

Language in Development Research in 21st Century Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Africa's development in the next millennium must be research driven. Only socio-cultural and economic investigation can provide the vital data necessary to arrive at sound, well-informed policies governing development for all facets of society. Given that most of Africa remains rural and illiterate, the issue of which language is to be a medium of research is especially crucial. Verbal communication is often the only option that trained researchers have to obtain information and attain their research goals. Indeed, this is the only method through which scientists and administrators may seek to influence social or collective behaviour and direct it toward development objectives. This paper contends, therefore, that development research in Africa has failed to make substantial improvements in the quality of life for the majority, mainly because development theory and practice have failed to exploit local languages as media for research and development work. Although, as a result of colonialism, European languages are part and parcel of Africa's heritage, these languages remain foreign for the majority of ordinary people, for whom development is intended.

Language is never simply a neutral instrument to convey meaning, but rather a culturally subjective system reflecting peoples' worldview. Language symbolizes the common beliefs and psychological make-up of the community from which it springs¹. For Africa, the use of language in social research and policy must consider the mobilization of human resources for development. No meaningful change can occur without the full participation of the masses. The importance of speaking to people in their own languages cannot be over-stressed.

DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH AS A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

The major purpose of development research is to provide fundamental and long-term solutions to social problems. Research of this nature provides a venue for the discussion of major issues in socio-economic and political-cultural development. Social science research should ideally aim at discovering and understanding such problems. Social development remains a complex phenomenon that brings into play a multiplicity of factors. These variables are often quite fluid in nature. However, research becomes a complete waste of resources if the findings do not reflect the true feelings of the target population. Unless that happens, results and recommendations contribute little to a collective understanding of the problems or the policies envisaged. Such failure in Africa has been attributed to (a) the lack of communication between researchers and potential beneficiaries of research; and (b) little public awareness of the various findings and programmes. Overall dissemination of research findings continues to

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be very poor². The nature and level of the discourse involved is frequently cast in complex, exclusive jargon understood only by a tiny minority of technical and academic elites. The absence of free-flowing communication between investigators and beneficiaries accounts for the bottle-to-mouth model of development research in Africa. As a result, social research over the years has become an essentially academic exercise.

CHANGE IN HUMAN BEHAVIOUR AS A PREREQUISITE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

As a result of IMF/World Bank assistance, the 1980s and 1990s saw the adoption of economic liberalization in Africa. Before entering an era of liberalisation and market-driven economies, the population must make a psychological leap from traditionalism into the 21st century. Only then can a society meaningfully address areas of immediate concern such as the eradication of poverty, ignorance, disease and hunger. The process of development entails not simply accelerated economic growth but also changes in traditional structures, values and practices⁵.

Thus, for markets to work, the crucial issue becomes how to negotiate desired social and behavioural changes. What role does the development researcher play in facilitating this process? As many scholars have stressed, unplanned or uncontrolled change in the name of modern "development" often results in social behaviours that counter the intended spirit of development. But social science research in Africa has tended to neglect the cultural and language issues of local communities. This "top-down" planning approach denies popular input and participation in the determination of economic and social policy⁶.

The manner of conducting policy without local development research also contributes to the isolation and alienation of the masses from the process of development. Exclusive and highly academic forums such as scholarly journals, dissertations/theses and technical ministry reports reach only a small group of intellectual elites, effectively cutting off the majority. Research results must flow through more informal and accessible channels of communication such as extension education, grass-roots conferences, workshops, exhibitions and demonstrative teaching. Such channels should be utilized when generating knowledge for broad social consumption. If information and data are to help achieve the desired development goals, they must be presented to the people in a culturally and linguistically appropriate manner. Therefore, the use of local languages/dialects that draw their idioms from an accepted cultural landscape is essential.

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH IN AFRICA

The problem of understanding and effectively communicating with people in a second language represents a problem most social science researchers recognize but fail to address. In all stages of research (from problem identification to the reporting of findings) the researcher must continually bear in mind the linguistic and communication complexity at hand. Special attention should be paid to the choice of language and level of discourse because language as a system of communicative symbols only receives meaning from culture and society⁷.

Social science researchers can use language to study the attitudes of various African societies toward change. Through language the researcher may gain insight into aspects of

cultural tolerance, accommodation of divergent views and the mechanisms of coping with change. Language and culture play a vital part in shaping individual and collective behaviour and values. A researcher armed only with a casual level of local language competence will end up with only a partial understanding of the social phenomenon or problem under scrutiny. If a researcher cannot understand the meaning and application of various oral forms (e.g. idioms, proverbs, popular sayings, tongue-twisters, riddles, myths, legends, songs and poetry) in a given community, he or she may not fully understand the politics, economic activities, social organization and cultural values of that locality. The principal claim is not that only researchers fully fluent in local languages may engage in research. Rather, the point is to stress the crucial role of understanding local language and culture as tools of deepening research understanding that would be the case if a researcher did not use them.

Although multilingual, Africa possesses regional languages that have long enabled different far-flung communities to communicate and do business. These languages spread widely, gradually becoming culturally widespread and sometimes politically neutral. This historical process has resulted in their acceptability across and beyond the boundaries of modern states. Examples of these common languages are Hausa, Wolof, Kiswahili, Arabic, Amharic and Berber. To a lesser extent, one may also add Zulu, Shona, Lingala, Ndebele, Xhosa, Tswana and several others.

In East and Central Africa, Kiswahili is the lingua franca, having a long written tradition that has been used as a medium of education at different times in history. Since it is estimated that only 20% of people in this region speak or understand English (and even fewer know French), the potential of Kiswahili as a tool for social communication and development cannot be over-emphasized. Given the high level of lexical borrowing between Kiswahili and the languages of this region, as well as the large body of literature available in the language, social research cannot afford to ignore or overlook Kiswahili.

Having mentioned the role local languages may play in research, we may pay our attention to the national versus local cultural issues. The importance of "local" as opposed to "national" loyalties in matters of development should never escape the serious social science researcher. With the possible exception of material acquisition and embracing new values through formal education or Christianity, most Africans still owe their ethnic origins considerable loyalty and obedience. In effect, many Africans still cling to what they consider values and attitudes while practising a modicum of "modern" life. In other cases it has been demonstrated that local "traditions" are invented from new and old experiences. Social science researchers must acknowledge this in order to avoid offending research subjects and to better understand the responses they encounter. Some of these values and practices a researcher faces have a direct bearing on the community's attitude toward modern development. To an uninitiated scholar, such values and practices may only appear as remnants of a distant past, but the communities concerned often find it necessary to incorporate them in development. Rather than simply dismissing them, the researcher needs to investigate the social basis of their origins and persistence. There is no better place to start such an investigation than with the various forms of creative language such as the oral genres.

LANGUAGE AND OBJECTIVITY IN DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH

One of the major concerns of social science research has been to understand human life and society as objectively as possible. However, since the data derives (directly or indirectly) from individuals with unique personal qualities, recent thinking on social science methodology has refuted the claim that such inquiry can ever be purely objective⁸. These individual qualities colour data whether the inquiry is experimental, survey or evaluative in nature. Individual differences become clear in the language of responses to various questions and in observable preferences for certain words, phrases, sentence structures and idioms. Two levels of thought based on language may be at play here. Individualised language habits or "idiolects" form part of the social personality and affect the worldviews expressed to the researcher. The social science researcher should differentiate these two epistemological types as they occur in the research discourse by analyzing meanings on both the linguistic and cultural levels. This ability directly affects the validity and reliability of the final results as the researcher attempts to distinguish opinion from fact. The effort to refine the process of communication and language use in social science is imperative to understanding the sources of authenticity in any society. In each community there are institutions and personalities regarded as the custodians of indigenous values or ways of life. These people wield untold authority within their community, often influencing language use and social thought. So by studying the expressive behaviour patterns of a subject community, social scientists gain an understanding of the meanings attached to various symbols and how these can reflect power relations. The objectivity and verifiability obtained by the social researcher in that manner is vital in formulating development policies.

CONCLUSION

The keystone of social science research is observation. However, it is impossible to interpret such observations without the careful employment of language as a medium of communication. Utmost attention must be paid to the meaning and application of language to guard against producing distorted accounts. The language used deserves as much attention as description of the phenomena under study. Only then can observation in research reduce the chance of unnecessary errors. There are many sources for error in social research. For instance, a keen researcher may discover cases of either over-generalization or selective observation by a respondent. Although the problem can be addressed by attempts to refine such results, a more profitable alternative would be paying closer attention to patterns of the language used to respond to the researcher. Language analysis helps unearth errors emanating from misinterpretation of data, misinformation, or the mystification of cause-and-effect. These aspects are central to the success of social science research and cannot be taken lightly.

This essay has discussed the importance of language, culture and communication in social research intended to promote development. Research is a social enterprise that makes use of linguistic and cultural tools. Meaning-formation or conceptualization is a culture-bound process. The objectivity, validity and reliability of findings depend upon the researcher's ability to operate effectively within the confines of culture and language. A close relationship exists

between habits of language use and thought processes as well as between socio-cultural mechanisms and the nature of human language. Therefore, problems in social research cannot be resolved solely through the use of non-African languages that currently dominate the literature on African development. Local languages and/or dialects must also be at the core of research and development discourse. The end results for African development might be better than what we have now.

Notes

1. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind : The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Heinemann: Nairobi, 1988, 15.
2. G. Eshiwani, *Background paper to Report on Educational Research and Development in Kenya* . Nairobi: Bureau of Educational Research, Kenyatta University, 1981, 2.
3. G. Warren et. al., *The Planning of Change*. New York: Hort Rinehert, 1969, 58.
4. M.S. Archer, *Culture and Agency : The Place of Culture in Social Theory*. New York : CUP, 1994, 38-39.
5. Frank Blackler (ed.), *Social Psychology and Developing Countries*. New York : John Wiley, 1983,8.
6. Penina M. Mlama, *Culture and Development*. Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1991, 8.
7. Barrie Walde (ed.), *Language Perspective*. London: Heinemann, 1982, 90.
8. Earl Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research*. Belmont: Wardsworth Publishing Company, 1992, 311.
9. F.A. Hanson, *Meaning in Culture*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975, 20-21.
10. S.H. Irvine and J.T. Sanders, *Cultural Adaptation within Modern Africa*. New York: Teachers Press College, 1972, 16.

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