigenous Languages in African Development

Professor Kithaka wa Mberia, PhD
Department of Linguistics and Languages
University of Nairobi

Abstract

Indigenous languages are much more than cultural phenomena. True, they are important vehicles for cultural transmission, identity building and values creation. However, they also have the potential, like languages elsewhere in the world, to aid the communities that speak them in development. Collectively, the languages are an important resource. In this paper, I argue for and demonstrate that indigenous African languages can contribute to the economic development and social progress of the African continent. I show that they have an important role to play in a wide spectrum of areas. They can be used with advantages in early formal education, health campaigns, conflict resolution and peace building, adult literacy, mass media, confidence building and enhancement of self-esteem, and in internal trade. They are also valuable as sources of information and knowledge, values, history and wisdom. Finally, I advocate for their management with a view to promoting and preserving them.

1. Introduction

From 1951 to the present, a number of events with a bearing on indigenous languages have taken place. In 1951, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's Group of Experts held a meeting on indigenous languages. The report of the meeting appeared seven years later in a seminal collection of papers edited by J.A. Fishman titled *The Sociology of Language* (UNESCO, 1951; Fishman, 1968)

In the summary section of the report, the experts observed that:

- i) The mother tongue is a person's natural means of self-expression, and one of his first needs is to develop his power of self-expression;
- ii) Every pupil should begin his formal education in his mother tongue; and
- iii) There is nothing in the structure of any language that precludes it from becoming a vehicle of modern civilization.

On February 21 every year, the world celebrates the International Mother Language Day. The celebrations are meant to remind us of the importance of mother tongues. The day was proclaimed by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in November 1999. In its declaration, the United Nations General Assembly called upon Member States to promote the preservation and protection of all languages used by peoples of the world. The day has been observed every year since 2000.

The third event with a bearing on indigenous languages took place in 2000. In that year, writers and scholars from the whole of Africa, including literary heavy weights such as Kenya's Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Egypt's Nawal el Saadawi, gathered in Asmara, Eritrea, for an important conference titled, "Against All Odds: African Languages and Literatures into the 21st Century". At the end of the Conference, the participants came up with the Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literatures. The Resolutions of the Declaration urged for the development and the use of Africa's indigenous languages.

The fourth event with a bearing on indigenous African languages took place in 2006. In that year, the African Union Executive Council met in Sudan and, acknowledging the importance of African languages in building and integrating Africa, recommended that the African Union declare a special year for revitalising African languages. The African Union Assembly accepted the recommendation and tasked its Commission with the responsibility of coordinating activities to promote the Year of African Languages in collaboration with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation as well as with other institutions (Hjort, 2006)

When we consider the four events mentioned above, a number of questions come to mind. Among these are:

- i) Why do indigenous languages arouse the interest of international bodies such as the United Nations Organisation and the African Union?
- ii) What is in indigenous African languages which makes them to attract the attention of Africa's best minds to an international gathering?
- iii) Why does the international community find it worthwhile to designate a day as International Mother Language Day?

This paper is geared towards looking for and finding answers to these and similar questions.

2. Indigenous Languages and Education

Since the colonial days in Africa, language in education has been a pestering issue. Some elites, basing their comments on perception rather than facts, have advocated for the locking out indigenous African languages from the education system especially their use as media of instruction. Such elites put forward various contentions to try and support their position. They argue, for instance, that indigenous African languages slow down learning. Others claim that since English, French and Portuguese (the languages of the former colonisers) are international languages and are available to us, we do not need to look for local substitutes for the media of instruction.

Some parents, thanks to the massive colonial brainwashing that painted virtually all things African as "backwardness", do not see any good reason for their children to be subjected to learning in indigenous languages. Elites and parents are not the only groups of Africans who do not see much worth in the use of mother tongues as media of instruction in the lower levels of formal learning. The perception is shared by other groups such as teachers and unionists in the education sector.

In the second camp of the mother tongue for media of instruction debate, there are experts in education, psychology and linguistics who argue for the use of indigenous languages in the lower levels of formal education. These experts point at concrete benefits to the child and to the community that result from the use of the child's mother tongue as the medium of instruction in the early stages of formal education. Research findings strongly support the view that using mother tongues as media of instruction in schools is good for learners. In 2007, two researchers in Tanzania investigated the differences between teaching a topic in English and then in Kiswahili some days later. The experiment involved Form 1 students in six schools. The researchers gathered the data using both qualitative and quantitative methods, (Rwantagu, 2011).

The researchers found out that, in every case, the students taught the same topic by the same teacher, performed better when the teaching was conducted in Kiswahili than in English or when code-switching was used. The research demonstrated that students learn better when they are taught in a language in which they are very familiar (Rwantagu, 2011).

Although the Tanzanian experiment involved secondary school students, the results have implications for the use of mother tongues as media of instruction at the lower levels of formal education. The results showed, as Rwantagu notes, that an indigenous language does not impede learning. On the contrary, mother tongues facilitate understanding of the subjects being taught. This advantage to the learner is even more pronounced among younger learners than the secondary school students used in the Tanzanian experiment.

In Niger, according to Nikiema (2011), German Technical Assistance Agency (GTZ) conducted a comparative assessment of pupils from both experimental and traditional schools². The assessment involved pupils in grades 4, 5 and 6. The assessment was conducted in both the national (indigenous) languages and in French. The pupils scored better in tests conducted in the local languages than in tests conducted in French. The better results were independent of the content of the tests. When pupils were tested on the French language, there were hardly any differences between the pupils who had used the mother tongue as medium of instruction, (that is, those in experimental schools) and those who had used French (in other words, those in the traditional schools). This was especially so in the final year, indicating that using a local language as the medium of instruction did not disadvantage pupils in their learning of the French language. Similar scores in French suggested that pupils from the experimental schools were not any weaker in French than those from traditional schools. The tests also established that when a pupil succeeds in an exercise in his/her first language, they succeed in the same type of exercise when it is conducted in French, pointing to a positive transfer of competences from Language 1 (L1) to Language 2 (L2).

Supporting the use of indigenous languages in education, Rwantagu observes that the language factor weighs in heavily as a tool for the appropriate transformation of socio-cultural, political and economic systems of a society. It is through the enrichment of local languages that the majority of the people can be empowered by accessing information in domains such as health, agriculture and environmental protection, (Rwantagu, 2011).

Contributing on a debate sparked by a circular on the use of mother tongues as the media of instruction in Kenyan schools, Joseph Othieno published a very informative article in a local daily. He observed that, in education, pupils perform better when the language of instruction is familiar to them because it improves the quantity and quality of information transmission, (Othieno, 2014)

Othieno gave as an example a case in Burkina Faso which he says was published and widely disseminated by the World Bank with a view to stress the importance of incorporating indigenous knowledge in all development programmes in the Third World. Alarmed by the high levels of illiteracy in the Nomgana community, a non-governmental organization, in collaboration with the Government and a university professor, developed a primary school curriculum in Moore, the local language. Primary school children were taught school subjects in Moore rather than in French. Indeed, Moore was also used as the medium of instruction for French. As it turned out, pupils taught in Moore performed better in the standardised examinations than those who were taught in French in the conventional curriculum.

Using Moore as the medium of instruction was exceptionally beneficial to the children. Not only did they perform better in the examinations, but they also completed their syllabus in four years instead of the conventional six years. Particularly interesting, the pupils using Moore as the medium of instruction developed better skills in the French language than their counterparts who had used French as the medium of instruction, (Othieno, 2014).

3. Indigenous Languages and Health

Performing arts in indigenous languages can be used to improve health in African populations. Genres of art that can be used to great advantage in improving health include drama, story-telling, dramatized and recited poetry, and puppetry. These art forms can be used to educate people on illnesses such as HIV/Aids and other sexually transmitted diseases, polio, kwashiorkor, cholera and tuberculosis. Furthermore, performing arts can also be used to educate rural women on the importance of delivering in hospitals and health centres so as to benefit from the institutions' clean environment and the knowhow of the nurses. Moreover, artistic performances can demonstrate the wisdom of post-natal visits to hospitals and health centres to secure babies' good health.

Malaria is one of the most lethal diseases in the world especially in Africa where it kills millions of children every year. The disease is caused by the protozoa-carrying female anopheles mosquito. For there to be the protozoa-carrying anopheles mosquito, there must be mosquito-breeding areas, notably, stagnant water in ponds and marshy grounds or in large water containing-vessels such as open drums. By using performing arts in local languages it is possible to drive the point home that individuals in homes or residents in a particular area can bring down the number of mosquitoes by clearing grass and bushes near houses, emptying water from large containers, draining stagnant water, and spraying marshy grounds. By eradicating the mosquito-breeding areas, the population of the insects can be brought down considerably if not eradicated all together. Consequently, by eliminating the mosquito-breeding areas, the population of the insects can be brought down considerably if not eradicated all together.

Players can use conventional theatre complete with well scripted plays. The scripts written in (or translated) into indigenous languages would have to use local idiom and local experiences so as to connect with the local audiences to communicate health issues. Besides scripted drama in indigenous languages players can also improvised plays. The appeal of improvised drama has been demonstrated by street artists in Nairobi. Nyengese's group which pulled crowds on the streets of Nairobi a few years ago provides a good example of the power of improvisation in theatre. The late Nyengese and his co-actors would appear on a Nairobi street dressed in comical costumes and start their improvised act. Some of the actors would be attired like men while others would wear women costumes with exaggerated derrieres. They would choose a location on a street and start their performing. Within minutes, they would be surrounded by an enthusiastic crowd. In turn, the presence of the crowd would arouse the curiosity of passers-by who would also join the crowd to find out why people were gathered. The bigger the crowds became the more motivated the actors would be. They would give the performance their all. The curious and keen crowds would be engulfed in laughter as they imbibed the social commentary delivered by the artists.

There are potential actors and actresses in every village, marketplace and city slum. Members of the local communities, especially the youth, can be trained in basic theatre skills so that they perform, in the local languages, plays and skits with health messages. Reaching out to local populations using local talent and local idiom would be a sure way of striking the right chord in the hearts of the target audiences. The newly found skills of the local artists can be effectively used to educate people on dangerous lifestyles. The local theatre troupes need not worry much whether or not their localities have social halls in which to perform. With good public relations, the troupes can get permission to use church premises, mosque compounds and school halls and classrooms when such facilities are not in regular use. Moreover, the local players can utilize open spaces such as football fields, market-squares and school playgrounds.

In an article titled “Indigenous Languages, Performing Arts and the HIV/AIDS Pandemic” (Wa Mberia, 2009), I argued that, besides drama, local performing artists can use narratives with the HIV/AIDS themes. With good training, the narrators can learn to use good pronunciation, clear enunciation, powerful voice projection, effective eye-contact, strong stage presence and credible stage movement to effectively communicate important messages on health using indigenous languages. Poetry is another art form which can be used effectively against habits that lead to morbidity and mortality. Poems in indigenous languages can be recited, chanted, sang or dramatized. Besides other compositional devices, such poems could use powerful metaphors, memorable similes, emotive imagery, strong symbolism and locally recognisable allusions to drive home health messages. Moreover, the poems could be reinforced with local proverbs, sayings and other forms of communal wisdom.

Songs are another art form that can be used in campaigns against illnesses. Traditionally, songs in Africa played a very important role in educating individuals and whole communities. They did this by praising people with positive traits, admonishing wayward characters and social misfits, and warning potential wrongdoers. Moreover, they ridiculed foolish behavior and gave accolades to the wise men and women in society. Songs can play a role in promoting good health. Singers in the villages, churches and school choirs, singing in indigenous languages, can be brought on board to pass across messages on how to prevent diseases and how to respond appropriately when people fall sick. Songs could, for instance, show the vanity of an HIV and Aids-positive person or an ebola patient going to a traditional healer.

4. Indigenous Languages, Conflict, Conflict Resolution and Peace

Indigenous African languages are a double-edged sword with regard to conflict. There are instances when an indigenous language has a proverb, a song, a story or a myth that paints another community or other communities in negative light. A language in a community (call it Community A) may portray another community (Community B) as a collection of cowards, fools or people who should not be trusted. People in Community A will not have much respect for the members of Community B. If members of Community B are aware that Community A despises them, they may pay them in kind. There will, therefore, be a mutual disrespect. Such a situation is potentially a fertile ground for conflict.

Another possible scenario, for the purposes of illustration, is whereby in a community’s language there is a proverb, a song, a story or a myth that claims that God created cattle only for the community and that all the cattle in world belong to the community such that any other community that has cattle must have stolen them from the rightful owners. Such a community will raid another community’s cattle with a clean conscience under the misguided view that they are simply restoring their animals to themselves. Since such a raid will be met with resistance or a counter-raid where life may be lost and property destroyed, we can say that the language that has the misleading myth is the cause of the conflict.

We have pointed out above that we are dealing with a double-edged sword. Whereas African languages can be the cause of conflict, quite often, they are used for conflict prevention and conflict resolution. In the villages, there are arbitration sessions that either pre-empt potential disputes or resolve existing conflicts. Such sessions often use wisdom extracted from a local language or languages. Let me illustrate. After the disputed 2007 General Election in Kenya, the country degenerated into chaos. There were killings based on ethnic/political affiliations. The situation was so dire that more than a thousand people lost their lives. It looked as though the country was on the verge of a civil war. Alarmed, various people tried different methods of cooling down the tempers. One method that was contemplated was using indigenous languages to persuade the speakers of the respective languages to refrain from violence. The logic underlying this approach is that indigenous languages enjoy an emotive dimension with their speakers that other languages do not have.

Today, “Ubuntu”, a notion and a worldview that holds that one’s existence is only feasible because other people exist and, consequently, demands love, respect and just treatment for others, is an aspect of African Bantu languages, (Mapadimeng, 2009; Mapadimeng and Oppenheim, 2012; Wa Mberia, 2015). Without Mandela’s exposure and belief in “Ubuntu” and its tenets of love, respect and forgiveness, perhaps, South Africa would have exploded into flames during the transition from apartheid to democracy. After the transition in 1994, the world waited with abated breath. The world feared for the worst which, fortunately, under Mandela’s stewardship, did not come to pass. It is not too far-fetched to hypothesise that “Ubuntu” played a role in the peaceful transition from apartheid to democracy.

We could do well to conduct systematic surveys on indigenous languages to record their negative and positive attributes with regard to conflict and peace. Armed with the appropriate information, we can develop programmes or strategies to counter those language aspects that have the potential to create conflict and enhance the aspects that are useful in conflict resolution and peace maintenance. Furthermore, we should promote concepts such as “Ubuntu” that dissuade us from conflict-oriented behaviour and call upon us to nurture peace.

5. Indigenous Languages, Gender Relations and Gender Power Balance

In Article 10 of the Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literatures (Asmara Conference Organisers, 2000), African writers and scholars stated that African languages, like all languages, contain gender biases. They added that the role of languages in development must overcome gender biases and achieve equality. The existence of gender biases in African languages as noted by the African writers and scholars is an impediment to development. The biases are in the form of girl/women-demeaning proverbs, sayings, narratives and songs. Some aspects of African oral literature portray girls and women as cowards, weaklings, undependable, lacking in leadership qualities, and as needing men’s support even in mundane endeavours. As they grow up, as they are socialized, boys pick up and internalize the biases and prejudices against girls and women. Matters are not helped by the fact that girls too are brainwashed into seeing the biases and prejudices as normal. Just like the boys, they too internalize the misconceptions about girls and, when they grow up, many women take mistreatment as culturally admissible and, therefore, normal.

When boys become men, their prejudices towards women become an impediment to the latter’s political, social and economic wellbeing. That partly explains the limited number of women in senior elective political positions in African countries. Because of their prejudices, many men do not take women candidacy seriously. Moreover, many women do not offer themselves for election into hotly contested positions. Many do not think that they are equal to the task.

There is need to reverse the tilted balance of power between men and women. One way to wage the battle is to confront gender biases in our languages. This can be done by coming up with policies that bar people – both men and women – from using expressions that paint women in negative light. Such policies, especially when accompanied by carefully designed women advancement programmes, can go a long way in advancing the status of women in Africa.

6. Indigenous Languages and the Decolonisation of the Mind

In Resolution No. 10 of the Asmara Declaration, the participants stated that, “African languages are essential for the decolonization of the African minds and for the African renaissance” (Asmara Language Conference Organisers, 2000:3). Before making the Resolutions, the Declaration had already stated that, “Decolonisation of the African mind must go hand in hand with decolonisation of the economy and politics”, (Asmara Language Conference Organisers, 2000:1).

As I have observed elsewhere (Wa Mberia, 2004), using local languages to deliberate on important societal issues has very important psychological benefits. People take pride in the languages. They respect the languages when they see that the languages can be used for serious business in society. When people respect their language they, by extension, respect themselves. The self-respect has the effect of raising self-esteem and confidence. In other words, using local languages for important issues in society can help in bringing about what Ngugi wa Thiong’o refers to as “decolonizing the mind”, (Wa Thiongo, 1986). Colonialism battered the self-esteem of the colonised people and made them lose trust in themselves as well as in things local thereby making them lose faith in their own capacity to innovate or come up with worthwhile ideas.

Using indigenous languages for important discourses in society can enable the people to believe in themselves once again and to have good levels of self-esteem and confidence. The elevated self-esteem and confidence lead to “the unlocking of their creative energies whose release will lead to innovative approaches to handling their physical and social environment and therefore result in more productivity” (Wa Mberia, 2004:8).

Commenting on literacy which is best promoted through indigenous languages, Dumond (1990) has commented that the village communities’ new ability to contribute to development of agricultural methods is the greatest innovation brought about by the spread of the national (indigenous) language writing. Until people learnt to read and write in their indigenous language, illiterate peasants were all too often considered to be ignorant and some of them believed so because their knowledge did not get the benefit of the prestige that comes from the written words and that agricultural extension work always looked like a contribution from outside, (Dumond, 1990).

7. *Indigenous Languages and Adult Literacy*

Whereas I have cited Dumond’s comment on literacy above, it’s worthwhile looking at the issue in more detail. Written materials play an important role in today’s societies. There are concrete advantages to be gained by a population has been empowered to read and write. Such advantages include reading and comprehending instructions on human medicine, veterinary drugs, fertilizers and insecticides. There are also benefits gained from the ability to read road signs and warnings, school meeting minutes, children’s school reports and national election materials (Wa Mberia, 2004).

As Dumond (1990) has observed, when people can read and write the language of the village, they tend to help the extension workers in their work. Moreover, the extension organizations are more likely to communicate in writing using notice boards and posters specifying recommended practices. When followed, such information leads to improvement in productivity. There are many Africans without formal education and who, therefore, cannot read and write. Yet, as we have seen, the ability to read and write is essential for development. Many African governments are aware of this. That is why adult literacy programmes have been conducted and continue to be conducted in many African countries. To achieve success, the programmes are conducted in African languages. Thus, indigenous languages, through literacy empowerment, lead to higher productivity.

8. *Indigenous Languages, Mass Media and Participation in National Matters*

In some African countries, there are television and radio broadcasts as well as newspapers in African languages. By disseminating important information to the citizens, the media make the people more informed on important national issues. The knowledge so gathered enables the citizens to engage in national discourses by writing letters to the editors, meaningfully participating in seminars, and raising issues in local meetings. By enabling the citizens to participate in an informed way in political processes and governance issues, local languages become tools for development. Film is one form of mass media that has not been fully exploited in Africa. Whereas the art form is thriving in countries such as Nigeria, it is yet to be embraced in many African countries. And yet, if low budget films were to be made in indigenous languages, African population would benefit a great deal. Issues that can be addressed using films include women empowerment, child mortality, literacy and development, the link between environmental degradation and poverty, dangers of alcoholism and substance abuse, the link between good governance and economic growth and the connection between peace and development.

9. *Indigenous Languages and Trade*

In any day of the week, across Africa, fishermen sell their fish; herdsman exchange animals for money; vegetable and fruit vendors trade in a wide range of fruits and vegetables; bus conductors demand and get fare from their passengers; shopkeepers buy and sell sugar, cooking oil, salt and wheat flour; and construction workers heave with building blocks, cement, ballast and metal. Virtually all these activities, which contribute immensely to the continent’s economic development, are conducted in African languages. On any given day, in any African country, the combined contribution of the indigenous languages to the economic development far outweigh the contribution of the European language holding the position of a prestigious official language.

10. *Indigenous Languages as Archives*

Indigenous African languages are important archives. They contain information on various aspects of life including people’s philosophy and worldview, knowledge on agriculture and on animal husbandry, and knowhow on human and veterinary medicine.

The information is embedded in narratives, legends, sayings, riddles, proverbs and individual words. Such information and knowledge can and should be retrieved and used for the good of African societies. Elsewhere (Wa Mberia, 2004), I have given the example of a proverb in Kitharaka which indicates the presence of medicinal properties in a medicinal shrub called *kirawa*. The proverb goes thus: *Ira nteme nio jiji kirawa*. The rough translation is that “the one that is injured is the one that knows where the *kirawa* is”. In other words, it is the injured person who knows where to find *kirawa*. Why does the proverb excite me? It excites me because it says a lot about our languages. The fresh bark of the shrub works in a manner similar to that of the elastoplast. The plant has strong medicinal properties. It is, perhaps, more potent in its anti-septic properties than elastoplast. How do we know, for instance, that the plant does not have chemical elements capable of curing cancer, HIV and Aids and/or ebola? The Kitharaka proverb is talking to us in a loud and clear language. It is saying “Do not take this plant for granted. Subject it to vigorous tests to determine its pharmaceutical properties”

What if, by following the hint given by the proverb we subjected *kirawa* to chemical tests and discovered that the shrub can, indeed, cure cancer, HIV and Aids, and/or ebola? What if Kenya were to commercially produce the resultant drugs and distribute them to the world? Manufacture of the drugs would pump billions of shillings into the Kenyan economy thereby becoming a game changer in the national development. And that is not all. By saving millions of lives thereby protecting the human resource, the drugs would contribute significantly to the numerous economies of the world. From a seeming ordinary proverb of a tiny language called Kitharaka, Kenya’s development would brighten up and the world too would have its share of benefits. The possibilities here described obtain for other languages on the African continent.

11. Indigenous Languages and Values

Creative industries and mass media in African languages hold great potential for the continent’s development. Given the emotive link between the languages and their speakers, messages in the languages reach not only to the ears of the people but also to their hearts. Thus, the languages provide great tools for mobilization on developmental issues especially at the grassroots. Elsewhere, in a paper titled “Indigenous Languages, Performing Arts and the HIV/AIDS Pandemic”, and which I have already mentioned, I have argued that one effective way of confronting HIV and Aids is through the use of narratives, poetry and drama in indigenous languages, (Wa Mberia, 2009). A similar argument can be made on campaigns against anti-social and harmful habits and practices such as alcoholism, drug abuse, female genital mutilation, child marriages, unmitigated greed, and road carnage. We can and should mine African languages for information on appropriate values. Although Africa had excellent social values in the past, the continent (and especially Kenya) is in dire need of the same values after losing them.

I have never heard of mass graves in traditional Africa. I have never heard or read of a traditional battle where warriors attacked and killed women, children and the elderly. I’m not aware of an African community that would kill adversaries after capturing them. Torture and humiliation of the vanquished were never practiced in African warfare. Sadism was neither considered bravery nor was it entertained. After capture, young men and women would be absorbed into the conquering community through marriages. Captured children would be adopted and, thereafter, treated as though they biologically belonged to the victorious community. It is possible that the high level of magnanimity exhibited during and after the war is embedded in at least some of our languages in the form of proverbs, riddles, sayings, narratives and songs. By examining those forms of oral literature, we can learn from them virtues such as tolerance and kindness.

Much more can be said about other positive values in traditional Africa. The world-view informing such values is still present in at least some of our languages. We could extract the information, pass it on to our children and mitigate the madness that has been ravaging the continent for the last six or so decades in which we have witnessed not only bloody coups d’etat but also an actual genocide in Rwanda. The continent’s development would be the big beneficiary from the extraction and utilisation of values that would enhance humane treatment of each other on the continent.

12. Managing Indigenous Languages

As we have seen in the foregoing sections of this paper, indigenous languages are an important resource for development. Just as with other resources, they should be managed well. This can be done by coming up with appropriate language policies that seek to develop and promote indigenous languages to enable them play their role in economic and social development along the lines pointed out above.

The Kenya Constitution proclaims Kiswahili as the national language and both Kiswahili and English as the official languages. The Constitution also requires the country to preserve and promote all indigenous languages. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa recognises eleven official languages; that is, SePedi, SeSotho, SeTswana, SiSwati, Tshivenda, XiTsonga, Afrikaans, English, IsiNdebele, IsiXhosa and IsiZulu. The challenge is whether the two countries as well as others that may have similar laws have the political goodwill and the economic ability to develop appropriate policies to preserve and promote indigenous languages.

According to the *UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing*, Wurm (2001), notes that 97 African languages are considered to be in danger. This figure, which is more than double the number given by *Ethnologue*, is closer to reflecting the actual situation on the ground. Still, the number of endangered languages on the continent could be bigger.

UNESCO's document titled "Language Vitality and Endangerment" (by the Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages) states that "a language is endangered when it is on the path to extinction". It adds that "language is in danger when its speakers cease to use it, use it in an increasingly reduced number of communicative domains, and cease to pass it on from one generation to the next. That is, there are no new speakers, either adults or children", (UNESCO, 2003:2). At more concrete level regarding language death, Mufwene (2006) states that languages die when their speakers give them up. He notes that speakers do not voluntarily refuse to use their languages. They are compelled to use other languages that afford them practical or material advantages such as being integrated in a mainstream society, finding a good job, and getting opportunities for socioeconomic vertical mobility. Speakers may keep their ancestral languages, but often end up speaking only the more advantageous language.

When speakers lose knowledge of their ancestral languages, those languages suffer what Mufwene (2006) refers to as "atrophy". When more and more speakers adopt this behavior and only the older generations speak the languages for traditional communicative functions, the languages fall into attrition. When the older speakers die, so do the languages. Several African languages are faced with death along these lines, (Wurm, 2001).

There are many indigenous African languages that are not necessarily threatened with immediate death. However, they do not have high vitality partly because of their restricted roles. For us to be able to continue using the languages along the lines presented in this paper, we need to put in place measures to save the ones that are facing death and to revitalize the ones that, although not threatened with death are, nevertheless, endangered.

Faced with the challenge of low language vitality as well as the threat of death of indigenous African languages and in view of the usefulness of these languages in development, appropriate language management policies need to be put in place to prevent or slow down the disappearance of the vital resources.

Language management policies on the continent should include language preservation and modernisation as well as language documentation for languages that cannot be saved from eminent death. Such documentation will ensure availability of information that will tell us not only about the dreams, aspirations, fears and the cultural achievements of those that once spoke the languages but also send more light on the workings of the human mind for languages and the mind are closely interlinked.

13. Conclusion

I have demonstrated that indigenous languages can and should be used as vehicles of African development. Whereas they are an important part of the definition of who Africans are culturally, they are also important economically. They can be used to produce better individuals through their use as media of instruction as well as contribute greatly to the achievement of African developmental goals. Thus, people should see them for what they are: an important resource for Africa. Consequently, there is need to manage them well just as we manage other resources. Such management should aim to preserve, promote and modernise the languages as well as to assign them new roles in society alongside the traditional roles. That way Africans will be putting into action locally available agents towards the improvement of Africa.

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