

The Absence of Kinyarwanda in the Current Language Policy of Rwanda

by

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Abstract

Kinyarwanda is spoken by most Rwandans. It is also the sole national and the official language of Rwanda. Thus, it is curious to note that today Kinyarwanda is increasingly absent from debates on the language problem in Rwanda. Indeed, the current debate and decisions regarding the use of languages focus mainly on the conflict between English and French.

This new type of conflict in Rwanda between the two European centered languages now seems to smother all other language planning initiatives. The fact that Kinyarwanda is the mother tongue of all Rwandans, has often served as a pretext to conceal the need to address the changing situation of the language and legislate for its use. Everything happens as if the problem of promoting Kinyarwanda was finally settled. This attitude vis-à-vis Kinyarwanda has always been there.

In this article, I will discuss the importance of Kinyarwanda, its developmental potential, its symbolic value, and attempt to question and understand researchers and decision makers' in regard to their indifference, and capture the scope, challenges and implications this policy of absence.

Introduction

It is strange to note that Kinyarwanda language is absent from the ongoing debates on the language issue in Rwanda. Indeed, it is also easy to notice that current Rwandan language planning and public debate is focused on conflict between English and French. Hence, this conflict based on European languages rather than the conflict between local language and foreign languages, thus seems to smother all other language planning initiatives and extends to not only conflict change, but also to the shifting of issues and the involvement of important actors.

This trend is already an indicator of a lack of interest Kinyarwanda regarding language policy in Rwanda, and it has been mentioned in the previous work (Rurangirwa, 2010: 459) that Kinyarwanda is the mother tongue of all Rwandans, therefore it is spoken by almost everyone, including those who have not been to school, which is unlikely for the English and French languages that often serve as a pretext to conceal the need to address the changing situation of Kinyarwanda and subsequently legislate the use of the language. Yet, everything happens as if in the problem of promoting Kinyarwanda has been finally settled.

For example, the declaration of the decision of the Cabinet meeting of October 8th 2008 that made English the medium of instruction at all levels report that: *'the Cabinet meeting has requested the Minister of Education to implement an urgent program to teach in English in all primary schools, secondary schools and in all public institutions of higher learning and those supported by the Government'*¹. Hence, there was no reference to Kinyarwanda, as if English was to become the sole medium of instruction in Rwanda. This attitude vis-à-vis the Kinyarwanda language has always been present, as we will see throughout our analysis.

In Rwanda, the collaboration between policy makers and experts in sociolinguistic issues should be one of our major principles that can guide us to a successful language policy. However, this principle requires also a precondition: a critical awareness of the importance of the language problem in the life of a people and a fortiori for the importance of the national language. Moreover, in this discussion, it is worthy to note again that the national language of Rwanda, Kinyarwanda, is spoken by almost the entire population, and thus a greater interest in Kinyarwanda in Rwandan language planning is needed in national language policy formation.

Continuing this thrust, throughout this paper I will discuss the importance of Kinyarwanda, its developmental potential and its symbolic value, as we try to understand and criticize indifference found among decision makers vis-à-vis the Kinyarwanda language, and among some linguists, in order to understand the scope, challenges and implications of the problem. And last, this paper will highlight some of the negative attitudes associated with Kinyarwanda that indicate an extremely dangerous approach the language.

Discussion

The current language policy in Rwanda fits in an approach called 'horizontal', a policy which, according to Abolou (2008), takes into account the enhancement of African languages known within 'Pan Africanism' and 'linguistic partnership', the former appearing in the 1930's linked to a 'Pan-Africanist' ideology that rejected the language of the colonizer and exploitation of African languages. Here Abolou argues for the 'inseparability of the couple language-culture' wherein language is seen as a means of liberation from the threat of dictatorship by colonial languages. Hence in this vain, it is the duty of African states to integrate African languages in all sectors of national life. Some writers, like L. Kesteloot (1983) have even called for a lingua franca for all Africa.

In contrast, the second trend, 'linguistic partnership' is fairly recent and closely related to the current context of globalization. This is very compelling and it seems even a threat against the linguistic nationalism statement in Africa. However, it is a movement of thought that advocates the promotion of African languages in a context that is marked by current Western representations of cultural and linguistic diversity that argue that African languages are not promoted because of their communication market capacity, national development potential, and their utilization for philanthropic initiatives/reasons.

In the new context of globalization, Africa has to promote African languages to enhance and safeguard the cultural and linguistic heritage of the continent, otherwise it will be threatened and perhaps it will be dissolved a process of modernity. This activity (philanthropic vision) can be very dangerous, especially for Africa if there is a failure to consider things at fair value, that is to say, to realize the importance of African languages in development. Abolou (2008:67-68) has mentioned this urgent need in an effort to institute language policy for Africa, although '*most African leaders are not yet aware of the fundamental and basic nature of the promotion of African languages and their importance in the development of the continent*²'.

It should be noted that this awareness does not mean that we have to return to the conception and methodology of the 1930's Pan-Africanist periods, because since then the contexts have been shifted from the so-called 'vertical language policy' designed to strengthen the colonial languages and 'negate' African languages to a context of globalization wherein African nations are obliged to learn English to reach a European centered/focused modernity. And accordingly, the English language operates as a super central language in international institutions/organizations and in scientific and technological domains that tends to impose itself, even over the great languages in international communication such as French.

Conversely, African people should be careful so that the choices made don't take them back to a new form of linguistic colonization that would allow them forget the value of their languages by caring only for the colonial/foreign languages. Abolou calls this act 'the soft re-colonization'³ and it is present in some African countries using colonial languages!

Positive Language Policy

Rwanda is in need of a "positive" language policy (Rurangirwa, 2010: 314), hence a language policy that is not against foreign languages, but at the same time a language policy which takes into account the local values, the possible development and the symbolic value of African languages that can also guarantee the protection of the linguistic and cultural unity and diversity activities languages for the promotion of African languages. And in short, this means, one has to find the significant meaning between 'linguistic fatalism' and 'linguistic fanaticism'. Hence, the former 'is linked to the post-colonial state and international institutions and is based on the learning of modernity which has to go through imported languages, which are clear father to son relationship'⁴ (Abolou, 2008: 39). Thus, in the post-colonial context, African languages were considered as unfit for lasting development which feed into the post-colonial capitalistic principles for the development of Africa that work to justify an 'embargo' on African languages at certain levels and in particular activities of development projects conceived and implemented by international institutions.

Furthermore, today in Africa, a national/international language policy must acknowledge that: an imported language has no monopoly in the to transport to modernity; African languages are able with linguistic and terminological development to contribute to national modernization; the promotion of African languages should not be limited to the protection of linguistic and cultural inheritance; African language need to have an important role in everyday communication and social interaction, and that African languages can play a major role in development activities (Rurangirwa, 2010: 461).

For example, African languages can ensure, beyond everyday communication, technical communication in structuring frameworks for project developments in agriculture popularization, trainings, education, health, etc. And specifically, during radio broadcasting for the projects directly involving the population⁵, Chaudenson⁶ asserts that the failure of some projects are caused by the negligence of the language of communication, hence the lack of African language usage.

In most of the contexts, only African languages can efficiently ensure this communication for development. There is little doubt, that a strategy for development conceived in Rwanda, whether by public power or by international institutions excluding communication in Kinyarwanda, a language spoken by the entire Rwandan population, would likely fail. This is true for other local languages in other nations, including those neither written nor spoken by the entire population, as they are the only ones to help reach the deepest levels of the population. In fact, communication for development is, according to Kone (1995) essential and thus engages 'communication resources, techniques, strategies and actions used in order to run efficiently ... a development program, to create a social environment favoring development ... to collect, to treat and pass round any information in the development course'⁷.

Kinyarwanda and Kiswahili Struggles

Kinyarwanda language is an essential tool for the success of development projects in Rwanda, a language of almost the entire Rwandan population, written and described for more than a century that has also benefitted from a status of being the official language. Nevertheless, Kinyarwanda is not yet observed by everybody in Rwanda. For example, one of the most recent 'negative' initiatives was the temptation of removing the department of African Languages during the last reform of the academic structures in National University of Rwanda (2008), the department where Kinyarwanda and Kiswahili linguistics were taught. And as a result, this initiative led to the revision of the decision and to the creation of a new department of Modern Languages where the four most important languages of the country are taught, which includes Kinyarwanda and Kiswahili.

Ironically, it is only in the new department of Modern Languages where Kinyarwanda and Swahili are permitted to be taught, all other departments teach in English. Undoubtedly, some of this initiative is a part of the current education policy options in Rwanda, which make the English language highly privileged in Rwanda via a national information based economy priority in the arena of information and communication technology. Thus, according to political decisions-makers, English has been declared as the sole future language of instruction in Rwanda.

Second, there is a temptation to remove Kiswahili language from the university while Rwanda takes, among other reasons, the integration in the East African Community as one of its great economic strategies. Here, the competition with English in the university seems once again to be the only possible explanation for the temptation to remove Kiswahili considering that almost all members of the community are Swahilophones or Anglophones in language influence. And adjacent to this, decision-makers testify to an insufficient awareness of the significance of the promotion Kinyarwanda or Kiswahili and therefore assign greater social prestige to English than any African language.

Counterfeit Good Will and Contradictions

The counterfeit good will toward Kinyarwanda that does not go beyond the usual abstract speech on language issues has been noticed. Hence, that is why often, some Kinyarwanda language promotion programs are abandoned at one stage or another to the specialists of language developments wherein they conceive 'Rwandan language promotion' in consultation or official meetings to host colloquia with no concrete action following. Among the biggest, and the latest was organized by the Institute for Scientific and Technological Research (in French: l'Institut de Recherche Scientifique et Technologique) on a precise theme of 'promotion of Kinyarwanda language'⁸. Recommendations in this colloquium, however important they are, till now, go unheeded. Moreover, in all these colloquia, they advocate education for Rwandan children in nursery school levels in their mother tongue, while all children of the decision-makers and even specialists of the language issue are sent in schools teaching English and French since nursery school. This contradiction constitutes another testimony about the simulated good will of stakeholders and specialists of the linguistic issue in Rwanda. The issue and the challenges of the literacy campaign in Kinyarwanda in nursery schools in the country side is different in towns where these stakeholders and specialists live; if we were to go by the findings of the P. Munyankesha (2004: 166) investigation, Kigali town inhabitants, for example, 'support less (than country side inhabitants) the idea that Kinyarwanda language being essential to children schooling'⁹. This certainly results from the fact that some people have children schooled in other languages (English, French).

National Language Par Excellence

Apart from the 'kinyarwandisation' advocated by the academic reform of 1978-1979 that stated the use of Kinyarwanda in various sectors of national daily life including education, the promotion of Kinyarwanda, language cultured from birth, has not been considered as a priority by the government. This resulted in a language policy without a defined orientation, commitment and 'determination', and as an outcome, the national language was marginalized and it was given the status of language of family conviviality, used in everyday communications instead of fulfilling its status of the official language. Therefore, in the new strategy of language planning in Rwanda, the modernization of the corpus of Kinyarwanda should be considered as a cornerstone of the building with a normalization of Kinyarwanda at all levels as a top priority, without which the language will be unfit for requirements of development. In short, it is a huge project but one that can be realized with strategies that could focus on the integration of Kinyarwanda, widely and effectively into the national institutions and then by determining the precise role of each of the other major languages in Rwanda. Kinyarwanda, which can be called the 'national language par excellence of Rwanda' in the sense that it is spoken by all Rwandans, it should become the official language in the full sense of the term in the new sociolinguist configuration of Rwanda.

Conclusion

This analysis is mainly based on findings of a literature search and a field survey conducted as part of a doctoral thesis (2010). It also relies on: some informal discussions with colleagues and experts in linguistics and language policy, experience as Rwandan, experience as a lecturer/linguist at the National University of Rwanda, and living the daily sociolinguistic reality of Rwanda. Hence, in this paper tried to demonstrate the need to alter Kinyarwanda language's function through a new language policy focusing primarily on the standardization and generalization of Kinyarwanda, taking into account its developmental potential.

In general, the lack of research on the sociolinguistic situation in Rwanda and on the corpus planning of Kinyarwanda shows two important statements. First, there is no awareness of the importance of national language daily life. Second, the lack of initiatives, and coordination of research show a weak strategy and methodology in implementing decisions taken. The same lack of awareness also explains the lack of cooperation and success in the national language policy toward African languages.

Consequently, it is appropriate to argue that: Kinyarwanda arises ultimately as the only language that would guarantee the fulfillment of political, economic, social and cultural development of Rwanda; the standardization of the status of Kinyarwanda is complete; the Kinyarwanda language can be an important communication tool between the government and the population in making political decisions and development projects, the national language (Kinyarwanda) should be integrated, and properly, effectively and efficiently used in all important domains of national life, including modern sectors; and in mobilizing the masses.

Notes

¹Translated from Kinyarwanda: ‘*Inama y’Abaminisitiri yasabye Minisitiri w’Uburezi gushyiraho gahunda yihuta yo kwigisha mu cyongereza mu mashuri abanza, ayisumbuye n’amakuru yose ya Leta n’aterwa inkunga na Leta (subsidiés)*’. Rwanda Government, 2008. *Imyanzuro y’Inama y’Abaminisitiri yo kuwa 8 Ukwakira 2008* [Online]. Available at: <http://www.gov.rw/>

² Translated from French: ‘...*la plupart des leaders africains ne sont pas encore conscients du caractère fondamental de la promotion des langues africaines et de leur importance dans le développement du continent*’

³ ‘recolonisation linguistique *en douce*’ (Abolou, 2008, p.68).

⁴ Translated from French: ‘[Le fatalisme linguistique] auquel se rattachent l’Etat post-colonial et les institutions internationales, se fonde sur l’apprentissage de la modernité qui doit nécessairement passer par les langues importées, lieux d’élucubrations paternalistes’.

⁵ Translated from French: ‘[Le fanatisme linguistique], prôné par les populations rurales, recommande les langues africaines, lieux d’illusion identitaire et de reconnaissance maternelle’.

⁶ Le modèle de participation à l’audience et le modèle intersectoriel, par exemple, qui mettent l’accent sur le ‘self-reliance’ et sur le ‘people-centred’ qui sont des approches visant à trouver en soi les moyens de son autonomie.

⁷ R. Chaudenson, 1991. Plurilinguisme et développement en Afrique subsaharienne : Les problèmes de communication. *Cahier des Sciences Humaines*, 27(3-4), pp.305-319 cited in Abolou, 2008, p.35.

⁸Translated from French : ‘l’ensemble des ressources, des techniques, des stratégies et des actions de communication utilisées dans le but de mener à bien[...] un programme de développement [...], créer un environnement social favorable au développement [...], collecter, traiter et faire circuler toute information [...] dans le sens du développement’, H.Kone et al., 1995. *La communication pour le développement durable en Afrique*, Abidjan : P.U.C.I., p.23 cited in Abolou, 2008, p.35.

⁹ Institut de Recherche Scientifique et Technologique du Rwanda (IRST), 2001. *Inama nyunguranabitekerezo ku guhesha agaciro ikinyarwanda: kuva ku wa 10 kugeza ku wa 12 Mata 2001*, Butare: IRST.

¹⁰ Translated from French: ‘soutiennent [les habitants de la ville de Kigali] moins l’idée que le kinyarwanda soit essentiel à la scolarisation des enfants’.

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