Communicating in local languages: a prerequisite for community access

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DRAFT[1]

Introductory remarks

At the beginning of the 21st century (NE), we live in a world that is increasingly experienced, perceived and depicted as a global community characterized by a diversity of cultural practices, beliefs, tastes and styles. In spite of this important fact, it continues to be necessary to explain why the maintenance and development of all languages extant today is an inescapable imperative, i.e., why the apparently unstoppable linguistic homogenisation of the world is not the unqualified blessing it is taken to be by many among the few who ever get to think about the language question.

There are, naturally, many ways of doing this but I wish to use the simple mnemonic formulation 3D+ID in order to expound very briefly on the fundamental reasons for this imperative which, incidentally, entails the injunction to promote multilingualism in all relevant, i.e., virtually all, social formations. I take the liberty to reproduce, with some amendment, the arguments as I presented them in a paper delivered at the Thematic Meeting organised by UNESCO in cooperation with the African Academy of Languages, the Government of Mali and the Agence Intergouvernementale de la Francophonie within the framework of the 2nd phase of the World Summit on the Information Society, held in Bamako, Mali, in May 2005. Against this background, I shall consider, also briefly, the language situation in Africa and go on to comment on the intersection and convergence of language and media policy and practice in the context of the micro-electronic revolution with special reference to the role and importance of community radio and the internet for affording ever increasing numbers of people access to vital information and, thus, to full citizenship in modern democratic polities.

At the heart of the discussion lies the insight, as expressed by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, that

> … language as communication and culture are … products of each other. Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. (Cited in Alexander 1989:55)

In the South African context with respect to access to information, Duncan (2002:4) underlines the importance of communicating information to the grassroots communities:

> Apart from its cultural dimension, information has a far more instrumental use in that service delivery will simply not be possible without two-way information flows. In so many instances, access to information can literally mean the difference between life and death. In view of the fact that broadcasting is the country's most accessible mass conduit for information,

it is centrally placed to play this information role and foster a common South African identity. …

Diversity

In order to understand the significance of our international commitment to the promotion and maintenance of multilingualism as a defining feature of modern life, it is essential to consider some of the more important implications of this social phenomenon. In my view, the most far-reaching and wide-ranging insights come from the ecology of languages paradigm, which has been pioneered and popularised by scholars such as Maffi, Skutnabb-Kangas and others, even though many of the avenues it has opened up or pointed to remain controversial and unexplored. Suffice it to say that the proposition that cultural and, therefore, linguistic diversity is as necessary as biodiversity for the survival and perpetuation of the human species is one with which we have to engage [2]. It is a proposition, moreover, which gives strength to the arm of all those who are committed to the promotion of mother tongue based bilingual education and of multilingualism, more generally, regardless of how divergent their points of departure might be. The proposition pivots on the yet to be proven assumption that there is a direct causal, and not merely a correlative, link between biological and cultural-linguistic diversity[3]. This is no reason for rejecting it, since whether or not the hypothesis is

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[2] See Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:91-96). The analytical coordinates of this debate have to be defined very carefully. Otherwise, it may become as irrelevant as the intense debate that was waged by avowed Marxist scholars in the 1920s and the 1930s on the subject of whether language "belonged" to the realm of the "superstructure" or of the "economic base". That debate, as is well known, had the Mephistophelian consequence of both contributing immensely to a thriving Soviet linguistics practice and resulting in the social and professional isolation and even in the physical extermination of so-called dissidents and deviationists. To quote Skutnabb-Kangas (2000:96):

> To me it seems important that serious consideration to the study of the possible causal relationships will not be curtailed by accusations of essentialism, romanticism, fundamentalism, neo-Darwinism, or any of the other –isms which might prevent serious and solid scholars from entering the field. The issues are too important to be waved away by thoughtless labelling before they have been thoroughly studied. And the interest, and action, have to grow faster than the threats to the planet.

May (2001:3), however, points to the danger that language loss may be contemplated with equanimity precisely through the emphasis on the analogy with the loss of biological diversity.

[3] Charles Darwin (1913:137), citing an essay by Lyell, which dated from 1863, as early as 1871 pointed out the "parallelism" between the development of different languages and distinct species. His discussion of this question, incidentally, serves to underline May's caveat (see note 1 above).

disproved eventually will not affect the fact that all languages are depositories of knowledge and that some of the endangered languages constitute the only possibility of access to valuable indigenous knowledge that reaches far back into the history of the human species. The link between human survival on planet Earth and the nurturing of multicultural and multilingual societies is clearly fundamental in every sense of the term. It is a consideration which, like ecology in the more obvious life-sustaining context of animal and plant life, can no longer be ignored by any modern state.

Development

If linguistic diversity has only recently come to be seen as an essential aspect of the survival of the human species, it is a long-established fact of modern life that language policy and language practice can either stimulate or impede economic efficiency, labour productivity, economic growth and development. Since human beings are dependent on one another for the production of the means of subsistence, they necessarily co-operate in the labour process and in order to do so, they have to communicate with one another. In this process of communication, language plays the most important role[4]. Hence, the development of linguistic markets, especially in the modern world of the capitalist mode of production, is directly related to the economic functions of a language or of a set of languages. These functions are automatically and objectively determined by the profit-seeking interests of the dominant sectors of economic production and of those who control the strategic means of production. As I shall point out presently, tendencies towards reification and mystification develop such that the owners of material wealth become afflicted with a kind of myopia that makes it almost impossible for them to discern the inappropriateness and even the counter-productiveness of their "tried-and-tested" language policy and language practice in the workplace[5]. In any case, the language(s) in which the major economic transactions of a society take place function like a key to power, money and status.

In the field of Applied Language Studies in Africa, there is a growing appreciation of the fact that one of the reasons for the failure of so many economic development plans on the continent is the fact that development aid is invariably packaged in a foreign language (usually English) and that this fact necessarily excludes the vast majority of Africans from being integral participants in the development process (see, among others, Prah 1995). The most advanced analysis of the genesis and social-order functions of linguistic markets is that associated with the work of the late Pierre Bourdieu. In a multilingual polity, it is essential that the optimal balance be found in the deployment of relevant languages in order to maximise efficiency and productivity. One of the myths of "hands-on" as well as of most theoretical economics is that a single, dominant, language is a critical feature of such a "balanced" policy. This is a legacy of the European provenance of modern industrial societies and does not correspond to the reality in most non-European countries. Indeed, given the universality of mass migrations today, it is no longer even characteristic of most European societies. In any case, it is counter-intuitive

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[4] It is plausible and justifiable to speculate that it is this need for co-operation that originally led to the activation of the genetic software in the brain of the genus "homo" which Pinker calls "the language instinct".

[5] A useful South African case study is du Plessis and Schuring 2000.

to claim that an entire nation will produce optimally in a second or third, not to say a foreign, language! In this context, what distinguishes more from less industrialized economies is not their alleged monolingualism but rather their much higher levels of literacy.

Democracy
The third implication of multilingualism as a policy issue is the specifically political objective of maximising the democratic potential of the social formations within which we live. It is unnecessary to spell out the details of the well known rights paradigm in this forum. Stated in the simplest possible terms: all human beings should have the right to use the language of their choice in order to conduct their essential transactions such as going to school, church (mosque, temple, meetings, etc.) or to the post office, the bank, the supermarket, etc., if these languages are prevalent in the political entity in which they live[6]. If they are unable to do so, they are necessarily disempowered, unable to be part of the decision making processes of the society concerned and unable to make or to influence the concrete decisions that affect vital aspects of their lives. Such circumstances occur in every social formation on a random basis as the result of a lack of resources or because of the insensitivity of one or other bureaucrat. When this happens, the matter can usually be put right without too much trauma and humiliation. The object of our concern is the systematic denial of such linguistic human rights as a matter of political and social policy of the ruling groups in a society. This question, it is clear, is of exceptional importance in a country such as South Africa, where we are going through a period of transition and, in certain respects, of very real transformation.

Given the obvious importance of linguistic human rights for the expansion and consolidation of democratic polities and for the well-being of all individuals, it is significant that as yet there is not a single international rights instrument in which education of children in the mother tongue is guaranteed without qualification (see Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:527-542). This is indeed ironic if we consider the fact that linguistic human rights are the aboriginal human rights, i.e., those rights derived from the need and the struggle to maintain the feature by which our very humanity is defined and made possible. Although we would have to reformulate it in various directions in order to bring it in line with the state of our knowledge of communications theory today, if we accept the Darwinian dictum: "No man without language, no language without man", we can arrive at no other conclusion.

A vital insight in this regard pertains to the implicit global contest between Anglo-Saxon dominance (the hegemony of English) and what we might dub the Global Alliance for the Promotion of Multilingualism. In this connection, the continents of Europe (the European Union), Africa (the African Union) and Asia (ASEAN) are of prime importance. Co-operation among the states and the civil-society sectors of these areas of the globe is

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[6] This raises the question of the rights of immigrant and regional or other demographic minorities. In this context, I shall refrain from discussing the matter. The literature on the subject is rich and varied. See as one of the most recent publications in this domain Extra and Gorter 2001. Also, May 2001.

essential for ensuring linguistic diversity as understood in the present context. The Power, not the Tower, of Babel is the vision that lights up this constellation.

Identity

In the context of a human rights approach (freedom of information), it is necessary to mention the integral relationship between language and individual as well as social identity. In this connection, we normally confine our discussions to the structuring and constitutive role of the mother tongue, i.e., the primary language or languages, in which the child is socialised. Without further exploration of the debates that have been, and are still being, conducted in regard to the main content of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis about the link between languages and the way we perceive the world or construct our diverse realities, I believe that it is most appropriate to accept a weak version of that celebrated proposition. By doing so, we immunise ourselves against any narrow nationalist notions of language as the "soul" of a nation. We accept the view, which is borne out by all linguistic research and by actual experience, that anything (thought or emotion) can be expressed in any language, even though the overtones and resonance will differ from one speech community to another and from one individual to another because of the unavoidable specificity, i.e., the contextual uniqueness, of all experience. *The individual citizen can only benefit optimally when s/he engages with her environment in a language s/he has very good command of. For most people, this is the "mother tongue" or the language of the immediate community. Thus, the use of local languages and not only languages of high status is a prerequisite for the maintenance of a democratic regime based on the equal dignity of all the citizens and, as I have pointed out, for optimal economic development as well as for the larger implicate ecological order on the planet.*

Two examples of evolving practice in Africa

My colleague, Brigitta Busch of the Universities of Klagenfurt and Vienna in Austria, has recently published one of the few substantial analyses of the relationship between language and media policy in the context of the telecommunications revolution of the late 20th century. The publication, *Sprachen im Disput. Medien und Öffentlichkeit in multilingualen Gesellschaften*, published in 2004 by Drava Verlag in Klagenfurt, is of great interest in the present context, since it compares developments in the countries of Eastern Europe, many of which have become, or are becoming, members of the European Union (EU), with two countries in southern Africa - the Republics of Madagascar and South Africa - that belong to the African Union (AU). In what follows, I draw heavily on her understandings and on the data she has gathered as well as on the analysis by the director of South Africa's Freedom of Expression Institute of the evolving South African broadcasting policy [7].

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[7] Duncan, J. 2002. Broadcasting and the National Question. South African Broadcast Media in an Age of Neo-Liberalism. Johannesburg: Freedom of Expression Institute and Netherlands Institute for Southern Africa.

To begin with, however, I quote a simple, direct statement of fact, as it were, taken from a proposal for a "Communications Network in African Languages" (CONAL) drawn up in 2004 by two Cameroonian linguists and adult educators[8]:

> Most of the development related problems in Africa are brought about by lack of sufficient information in African languages. Generally the information does not get right down to local communities because it is disseminated in foreign languages that the people do not understand…. (Tadadjeu and Chiatoh 2004:1)

In the light of this statement[9], it is important to stress the now accepted fact that developments in the broadcasting and telecommunications sectors, together with the hegemonic effects of "globalisation" in the domain of language practice are increasingly making the centralised control of information problematical and that national state authorities are to a large extent compelled to allow regionalisation and fragmentation of these domains. In the case of countries such as South Africa, legislation promoted since 1994 in the interests of nation building and transformation has proactively created the space for the public broadcasting system, the local or regional private service providers and non-profit community radio sectors to thrive in an environment of flexible control. Indeed, in spite of many problems and detailed criticisms[10], it is not too much to suggest that in this particular sphere, post-apartheid South Africa has gone a long way towards "getting it right". Busch (2004:277) even suggests that from a European perspective, the manner in which media policy is discussed in the media and the ways in which multilingual programme formats are produced could provide important guidelines for good practice in the EU, bent as it is on shaping a European public consciousness.

Essentially, what we are witnessing in the field of media developments at the beginning of the 21st century is the displacement of the primacy of print media by that of audio-visual media. This has significant disintegrative implications in the field of language policy and practice. Among other things, features such as the supposedly unquestionable assumptions about language standardisation, language "purity" and even about the definition of "languages" itself have all become problematical. Practice in the privately-owned commercial and in the community-based non-profit sectors is speeding ahead and creating new language situations that have not yet been characterised in socio- and psycholinguistic terms, or even in terms of orthodox theoretical and descriptive linguistics. Whereas the primacy of the print media in the context of the rise of capitalism from the 15th century onwards[11] shaped a homogenised monolingual habitus in terms of the nation state paradigm, the emerging primacy of the electronic media is leading to de-centring of control through both privatisation of services and supranational networks and monopolies with consequent language fragmentation and other challenges to linguistic

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[8] Tadadjeu, M. and Chiatoh, B. 2004. The Implementation of the Communication Network in African Languages (CONAL). Unpub. Ms.

[9] This strand of sociolinguistic research in Africa, heralded by insightful speculation by, among others, Mshana (1992), Djité (1993) and Prah (1995), awaits a large-scale study.

[10] Duncan (2002:2), foe example, refers to the fact that "… ongoing inequalities with respect to media access have led to accusations that South Africans do not share a common pool of information".

[11] Anderson (1983) is the celebrated reference for this view.

taboos. It is these developments that are, potentially and in actual practice, opening up the space for the realisation of one of the United Nations' and UNESCO's most powerful human rights appeals, i.e., the demand for freedom of and access to information for all. The ascendancy of the new technologies and the new media is, inevitably, resulting in an albeit uneven retreat of the print media[12].

Of course, for this presentation the most relevant spin-off of the revolution in media technology is the range of ways in which the new media are affecting the use of African languages on the continent. Radio, in particular community and public service radio, is central to the understanding of the media dynamics on the African continent. What used to be called "combined and uneven development" in Marxist political economy studies is being demonstrated in this sphere as non- and pre-industrialised communities in the South are engaging with the most sophisticated electronic gadgetry such as satellite dishes, mobile phones and the internet in order to get access to information, education and entertainment. In this connection, the examples given by Busch, among others, from Madagascar, Nigeria, Cameroon, South Africa and elsewhere are extremely poignant. From my own experience in South Africa, I can report that internet cafés, video clubs and electronic newsletters and other networks are very widespread and popular. The sense of being connected with the great wide world is, naturally, most alluring to the youth but in rural areas, these same phenomena have an often life-sustaining significance, especially in the context of AIDS education, water shortages and similar "natural" afflictions.

There are two issues that are most pertinent in the present context. First, there is the impact of the convergence of broadcast and telecommunications technologies on the dissemination of information among rural and poor people, most of whom – in the South – tend to be hardly literate, and thus for the promotion of democracy and development and, ultimately, for the maintenance of bio-cultural diversity. We cannot separate the question of digital literacy from that of basic literacy Secondly, the significance of using African languages that, especially in Africa, where the static maintenance syndrome (or the colonised mind) makes people believe that their languages are useless and thus reinforces their voicelessness. The eurocentrism of the elites equally helps to trap the masses in the dungeon of illiteracy.

It is essential that much more careful attention be given to the promotion of a culture of reading and the question of early literacy in African and other marginalised languages.
Secondly, the significance of using African languages that are otherwise marginalized in the global context on the internet and in other electronic (and print) media should not be underestimated. Given the fact that these languages, generally speaking, are perceived as having no, or only minimal, market value, the enhancement of status that this usage brings with it is of exceptional importance for the respective user communities, including the intellectual communities, concerned. Moreover, in accordance with the adage that languages develop through being used, the challenges which this fact poses to terminology developers, creative artists, journalists and scholars generally give rise to a vibrancy and a dynamic that can truly be placed in the vicinity of the much vaunted "African Renaissance" Examples are legion, especially since the inauguration of the

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[12] Statistics and references in Duncan 2002:1

African Academy of Languages, under whose general stewardship a large-scale language planning and language development strategy has been conceptualised and is being realised in the form of a series of core panafrican applied linguistics programmes. While there are many controversial and difficult decisions that will have to be made along the way, there is no doubt anymore that the post-colonial malaise in the domain of language use and language policy is at last being addressed seriously and with real hopes of success in the medium to long term.

Human language technology can become the portal for initiating and keeping open the development of a culture of reading in African languages if sufficiently innovative ways are found to inform, educate and entertain users, especially at primary school level. Texting on mobile 'phones in African languages is already a normal phenomenon in urban and in many rural schools and other institutions. Automatic Teller Machines are programmed to provide information to customers in their own languages. The recent award of the Oscar for the best foreign-language film to the highly multilingual South African *Tsotsi*, as well as well as the Berlinale award in 2005 in a similar category to the film *UCarmen eKhayelitsha* show that with adequate funding and skilful resource management, the latent creative capacities of Africa's peoples and their languages can be unlocked and their voicelessness overcome. Language is the key to this process because of the manner in which it is charged with tradition and yet capable of bridging the divide between past and present. It is through intercultural communicative acts such as translation and interpreting and through expanding the lexicons of languages to express modern sentiments and to capture the novelty of today that all peoples have appropriated their versions of modernity. For this reason alone, if for no other, it is essential that information be made accessible to all people in their local languages. IPAC, UNESCO and ACALAN face a historic challenge in this regard and we can only hope that practical strategies and examples of good practice will be found to maximise the impact of what is happening in the technological environment and in the changing media as well as language policy domains.

The availability of the Internet as a tool enables smaller linguistic communities, if they have access to the necessary hardware and software, to take their virtual places alongside all the peoples of the world and to preserve their languages as expressions of modernity. There is also no doubt that the world wide web is beginning to serve as a kind of linguistic archives for endangered and even extinct languages and that this capacity is of the utmost significance for the preservation of the cultural heritage of all of humanity. In terms of access to information, this represents a corner of then canvas that most people never even notice; yet, it is, perhaps, the most important in terms of human dignity and of social and individual identities.

This heritage orientation towards the web is in some sense backward-looking and it is, therefore, pertinent to ask how we can best use cyberspace in order to enhance the status and accelerate the use of our languages in all the controlling domains of language. As stated earlier, under the aegis of ACALAN, there are the beginnings of important work, especially in respect of the promotion of training in computational linguistics and of terminology development and standardisation for science, technology and other fields.

However, the really significant issues have to do with freedom of access to the net, the curtailment or, preferably, the outlawing, of any obstruction to the Internet whether this emanates from governments or from private sources. As victims of the digital divide, African scholars and people tend on principle and for reasons of self-interest to be in favour of the maximum of freedom in respect of the Internet and of the digital environment generally. The ongoing debates on these issues (freedom of access, of information, of speech, etc.) are not new, of course. They repeat similar debates that took place under historically different conditions when radio, television and other inventions in telecommunications first became issues of public interest[13]. We have to find ways of resolving the awful contradictions inherent in the "magic" of the Internet and in all its related functions and processes, the fact that it is one of the most timely products of the human mind in that it enables us to tackle the enduring questions of poverty, disease, illiteracy and ignorance but that through the manner in which cyberspace is, or can be, appropriated, it might very well serve as one of the most pernicious tools for the perpetuation of inherited social inequalities of all kinds. International agreements and conventions on the freedom of access to and use of the Internet are pivotal instruments for the promotion of democratic governance and should be used towards this end by African, and other, democrats.

On the continent, South Africa has probably gone furthest in this direction. Duncan (2002) discusses the legislation in terms of which a media policy framework has come into being in some detail. Essentially, there is a commitment to the increasing use of the indigenous African languages and budgetary provision is made in order to translate this commitment into reality. However, there are many contradictions arising from the fact of 11 nominally equal official languages. Thus, for example, the public broadcaster is castigated for not making it possible for the two so-called "minority" languages among the 11 official languages to be used equitably in the broadcasting regime. However, both Busch (2004) and Duncan (2002) laud South Africa's albeit zig-zag progress in respect of genuinely promoting multilingualism in the visual media (as opposed to a kind of multiple monolingualism in the audio media, especially in public radio). With respect to the policy framework, Duncan (2002), despite her critical stance, captures the consciousness of South Africa's policy makers of the potential of the new media:

> … (Methods) need to be found of drawing on all that is good in the technological revolution, and re-deploying it to serve the information interests of all South Africans. … The potential of … (the) new technological developments is tremendous, especially their potential to present a spread of content more accessible than ever before. However, the most exciting possibility … is that of increased interaction between 'producers' and 'consumers' of information, to the point where it can become virtually impossible to distinguish between the two. The development of a '360 degree feedback loop' deepens the democratic potential of these new media, where they could be socialised to the point where the utopian definition of freedom of expression contained in the

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[13] Brigitta and Thomas Busch drew my attention to this point.

South African constitution – namely that everybody has the right to receive and impart information – could become an attainable reality.

With respect to the legislative requirements, she spells out equally clearly what can and should be done at present.

… (It) is necessary for the SABC to consider a radical de-centralisation programme, shifting resources from its head office … to a number of de-centralised production centres. In fact, the roll-out of new technologies necessitates a vision of public broadcasting that exploits provincial and local access possibilities. So public broadcasting would be connected to an arrangement of local, regional and national hubs, serving as information resources not only for one another, but also for their local communities and service areas. The result will be the promotion of interactivity, expanded co-production, and creative re-use of public broadcasting programming and other archival material. The SABC would therefore need to work closely and form partnerships with other communications organisations at provincial and local level, including the growing telecentre and multipurpose community centre movement and community radio.

In conclusion, it should be said that developments on the ground, where small-time operators and entrepreneurs are "doing their own thing", establishing video clubs, creating blogs, chatrooms, etc., in African languages (see Busch 2004:234-238) and, thus, shaping the policy landscape "from below" can be accommodated in a democratic polity by the kind of legislation for a flexible regulatory framework that is being developed in South Africa. This is optimal, of course, and it is essential that the necessary political action be taken at the level of the AU or of sub-regional structures such as SADC, ECOWAS, etc., in order to facilitate this essential development. If it does not happen soon, it is to be expected that in Africa, at least, the digital divide will soon become an unbridgeable chasm. In that case, the fate of the urban and the rural poor will effectively be sealed in the worst sense of that term.

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