The Impact of Eurocentrism towards the Language Problem in Africa

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Abstract
The contact between Africa and the Western world has had monumental influences in Africa's self-definition and assertion. The linguistic problem in Africa manifests itself as an inherent incapacity of Africans to propose and promulgate linguistic policies that allow the use and development of African languages in the continent and beyond. The incompetent policies that have long been a factor of marginalising African languages are highly influenced by Eurocentric ideologies and politics through which without a conscious leap from such ideologies Africa shall always be subject to hegemonic aids and ideologies. This purpose of this paper is to expose the Eurocentric influences behind Africa's supposed multilingual knots. We shall explain in detail what euro centrism is and demonstrate, thereby, how Euro centrism perpetrates the negativity ascribed to African languages. This paper shall make an exposition on the relationship between euro centrism and the language problem in Africa. We shall discuss how euro centrism guises itself in the African language problematic, and shall also develop arguments on how globalization is playing a key role in marginalising African languages.

Key Words: Euro centrism, African Languages, Self-definition, Globalization

1. Introduction

Africa has encountered several social ills that are as a result of euro centrism, this claim is justified through the slave trade, colonisation and post-colonial history that has one common denominator, Europe. Euro-centrism is: A cultural phenomenon that views the histories and cultures of non-Western societies from a European or Western perspective. Europe, more specifically Western Europe or "the West," functions as a universal signifier in that it assumes the superiority of European cultural values over those of non-European societies. Although Euro centrism is anti-universalist in nature, it presents itself as a universalist phenomenon and advocates for the imitation of a Western model based on "Western values" – individuality, human rights, equality, democracy, free markets, secularism, and social justice – as a cure to all kinds of problems, no matter how different various societies are socially, culturally, and historically (Pokhrel,2011).

This phenomenon has been entrenched in European and African minds through ages of constant stereotyped ideologies in education and in media throughout the Western and African world: It is an ideology that sets the Western world and its cultures as the superior and only model of society worth imitating; most Westerners have internalised the idea of European exceptionalism and allow it to merge with the universal phenomenon of *ethnocentrism* to breed what we call *Euro centrism* (Wolff, 2017). The following example demonstrates how euro centrism was expressed:

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When French colonizers in the nineteenth century spoke of *la mission civilisatrice*, they meant that, by means of colonial conquest, France—or more generally Europe—would impose upon non-European peoples the values and norms that were encompassed by these definitions of civilization. When, in the 1990's, various groups in Western countries spoke of the 'right to interfere' in political situations in various parts of the world, but almost always in non-Western parts of the world, it is in the name of such values of civilization that they were asserting such a right (Wallerstein,2019). From the above example, it is evident that Eurocentrism bases itself on stereotyped ideologies that allow its 'justified' expression of superiority in our present society from the moment of its inception: It firstly treats European society and history as a point of reference in imposing external definitions of other societies, so that they are considered 'backward' or 'stagnant' if their history doesn't contain specifically European features, like feudalism. Secondly, it obstinately deals with political economy as though the most important processes are those within or among the industrialised nations, instead of between them and the oppressed nations. It neglects the role played by colonialism and the slave trade and still today played by factors like unequal exchange as an essential and fundamental fact of the capitalist mode of production. Thirdly, this negative trend peripheralizes the oppressed nations politically, treating them as so-called 'reserves' of the revolution and subordinating their struggles to the supposed interests of the proletariat in the 'advanced' countries (Richard& Saba, 1985).

According to Wolff (2017) It is from these fundamental tenets that opinion leaders in the Western world, i.e. academics, public intellectuals and politicians, have settled cosily in their convictions about European exceptionalism and thus have developed and maintain a 'Eurocentric' perspective on the world around them"(Wolff,2017). This paper shall therefore make an exposition on the relationship between eurocentrism and the language problem in Africa.

2. The Impact of Euro centrism Towards the Language Problem in Africa

The two major themes investigated by this paper include: euro centrism guises itself in the African language problematic and key role of globalisation in marginalising African languages

2.1 The Eurocentric Guise in African Languages Problematic

The supposed incompetent nature accorded to African languages in comparison to European languages is directly relatable to Eurocentric attitudes inherent in not only Europeans but also among African scholars who have accidentally suffered a European ideological mental conditioning that aggrandizes European ideals as the proper and only ideal of social life and civilisation, "these often subconscious attitudes influence current linguistic and political ideologies which, to no little extent, are shared by many members of the African post-colonial elite, and further by all kinds of stakeholders in mainstream discourse on development and, in particular, on formal (and including higher) education (Wolff,2007)," consequently, "this tendency has hindered the fruition of African liberation struggles, in fact the continued use of the "term 'post-colonies' for the newly independent states in Africa recognises the continued existence of overt and covert dependencies from the former 'colonial master' (Wolff, 2007)."

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Speaking about the problem of language which goes hand in hand with culture and identity of a people, we can easily assert that the identities of many African people are learned identities or imposed identities; it takes but the courage of a few to break away from the impositions of colonial and post-colonial inferior complex ideals to attain their authentic selves. Westermann (1967) in his *The African today*, expresses how the educated of the Africans suffer most of the inferiority complex, by how they dress and how they communicate. He avers that: The Negroes' inferiority complex is particularly intensified among the most educated, who must struggle with it unceasingly. The wearing of European clothes, whether rags or the most up-to-date style; using European furniture and European forms of social intercourse; adorning the Native language with European expressions; using bombastic phrases in speaking or writing a European language; all these contribute to a feeling of equality with the European and his achievements. (Westermann, 1967).

The English-speaking Africans for example, are "not only merely proud of their mastery of English, they also celebrate their ignorance of their mother tongue (Omachonu, 2008)." By adopting Western languages in our education systems, our social relations and communications, we are simply alienating ourselves from the African perspective. We make ourselves strangers to realities which would have best been conceptualized through our local African languages. Fanon, in his *Black Skin, White Masks*, addresses this issue during his time: "the middle class in the Antilles never speak Creole except to their servants. In school the children of Martinique are taught to scorn the dialect… some families completely forbid the use of Creole, and mothers ridicule their children for speaking it (Fanon, 1967)." Strange as it may seem, "a man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language (Fanon, 1967)."

It is of importance at this juncture to mention the fact that most of the founding fathers of the African nations received their education in the West, meaning that they underwent Western tutelage through Western languages, however the most critical phenomenon is not their being educated through Western tongues but rather the fact that long after independence, citizens of African nations receive their education through Western languages. The net effect of the colonial legacy is that the dominance of imported languages which began in the colonial period has persisted till today. Proof of this is to be found in the statistics of official languages in Africa. Of 53 countries, indigenous African languages are recognized as official languages in only 10 countries, Arabic in 9, and all the remaining 46 countries have imported languages as official languages as follows: French in 21 countries, English in 19, Portuguese in 5 and Spanish in 1 (Bamgbose,1991).

Additional evidence of the continued dominance of imported languages is the medium of education which remains substantially in these languages, particularly at secondary and tertiary levels (Bambgose, 1991)." Whether this happened unconsciously or was planned shall not be discussed here; however, we shall focus in explaining how this phenomenon has contributed to the language problem in Africa; how does the dominance of European languages in African education systems constitute a problem? Every colonized people – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural

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originality- finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle. (Fanon, 1991).

The dawn of independence brought a new feeling of freedom among many African countries that achieved their freedom from their colonial masters. Independence, however, was only a physical state of the larger colonial reality, there was much construction and deconstruction of social ideals to be done. Colonialism introduced new ideals in the African people which can be viewed to have both complimented and contradicted original African values of social cohesion; there was a need to restructure the African society, which was almost alienated from its core original values, as Wiredu states: If you learn philosophy in a given language, that is the language in which you naturally philosophize, not just the learning period but also, all things being equal, for life. But a language, most assuredly, is not conceptually neutral; syntax and vocabulary are apt to suggest definite modes of conceptualization. …the African who has learned philosophy in English, for example, has most likely become conceptually westernized to a large extent not by choice but by the force of historical circumstances. To that same extent he has become de-Africanized…. unless there was a conscious effort toward cross-cultural filtration. (Wiredu, 1998).

The colonialists came to Africa, gave us a language, they gave us a new culture and a new name. We accepted the new language, the new culture and the new name by convention and or by coercion and in the course of time we were removed from our traditional languages with neither a clear history nor future: Hitherto identical or related languages came to be divided and this has led to the incidence of cross-border languages of which Africa has a large number. The severity of the partition in some cases can be illustrated by the example of Cameroon, which shares as many as 70 cross-border languages with the neighbouring countries, one of which is Nigeria, with which it shares as many as 45 languages (Chumbow & Tamanji, 2000).

Kishani, (2001) noted that once a people undergo a linguistic alienation, the risk of their being uprooted from their modes of philosophical conceptualization, collection, conservation, and transmission becomes almost certain. Eurocentrism is a mind-set which, amidst the social problems in Africa that are as a result of European ideals, offers complementary arguments for further development of European ideals in African society. With regards to the marginalisation of African languages: The current Western mind-set would view the European *standard languages* of the former colonial powers as being 'essentially superior' to the 'essentially inferior' indigenous *vernaculars*, often belittled as 'dialects', outside the Western world. Consequently, in this line of thinking, all 'modernisation' and 'development', in particular (higher) education, can only and must be conducted in these 'superior' languages in order to meet the models provided by 'Western civilisation'(Eegunlusi,2017).

The provenance of the linguistic problems in African states, therefore, can rightly be the Eurocentric mind-set which most African leaders, academicians, politicians and policy makers possess, especially when we consider the fact that most African elites have gone through

European scholarship, this has profoundly influenced how Africans have come to define themselves: Historically, a lot of changes have happened as far as the linguistic, cultural and psychological leanings of African identity are concerned. For instance, considerations that were given to African identity during the pre-colonial period are not the same as during colonial and post-colonial periods. Colonialism has greatly influenced this identity. As colonialism thrived, it eroded the important fibres of this identity (Eegunlusi, 2017).

The basis of self-definition for the contemporary African is to a great degree not related to the pre-slave trade and pre-colonial epochs but rather the colonial and post-colonial experience, an experience which is buttressed by Eurocentric stereotyped ideologies: Before colonialism, Africans' perception of themselves was based more on internal viewpoints. By this, they were able to form world views that directed the affairs of the continent. During and after colonialism, their perceptions became increasingly external in outlook. This latter status of Africans' perception of themselves is dominated by colonial influence (Eegunlusi, 2017).

Describing the unconscious damages that colonisation had towards the self-definition and self-understanding of Africans, Ojoniyi observes: From my personal experiences of the relics of colonisation as a young boy growing up in Western Nigeria, I can give first-hand information of the subtle and unconscious damages of colonisation on the way Africans have come to perceive and understand themselves in relation to the crucial issue of identity. Such damages, especially of race and self-perceptions, arise from the colonial masters' perceptions, creations and narrations of the natives which were uncritically accepted as the true representation of the black self. I remember that anytime there is a demanding task to perform, men will be assembled and one, giving a supposedly rousing command to motivate the men to a collective action will say in a loud voice: "eees sobey". "Eee sobey" is a corrupt form of "apes obey"! The colonial masters will yell at a group of blacks that have been assembled to carry out a task "Apes obey"! So, "apes obey" is one of the several legacies of the colonial masters' ways of seeing the Africans and of dealing with them. They are as mammal as apes and gorillas, no more no less. (Ojoniyi, 2015).

Such an experience serves to offer a hint at just how much Eurocentrism has in a damaging way shaped the African mind towards the prejudicial African self-perception: Unfortunately, as a result of this form of perception and narration, a subtle and an unconscious damage has taken place in the collective psyche of the people that from primary schools to secondary schools, teachers and instructors motivating us to carry out any challenging or daunting task are fond of yelling out as the "new educated masters", "apes obey". Those of us who try to "rebel" against being called "apes" by the new masters are met with cane and other forms of corporal punishments. The new masters dress and attempt to copy all the "noble" actions of their mentors including religion. The actions of our teachers, a carry-over of the colonial masters' superiority complex, can only complete the process of the progressive damages to the understanding and the perception of the black self of the students. The black self is also further damaged by the fact that the students are not allowed to communicate in their mother-tongue. The mother-tongue in the understanding of the new masters is a colloquial speech and, by implication, it is inferior, ignoble and totally unacceptable by any civilised mind! In front of every class during my primary and

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secondary school days till date one will always find it boldly written: "Vernacular Speaking in this Class is prohibited"! (Ojoniyi, 2015).

Consequently, the language problem we are investigating relates to the complex issue of African identity which as we have demonstrated has been adulterated by Eurocentric ideologies and mind-set, this experience has led to the fact that "the execution of outdated language policies in education that are often misguided and do not reflect reality continually cost individual learners and their societies. (Muzoora, Terry & Asiimwe, 2014)." Undoubtedly the contact between Africa and the European world has had consequential repercussions to our self-esteem albeit the high status we accord to European standards: It seems that the colonizers colonization of our mentality has made us disadvantaged despite our learning. Many others who stay back in Africa see their lack of opportunity to travel and escape the shores of Africa as serious disadvantage and resolve to pursue their self-interests without giving serious thought to public interests and developmental necessities. At the same time, many are passive while only a handful is willing to do anything. But, sad to say, these few are "lone rangers" and unwanted voices in the midst of the multitude (Eegunlusi, 2017).

It is unfortunate, therefore, that "strictly speaking; Africans rate themselves so low in comparison to the whites because of colonial dominance (Eegunlusi, 2017)." Subsequent efforts to organise African societies have profoundly failed at moulding an authentic African way; the trajectory of African development has been an imitation of European ideals which give no room for African models of life, this is because: Colonially, the African is alienated. This alienation has several dimensions such as political, moral, economical, and so on. The systems of government, the moral behaviour we now imbibe, the economic policies we follow, and so on, are motivated and dominated by the west. The root of these is our mental alienation by colonial policies. This mental alienation was imposed on us through western education. Through this, Africans' colonizers imposed their cultural systems, values and ideals on the Africans. This was done through imposing their languages on the continent. Obviously, this is the most dominant approach to impose alien values on a people. … As at now, our thoughts are dominated by what their linguistic terminologies direct. We do things through their languages and communicate our ideas through them. This became our main medium of expressing our ideas. As such, languages as French, Portuguese and English dominate our daily affairs. This indicates that, epistemologically, Africans are alienated by colonialism. Initially, colonialism imposed these languages on us and we are forced to assimilate western cultures. However, by the time colonialism ended, the damage was done (Eegunlusi, 2017).

The Eurocentric mind-set is deeply entrenched in most Africans which is synonymous to mental slavery, this serves as a clue as to why the problem of language, among many other challenges, in most African nations has been given little to no concern on their use and development. Looking at the development of the world especially in terms of technology, economics and education, there seem to be meagre reasons for any African to put so much importance in the native African languages, ironically most African elites naively admit the irrelevance of knowing their own mother tongues: One reason may be that in their academic training they may themselves have come to internalize such accounts of African thought so thoroughly that they

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have become part of the furniture of their minds. Such minds are what may justly be called colonized. They are minds that think about and expound their own cultures in terms of categories of a colonial origin without any qualms as to any possible conceptual incongruities. Such a mode of thinking may correctly be said to be unduly influenced by the historical accident of colonization (Wiredu, 1998).

Our academic training therefore, has played a fundamental role in alienating Africans from their own languages since the languages used in academic training are mostly European languages hence "one cannot hope to disentangle the conceptual impositions that have historically been made upon African thought-formations [in academia] without a close understanding of the indigenous languages concerned (Wiredu,1998)."

Recounting his time at school in Kenya, Ngugi states that: Any achievement in spoken or written English was highly rewarded; prizes, prestige, applause; the ticket to higher realms. English became the measure of intelligence and ability in the arts, the sciences, and all other branches of learning. English became the main determinant of a child's progress- up the ladder of formal education. (Ngugi, 1994).

And again, that nobody could pass the exam who failed the English language paper no matter how brilliantly he had done in the other subjects. I remember one boy in my class of 1954 who had distinctions in all subjects except English, which he had failed. He was made to fail the entire exam (Thiong'o, 1994). The language problem in Africa must be confronted in all areas of social life:If the African countries look to being positive contributors to this global age rather than victims of it, there needs to be change. There is a need for an ideological paradigm shift from language policies in education that emanate from colonial and neo colonial ideologies to those that target decolonisation and empowerment (Agbedo, Krisagbedo& Eze,2012).

The extreme punishments that used to be administered to learners that were found speaking in their mother tongues have been demolished in Kenya in recent years yet the problem lingers not only in Kenya but the whole African continent, a clear indication of how deeply eurocentrism is entrenched in Africa.

2.2 Key Role of Globalisation in Influencing African Language Ideologies

The current globalisation efforts in the world have perpetuated ideologies that attenuate the use and development of African languages in mainstream social avenues such as government institutions, schools, and private organisations. "The term globalization comes from English, as base of the word 'globalization' which refers to the emerging of an international network, belonging to an economic and social system (Online etymology dictionary, 2009)" similarly, "One of the earliest uses of the term "globalization", as known, was in 1930 - in a publication entitled *Towards New Education* - to designate an overview of the human experience in education (Online etymology dictionary, 2009)." The sociologists Albrow and King (1990) defined globalization as all those processes by which the peoples of the world are incorporated into a single world society. An in-depth study of what pertains globalisation shall often offer

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varied definitions and concerns associated with globalisation: Globalization is the favourite trap-concept of journalists and politicians. The term has also become the key idea for the practice and theory of the business, but also came in academic debates. Unfortunately, what people want to express or define by globalization is often confusing (Wolff, 2017).

The trite incorporation of the peoples of the world into a single world society as a key tenet of globalisation has misled most African nations into adopting European standards as the most favourable to accomplish the globalising goal. Every human society has its own in-group values, beliefs, language and heritage which serves the purpose of expressing a specific identity among many other social groups, however, "the notorious 'Eurocentric mind-set' is created by extending this arguably natural feature of all human societies to a shared value system of Western and Central European Christian cultures and societies (Wolff,2017)." During the colonial invasion of Africa by European nations "the idea was to bring the light of both *Christian Revelation* and *European Enlightenment* to Africa with the aim of moulding the societies and cultures of the 'primitive tribes of Africa' into copies of the 'civilised nations of Europe. (Wolff, 2017)." This was accomplished simply through the Eurocentric supremacist ideology: Quite naturally, the Europeans started off from their own self-assured ideological position, which is based on the internalisation of *European exceptionalism*; it assumes both racial and cultural *cum* religious supremacy as given. Accordingly, they would turn the sociolinguistic and sociocultural situation back home into a model for export; this would be part of their self-declared *civilising mission* among the 'pagan tribes of savage natives' in Africa. (Wolff, 2017).

Through continued Eurocentric ideologies in Africa, most Africans have fallen victims of some sort of inferiority towards European ideals, and with the rising concern of globalisation, most Africans believe that all that is 'white' is the most capable of realising the globalising ideal, and "because of the presumption that the language of globalisation should be a language such as English, the effect on African languages is that their roles are further circumscribed (Bambgose, 2011). The language problem we are facing in Africa is highly influenced by the European language policies which we believe are superior and more suitable for education, scientific research, globalisation and social cohesion. It should be considered, however, that: The ideology underlying the import of such policies is basically Social Darwinist by *a priori* accepting essential 'evolutionary' differences to exist between human societies, with some being more 'advanced' than others, and thus legitimises colonialism. In terms of language policy, this position favours exoglossic monolingualism, i.e. the imposition of one foreign 'neutral' or 'unifying' language. It disregards the historically grown sociocultural realities in Africa with roots in the continent's characteristic territorial multilingualism (Wolff, 2011).

The Eurocentric policies in Africa must be recognised as a threat to not only African languages but also to the authenticity of the African identity since "the ideological presupposition is that modern statehood in Africa must be 'de-Africanised' in order to match Western models (Wolff, 2011)." which is an expression of Eurocentric exceptionalism, and supremacy in the pretence of globalisation. African languages are being marginalised for the purpose of globalisation, in this sense European languages are regarded more effective for this endeavour: Possibly, this over-estimating self-deception regarding European linguistic and cultural plurality and diversity

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accounts for the emergence of a Eurocentric attitude according to which any situation that would quantitatively surpass the European one must be considered chaotic and unmanageable – such as would appear to be the case for Africa (Wolff,2011).

The arguments in support of continued use of European languages often have an ideal that is based on globalising efforts; these are arguments that are developed against multilingualism and or multiculturalism for the purpose of bringing the people of the world to a common heritage. It is often the case that the African multilingual condition is related to backwardness, ethnic conflict and underdevelopment, "the presence of many languages is also equated with economic backwardness while the existence of one language for the whole nation is associated with economic prosperity and political stability (Ndhlovu, 2008), therefore, it is common that: Africa's language resources and their place in African development are unrecognised and little documented or researched in the context of African studies. Language study currently exists on the periphery of mainstream African Studies teaching and research activities (Ndhlovu, 2008).

3. Conclusion

Eurocentrism as we have demonstrated is an ideology or mind-set that has influenced both Europeans and Africans, that is, both the perpetrators and victims. Most Europeans acknowledge themselves as being exceptional and superior to other races and that their ideals are worth imposing on other races, the Africans on the other hand have inherited an inferior complex and have ended up being imitators of European ideals. Globalisation for the larger part has also served to alienate Africans from their social ideals in the sense that the ideals that serve towards the realisation of globalisation are European based. Africans are generally an inferior race that suffers from underdevelopment, ethnic conflicts and political instability. It remains a challenge for African leaders to institute language policies that shall cease the witnessed marginalisation of African languages while at the same time allowing for learning of foreign languages. It is highly commendable that African scholarship be practised through local African languages to curb further entrenchment of European languages into the African minds. The gradual disinterest in local languages must be met by positive action through education; African governments must accord this language phenomenon a crisis, which crisis must be resolved through policies that will allow for a renewed interest in local languages even in academia.

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