

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

## Language Policy in Ethiopia: History and Current Trends

Getachew Anteneh \* Derib Ado\*\*

**ABSTRACT**

*Ethiopia, as one of the multilingual and multicultural countries, has faced the critical problem of development and implementation of language use policy that could satisfy the needs of various societies in question and contribute to their socioeconomic and socio-cultural development. The various governments that ruled Ethiopia since the reign of Emperor Tewodros II followed various language use policies that suit their political orientation.*

*The major objective of this paper was to seek answers to the following questions:*

- a. What type of language policy did Ethiopia have in the past?*
- b. What is the language policy of the country today?*
- c. How is Ethiopia implementing its language policy today?*

*The historical survey of language use policy was made based on the secondary data (i.e. written documents) from different sources. The study on the implementation of the current language policy of the country focuses mainly on four regional states, namely Amhara, Oromiya and SNNP regional states and the Addis Ababa City Administration. Interviews were conducted with various bodies that are concerned with developing, implementing and monitoring language use policies, such as the Ethiopian Language Research Center, the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, the information and education bureaus of three regional states, namely the Amhara, Oromiya and SNNP regional states to get the necessary data.*

*The analysis of the data shows that though there had been a change from having no written policy to a policy that encourages the development and use of all the languages in the country, the implementation showed a little change in the time from the reign of Tewodros II up to the end of the Derg. The language policies of Tewodros II, Minilek II, Hailesellase I and the Derg regime had been similar on the ground level: they all implemented a one-language language use policy. The language use policy of the current government, however, is quite different in its approach and implementation. The implementation of a multilingual language use policy has served the country both its blessings and consequences.*

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\* Getachew Anteneh JU Education Faculty Jimma, Ethiopia

\*\* Derib do Education Faculty Jimma Ethiopia

## I. INTRODUCTION

### 1. *Background of the study*

Ethiopia has been labeled possessing a long history of three thousand years and more. At various times, its governors and rulers had played their roles in shaping the geographical, cultural, historical, religious etc. -all aspects of the country. As a result most of the status quo today is, to a great extent, the legacy of our past history. Our worries and challenges, - all, have something to do with the past.

In the course of its long history, Ethiopia has treated different social and cultural issues within the boundary. One of the primary issues that concern Ethiopia today is the question of language. Being a multilingual and multicultural country, Ethiopia shares the problem of language use and language choice for various purposes. There are more than 75 languages in Ethiopia that can be categorized under different language families (i.e. Semitic, Cushitic, Omotic, Nilotic). These diversified languages are

considered as assets for the speakers. Every language is used as a means of interaction for the community that speaks it. Apart from the use of these languages for communication purposes, they have the potential to be used in education, administration and the justice system of the country.

This paper attempts to look the historical development of language policy in Ethiopia, in other words, it aims at assessing the various language policies that have been practiced in Ethiopia for the past one hundred plus years. It tries to relate the nature of language policies, their manifestations and position in the practical application of language use, during different periods in Ethiopia (from the time of Tewodros II up to now).

### 2. **What is language policy?**

The concept of language policy is mainly related to decisions rules, regulations and guidelines about the status, use, domains and territories of language and the rights of speakers under question"<sup>1</sup>. Calvet says we shall

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<sup>1</sup> *Schiffman 2005*

treat language policy as the conscious choice made in the domain of relationship between language and social life as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

There is also a more specific definition that treats the subject in a better depth. This specific definition explains language policy as:

I. *What government does officially through legislation, court decisions, executive action or other means to:*

a. *determine how languages are used in public contexts*

b. *cultivate language skills needed to national priorities, or*

c. *establish the rights of individuals or groups to learn use and maintain languages.*

II. *Government regulation of its own language including steps to facilitate clear communication, train and recruit personnel, guarantee due process, foster political*

*participation, and provide access to public services, proceedings and documents.*<sup>3</sup>

The explanations provided so far clearly point out that language policy is the responsibility of the government. Scholars such as Columas (1994), and Calvet (1997) also assert that there is a need for the possession of authority in the formulation of language policies.

The other point that is explained by the definitions is about the domain of application of language policies. Language policies are concerned with determining the status of languages that implies whether languages should be used as national language, language of wider communication, official language, working language, language of instruction, etc. is decided at government level by a policy. Language policies are concerned with domains use, and territories of languages also imply that which language should be used in education, administration etc, and to what extent and where should be resolved by language policies.

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<sup>2</sup> Calvet 1997

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<sup>3</sup> Crawford 2000

### 3. Types of language policies

Language policies differ from place to place and from time to time according to the political orientation of governments and the nature of the society that exists. Some governments have clear and explicit language policies, called *overt policies*, which have written support in legal documents, for instance, the constitution. Others prefer to conceal to their language policy, and as a result, do not state their language policies in written legal documents or others. Such policies are referred to as *covert language policies*. Covert language policies are also known as *de facto*, *common law* or *traditional*, and usually it is the linguistic *status quo* that is taken as the *de facto* or common law.<sup>4</sup>

Language policies are also classified as either promotive or tolerance (permissive) depending on the support and encouragement provided by the government in the use and development of languages. In the case of promotive policies there is a promotion of one or several languages by giving some

constitutional, administrative and legal guarantees by providing personal and/ or by specifying the domains of use. By domains of use, it means whether (a) language (s) should be used in court, schools or in the administration, etc. Tolerance policies, on the other hand, allow the use of a particular or several languages but there is no such encouragement of use and development by providing financial or personnel support.<sup>5</sup>

The other distinction between language policies is between equalitarian and restricted policies. Some language policies treat 'even if a very small minority' as always totally equals to any language and place all languages on equal footings. However, restricted policies as their name imply, are not as open as equal for all languages.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, Patten (2001), proposed four models of language policy, based on the usage of language (s) in a given community. They are

- a. disestablishment or public, disengagement: the model

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid

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<sup>5</sup> Schiffman 2005

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

which maintains that there should be no official publicly recognized language (s).

- b. official multilingualism: in this model there should be the same recognition for the various languages spoken in the community.
- c. language rationalization: the model which privileged public language by limiting or denying recognition of other languages in certain spheres of language use.
- d. language maintenance: the model which aims to make all languages equally successful in their use.<sup>7</sup>

All these different types of language policies, as stated earlier, are the manifestations the government's ideologies in a given country for the speech community regarding on the language (s) use.

#### 4. What is this study about?

In monolingual nations, the use of language does not create problems, as there will be no difficulty in choosing the language for various purposes,

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<sup>7</sup> Patten 2001

whether it is for education, administration, wider communication etc. In multilingual nations, however, there exists a problem as which language to be used for education, administration, wider communication and so on. Thus, the use of language is usually supported by a language policy in those multilingual nations.

This study looks into the language policies of various governments that ruled in Ethiopia since Tewodros II to show how Ethiopia dealt with such a very serious problem and how the current government is dealing with the same problem. Specifically it will answer the following questions:

- What type of language policy did Ethiopia have in the past?
- What is the language policy of the country today?
- How is Ethiopia implementing its language policy today?

#### 5. Delimitation of the study

This study is limited to describing or showing the historical development of language policy in Ethiopia. The study will try to investigate the history of language use policy in Ethiopia since the regime of Emperor Tewodros II up to

now. The discussion of the implementation of the present language policy of the country will look at the case of the Amhara, Oromiya, SNNP regional states and the Addis Ababa City Administration. The rest of the regions, namely Afar, Tigray and Somali are not included in this later discussion due to time constraint to conduct interviews and collect the necessary data from these regions.

## II. Methodology

This research is a survey that employed a qualitative method. The historical survey of language use policy was made based on the secondary data (i.e. written documents) from different sources. The information on the implementation of the current language policy of the country was gathered through interview with various bodies that are concerned with developing implementing and monitoring language use policies, namely the Ethiopian Language Research Center, the Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Culture, the information and education bureaus of the four regional states, namely the Amhara, Oromiya, Addis Ababa administrative State and SNNP regional States.

## III. Language policy in Ethiopia: history

### 3.1 Language policy before the reign of Haile Sellasie I

Despite its long history Ethiopia had no written constitution before Haile Sellasie. There are claims that those governments used the 'Fetha Negest' (Book of Kings) as a basic reference in their governance.<sup>8</sup> That there was no constitution or clearly stated language policy before Haile Sellasie I though, does not mean there was no language policy at all. The prevailing linguistic status quo can be taken as the implicit language policy.<sup>9</sup> In order to assess the language policies of the then governments, however, we need to look at the subdivisions of the era.

#### 3.1.1 Language Policy before Haile Sellasie I

*Before the reign of Emperor Tewodros (1855), Ethiopia was under the hands of different regional lords. Assessing the*

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<sup>8</sup> Cooper 1976a

<sup>9</sup> Schiffman 2005

language policies of these rulers require a detailed study of the era, and it is beyond the scope of this paper.

The reign of Tewodros II was cited as the beginning of the history of modern Ethiopia by many people.<sup>10</sup> The major contribution of Tewodros was that he tried to unify Ethiopia under one empire. Though his objective to unify the country was not successful for various reasons, he laid the foundation for the coming rulers who followed in his foot steps. Tewodros had a promotive language policy that encouraged the use of Amharic. The main and noted contribution of Tewodros nevertheless, was his attempt to make Amharic a literary language. He changed the trend of using Geez to write the Royal Chronicles into using Amharic.<sup>11</sup> In his reign, Amharic got the momentum to move one step up from a mere lingua franca to a literary language. The language policy that Tewodros followed was a covert one as it was not supported by any legal document like a constitution.

The next emperor, *Yohanes IV*, a Tigrinya speaker himself, did not try to alter the history by adopting Tigrinya for official purposes. He promoted the same language as Tewodros did in his quest for national unification of his empire. Since he followed the footsteps of Tewodros, we can thus, put his contribution in similar category with Tewodros.

The third period, *the reign of Minilik*, can also be considered the continuation of the second period with relative modernization and expansion. In terms of unifying the country it can be said that Minilik II finished what Tewodros had started. The promotion of a monolingual language policy, namely the promotion of Amharic, continued covering a very wide area. By the time of Minilik, Amharic reached the premises of local elites and administrative offices where the language had never spoken before-to the south, east and west part of Ethiopia.

With regard to Minilik's language policy, Cohen notes that it focused mainly on incorporating local elites. Amharic then, got the chance to be considered the language of the rulers.

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<sup>10</sup> McNabb 1989

<sup>11</sup> Bahru 1991

Every local rulers, as a result had to speak Amharic in addition to other religious and cultural adaptations. He also states that the roles played by the soldiers, the church and northern Ethiopian settlers together with the incorporation of local elites by providing them with local authority and recognition (even by establishing intermarriage between the families of the royal group and the local elites) helped, among other things, the implementation of a covert language policy promoting one language.

### ***3.1.2 Language policy during the reign of Haile Sellasie I***

Haile Sellasie's government had a unique history from its predecessors with regard to language policy. It had a well established language policy in a written constitution. The first ever constitution was provided in August 1930 on the coronation of Ras Teferi as Emperor of Ethiopia by the name Haile Sellasie I. This constitution, however, does not mention any thing about the official language or any other use of language while it itself was written in Amharic.

As Cohen states it, there was a comprehensive and premeditated language policy which was incorporated in the bigger policy of what is called 'Ethiopianization' <sup>12</sup>. While the 'Ethiopianization' during Emperor Minilik incorporated local elites the 'Ethiopianization' during Emperor Haile Sellasie aimed to encompass the general population.<sup>13</sup> The major rational behind such a move was also explained by the government's quest for national unification and ease of communication among different people. Cohen concludes "in pursuance of a policy of national unification, the government sought to establish a national religion

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<sup>12</sup> We prefer the term 'Ethiopianization' instead of the term 'Amharization' which is used by most foreign writers because we feel that the rulers were always referring to themselves as rulers of Ethiopia and their actions were justified in unifying the country-creating an Ethiopian culture. Note that Darkwah (1975) argues that Minilik a systematic way of assigning and controlling local rulers have a full control over them. He also states that Minilik has assigned Muslim rulers in the eastern part of the country for economic and political reasons.

<sup>13</sup> Cohn 2000

culture and language for all Ethiopians.”<sup>14</sup>

Though it seems more of hypothetical and it did not have such a profound effect on the country's language policy, there was a brief departure from promoting a single language during the five year (1935-41). During this period, the Italians helped introduce local languages even as media of instruction at primary school level. Scholars explain that the changes that Italy introduced was part of their divide and rule policy, which McNabb considers as Italy' attempt to combat “nationalist sentiments” and Tekeste calls (it the attempt of “passivization through apartheid”) as the attempt of “passivization through apartheid” the use of languages as the medium of instruction and other administrative purpose.<sup>15</sup>

After Haile Selassie regained power in 1941, government language policy started to come out more clearly. In 1944, for instance, there came out a clear directive to control the missionary

activities in education sector. It states that Amharic shall be the general language of instruction in Ethiopia, and missionaries are expected to comply with it by learning Amharic and teaching via Amharic.<sup>16</sup>

The implementation of a single language policy was more prevalent in the area of administration, judiciary and education sectors. Even before the re-integration of Eritrea with Ethiopia, the government had replaced Tigrigna and Arabic by Amharic as a medium of instruction.<sup>17</sup> Later Amharic became a full-fledged medium of instruction at primary school level throughout the country following the official declaration of the position of Amharic as the official language of the country in the revised constitution of 1955.<sup>18</sup>

Haile Selassie's promotive language policy of a single language was not limited in the education sector. Amharic was the legitimate language to be used in all official functions: government publications and announcements were

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<sup>14</sup> Cohn 2000:30

<sup>15</sup> Tekeste 1986 in McNabb 1989

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<sup>16</sup> Cooper 1976a in Bender 1976a

<sup>17</sup> McNabb 1989

<sup>18</sup> McNabb 1988

all made in Amharic. A language survey made by Cooper showed that Amharic dominated the use of other languages in the judiciary system.<sup>19</sup>

McNabb argues that the establishment of the National Academy of the Amharic Language in June 1972 had strengthened the position of Amharic and by implication, the implementation of a monolingual language policy. This claim is asserted by the nature of the objectives set for the national academy. i.e.,

1. To foster the growth of the Amharic language
2. To encourage the development of Amharic literature.<sup>20</sup>

A further evidence for the nature of the language policy during the reign of Emperor Haile Sellasie comes from the language use of the government in the media. No newspaper was published in any other Ethiopian language, except for one daily Tigrigna news paper, while there were two daily and four weekly newspapers in Amharic. In addition to this, the time that Amharic was broadcasted on the radio twice as large

as the time allotted for the broadcasting of other Ethiopian languages , i.e. Tigrinya, Somali, Tigre and Afar.<sup>21</sup>

It could be concluded that, in general during Haile Sellasie's government there was very little concern for the development of other Ethiopian languages. The course that Haile Sellasie followed was in line with the prevailing global assumption that the use of one language is useful in bringing about national unification, which he sought very badly.<sup>22</sup>

Quite contrary to the discussion so far, there was a final, but unsuccessful attempt that was made during the very final days of the emperor. The August 1974 draft constitution, Article 45 states that, "With out violating all those statements in other articles of the constitution, Ethiopian tribes and nationalities shall enjoy the right to maintain and develop their language and culture."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Tesfaye 1971 in McNabb 1989

<sup>22</sup> Cohen 2000

<sup>23</sup> A translation by the authors from the Draft Constitution of Ethiopia Presented to the High Constitution

<sup>19</sup> Cooper 1976b in Bender et al 1976

<sup>20</sup> Negarit Gazeta 1987

The attempt to endorse such statements in the constitution did not become successful because the revolution took over the ratification of the constitution, and this final sympathetic attempt to follow a tolerance language policy remained unheard of.

### 3.1.3 Language policy during the Derg

Following the revolution in 1974, the Derg took power and adopted a socialist ideology in the government of the country. As a result of the ideology which applauds the necessity for respecting nationalities' rights, the Derg pronounced that there came the time for all nations, nationalities and ethnicities to enjoy the freedom of maintaining, using and developing their language together with many political and economical benefits. The 1976 document of the government as quoted by McNabb states that,

*Given Ethiopia's existing situation the problem of nationalities can be resolved if each nationality is accorded full right to self government .... wit in its*

Conference in Inter Africa Group  
1993

*environments, it (each nationality) has the right to determine the contents of its political, economic and social life, use its own language and elect its own leaders and administrators to head its general organs.*<sup>24</sup>

The first attempt, it could also be called the only one as well, in implementing such a language policy which recognized other Ethiopian languages, was the introduction of fifteen Ethiopian languages (including Amharic) in the national literacy campaign. The fifteen languages selected based on the language survey made earlier by Bender and others were Amharic, Afan Oromo, Wolayta, Somali, Hadiya, Kembata, Tigrinya, Tigre, Sidama, Gedeo, Afar, Kafa-Mochinga, Saho, Kunama and Silti. These languages were said to represent about 90% of the population.<sup>25</sup>

There were some shortcomings of the national literacy campaign of the Derg.

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<sup>24</sup> Ethiopian Government 1976

<sup>25</sup> McNabb 1989

All languages were made to be transcribed in the Ethiopic(Geez) script and were made to use the 'fidel' which was proved to be inadequate, not only for the Cushitic and others but also for the Semitic language themselves.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the teachers were, almost all, Amharic speakers, who did not speak the local languages spoken in the area they went to teach. McNabb summarizes the effect of this campaign saying that, "The literacy campaign although through the media of nationality languages, [brought] more adults into contact with speakers of the official language, Amharic."<sup>27</sup> Hoben also arrives at similar conclusions by pointing out that lack of resources infrastructure and proper consultation, the literally campaign and all other policies regarding language remained imposition.<sup>28</sup>

Though, Article 2.5 of the 1980 constitution states, "The peoples Democratic Republic of Ethiopia ensures the equality, respect and development of the nationality

languages,<sup>29</sup> practically, there was no other Ethiopian language given any official status nor there was any implication in the constitution, that other Ethiopian languages could be used for official purposes.

If we examine the Derg's language policy critically it seems that it was a continuation of the previous language policy in a slightly different form. As it was stated so far, Amharic remained the main language that was used in the formal education, judiciary, administration and the media.

### ***3.2 The Ethiopian language policy: current trends***

In May 1991, the Derg was over thrown by the EPRDF. The new government, named the Transitional Government, first developed the charter which mainly focused on the rights of nations and nationalities. The second article of the charter states,

*Nations,  
Nationalities and*

<sup>26</sup> Cohen 2000

<sup>27</sup> McNabb 1989

<sup>28</sup> Hoben 1994

<sup>29</sup> A translation by the authors from The Decree of the Constitution of the Ethipipian Peoples Democratic republic in Inter Africa group 1993

*peoples have the right to self determination. Accordingly each nation, nationality and people has the right to preserve and guard its identity, develop its culture and history and use its own language.*<sup>30</sup>

The consequent geopolitical reformation, which introduced the federal system of administration and the ratification of the 1994 constitution, changed the history of the country with regard to language policy. In the constitution, Article 5 reads,

1. *All Ethiopian languages shall enjoy equal state of recognition.*
2. *Amharic shall be the working language of the Federal Government.*

3. *Members of the Federation may determine their respective languages.*<sup>31</sup>

Meles Zenawi's government aggressively promoted the use of local languages for official, administrative, judiciary and educational purposes. As a result of such a language policy, regional states have chosen their respective official languages for various purposes. Today, in addition to Amharic, which is used as the working language of the federal government and the official working language of four regional states plus the federal cities Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa, Afan Oromo in Oromia, Tigrinya in Tigray, Harari (Aderi) in Harari, Afar in Afar, and Somali in Somali serve as regional languages. There are also many languages used as official languages at zonal and wereda levels, especially, in the SNNPR.

Probably the strongest manifestation of the new government's language policy is seen in the education system of the country than in the other areas. Section

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<sup>30</sup> A translation by the authors from Ethiopian Transitional Government Charter in Inter Africa Group 1993.

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<sup>31</sup> The Constitution of The Federal democratic republic Of Ethiopia

3.5.1 of the Education and Training Policy (1994) reads

*"Cognizant of the pedagogical advantage of the child in learning in mother tongue and the rights of nationalities to promote the use of their languages, primary education will be given in nationality languages".<sup>32</sup>*

The government strongly argues that people should learn in their own mother tongue because,

- a) *language is the basis for identity*
- b) *pedagogically it is more advantageous*
- c) *It gives people psychological satisfaction and helps them develop positive self esteem.<sup>33</sup>*

As a result of this policy, there are twenty one languages, excluding Amharic, which are currently used as media of instruction at primary school level. These languages are Tigrinya, Afan Oromo, Awigni, Xahmta, Somali, Afar, Aderi(Harari), Anywak, Nuer, Majang, Sidama, Gedeo, Wolayta, Gamo ,Goffa, Dawro, Kambata, Silti, Kafa, Konta, Hadiya. All these languages are also given as separate subjects in the primary education. In addition to the primary education, Amharic, Afan Oromo, and Tigrinya are being taught as subjects upto postgraduate level. Several languages including Afan Oromo, Tigrinya, Wolayta, Gamo, Sidama, Kafa, are used to train primary school teachers.

The current government has made clear that it works towards the development of all the Ethiopian languages for various purposes. The cultural policy of Ethiopia states that the policy ensures

*1. [all] the languages, ..., literature ... of the nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia receive equal*

<sup>32</sup> Ministry of Education 1994:

<sup>33</sup> A translation by the authors from Education Policy in Ministry of Education 2002

*recognition, respect and chance to development.*

Addis Ababa, Amhara, Oromiya and the SNNPR.

2. *creating a favorable situation to carry out scientific research and inventory of the languages, oral literature. ...of the nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia and make them useful in development endeavour* 3.2.1 ***The implementation of language policy in Addis Ababa***

3. *providing the necessary professional assistance to the various nations, nationalities and peoples while making their choice of language*<sup>34</sup>

Addis Ababa is the seat of all nations, nationalities and peoples from all over the country. From the point of view of implementing the multilingual language policy, it poses a serious problem because almost all languages in the country are spoken in the city. The government has decided that Amharic shall be the working language of the city's administration as it is the capital of the federal government. On the other hand, The city's charter, all official communications, newspapers, radio and TV programs are presented in Amharic. First cycle primary education is given in Amharic and second cycle primary education is offered in English. Amharic is given as a separate subject from grade one.

The choice of languages to be used at regional state level seems to be settled, but still there is a need to choose languages for medium of instruction, administration and justice at various levels in different parts of the country. In the following sections we will try to look at how language policies are implemented in four regional states:

Actually, implementing a multilingual language policy that allows the use of 75 or more languages in the city would be quite impractical. Yet Addis Ababa is not the seat of the federal government only, but the seat of the Oromiya National Regional State as well.

<sup>34</sup> The Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture 2003

Considering the special interest the regional state has in Addis Ababa, the choice of language use seem to be still unsettled as there is a plan to open 10 schools that use Afan Oromo as a medium of instruction in the 10 subcities of Addis Ababa

### ***3.2.2 The implementation of language policy in the Amhara National Regional State***

Article 5 of the constitution of the Amhara Regional State provides that

- 1. all languages spoken throughout the regional state shall enjoy equal recognition on the part of the state*
- 2. Amharic should be the official working language of the national regional state*<sup>35</sup>

The implementation of the policy seemed to be straightforward in the education sector in the region. So far, of Amharic, Afan Oromo, Awngi, Xamta

are used in the primary education, the first two up to second cycle while the last two at the first cycle primary education level. Amharic is given as a separate subject in all the educational levels, while Awngi and Xamta are given as subjects from grades 1-8. Afan Oromo is used as both medium of instruction and administration in the Oromiya zone of the region. Besides these languages, English is given as a subject from grade 1 and is used as a medium of instruction in all the secondary schools of the region.

As to the script selection, Amharic, Awngi and Xamta use the Ethiopic script while Afan Oromo uses the Latin script. The selection of the script for Awngi and Xamta was made by the government officials. The script selection for Afan Oromo was made by the Oromiya National Regional State.

Radio broadcast is made in all the four languages stated, but the TV broadcast is only in Amharic. But people in Afan Oromo zone enjoy the TV program broadcasted by Oromya National Regional state within ETV. All the newspapers, magazines and other

<sup>35</sup> The Amhara National Regional State 2001

supplementary materials for education) are produced in Amharic.<sup>36</sup>

The Argoba language did not get any attention by the regional government until the establishment of the Argoba Special Woreda this year because it was believed that the Argobas live in neighbouring Afar Regional State.<sup>37</sup> There is no clear indication as to whether the region will endorse the use of the Argoba language for education and other purposes.

As to an official from the education bureau, except for Amharic, all the other languages were made to be medium of instruction in haste. There was no survey made to check whether the concerned people wanted the languages to be the medium of instructions. As a result there was a resistance to the use of Awngi and Xamta as a medium of instruction at the beginning. With regard to textbooks, there were no textbooks prepared beforehand in these languages.

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<sup>36</sup> Information on languages on for education and the media was provided by Ato Tamirat Sisay , Head of the Radio Division, Amhara Mass Coomunication Agency.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Ato Fanta Moges , Deputy Head, the Education Bureau of the Amhara National Regional State.

Therefore, the preparation of the textbooks was made by translating the textbooks prepared in Amharic to the other languages. This in turn was very problematic due to shortage of manpower in the region. The other problem seen was shortage of teachers, especially those who can teach those who can speak Xamta. The regional state used priests and other local people who were educated up to grades 8 or 6.<sup>38</sup>

### *3.2.3 The implementation of language policy in Oromiya National Regional State*

The Oromiya National Regional State recognizes that all languages have equal recognition by the state. The official language of the state is Afan Oromo. Afan Oromo is used in education, administration, justice and the media apart from being the lingua franca in the vast wide areas in the country.

In Education, Afan Oromo is used as a medium of instruction in informal education, primary education (up to 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle), and in the colleges of primary

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<sup>38</sup> Interview with Ato Tekil Wolde Kidan, Head, Educational programs, Education Bureau, Amhara National Regional State.

school teachers education at 10+1, 10+3 levels. It is also offered as a subject from grade one up to postgraduate level. Currently there are first degree programs in Afan Oromo, at Jimma University and Haromaya (Alemaya) University and Afan Oromo minor programs at Addis Ababa University and Mekele University. Primary school education is also available in Amharic in most of the towns in the Oromiya National Regional State to satisfy the needs of the non-Afan Oromo speaking nationalities. According to an official in the Oromiya Educational Bureau, efforts are underway to offer primary education in Somali in cooperation with the Somali National Regional state in the boarder areas of Oromiya that are close the Somali National Regional State. According to the same official, the suggestion by the federal government to offer 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle primary education in English, which is now the medium of instruction at secondary schools and given as a separate subject at all levels from grade one, was rejected as a survey made by the region in cooperation with the Addis Ababa University showed that there is a great demand for the society

that both cycles of primary education be given in Afan Oromo.<sup>39</sup>

All the newspapers, magazines, brief communications, the regional state's constitution and legal documents are produced in Afan Oromo, which makes use of the Latin script. The region has a TV and radio programs in Afan Oromo.

#### ***3.2.4 The implementation of language policy in the South Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State***

More than 70% of the languages in Ethiopia are spoken in the South Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State. The Regional State recognizes that there are about 56 nations, nationalities and peoples and more than this number of languages in the state.

The amended constitution of the state, in Article 5, states that

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<sup>39</sup> Information on the use of language in education, specially in primary education and related issues is gathered from Ato Dagne Bulcha, Head of the Curriculum Division, Oromiya Education Bureau.

1. *all languages in the region shall enjoy equal state recognition*
2. *Amharic should be the official working language of the regional state*
3. *zones and special woredas may determine their respective working languages in their own councils.*<sup>40</sup>

The constitution of the federal government has been translated into Sidama, Gedeo, Hadiya, Kambata, Wogagoda, Kafa, Kistane and Silti. The four languages that made up the Wogagoda (Wolayta, Gamo, Gofa and Dawro) and the rest of the languages that are mentioned earlier are used in the justice system in the zones and woredas they are spoken. Any one in the region has the right to use Amharic or get a translator if he/she does not speak the languages that are used in the justice or the administration. Of these languages only Kistane and Silti, which are Semitic languages use the Ethiopic script, while

the rest of the languages are written in the Latin script.

A dozen of languages are also employed in the education area in the SNNPR. Currently, including Amharic, 12 languages are used as medium of instruction at primary schools from grades 1-4. The languages are Sidama, Gedeo, Wolayta, Gamo, Gofa, Dawro, Konta, Kafa, Silti, Kambata and Hadiya. Amharic is used in towns and cities as an alternative for those who do not speak the languages that are used in education in their area. All the languages that are used as media of instruction at primary school (1<sup>st</sup> cycle) are offered as separate subjects from grades 1-8. These languages are also used in the teacher training institutions in the region.<sup>41</sup>

An attempt to use Kebena and Koorete as media of instruction at 1<sup>st</sup> cycle primary schools failed mainly because of printing cost and shortage of skilled human power. In the weredas where

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<sup>40</sup> The SNNPR 2001.

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<sup>41</sup> Due to the small number of the Konta trainees, however, Konta would be teachers are trained in Wolayta with Wolayta would be teachers. The training of teachers in Gamo and Gofa also takes place in one institute or in the institute.

Kebena and Koorete are spoken, Amharic is used as per the decision of the respective woreda councils. The region states that preparations are underway to offer primary school education in other languages such as Bench and Sheka.

The language that is used as a medium of instruction at 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle primary school (grades 5-8) is English since September 2005 per the decision of the regional council. Before 2005, all primary school education was given either in the local languages which are now used at 1<sup>st</sup> cycle primary school or in Amharic.

The implementation of the multilingual language policy has faced a very serious problem in the SNNPR than in other regional states, specifically in the area of education. This is mainly due to small number of speakers for the majority of the languages. At the beginning, the problem was in preparing textbooks in the various mother tongues. There was accurate shortage of skilled human power to prepare the texts, and as a result the texts for first cycle primary education were first prepared in Amharic and then translated into the mother tongues by teachers who speak them.

According to the officials in the Education Bureau of the SNNPR State, the serious problems that the region faced during the implementation of the multilingual language policy include

- a. a problem of choice of languages in areas where there are societies that speak two or more languages and in boarder areas
- b. unwillingness of people to send their children learn in their mother tongue
- c. high cost of printing textbooks in each language because the number of copies needed in each languages is small
- d. presence of many languages in a very small area
- e. confusion between dialects and languages

Among these problems, the ones that are stated in (c) and (d) arose mainly due to the absence of routine practices that should be done in language planning. First of all the people were not asked whether they needed education in their mother tongues or not. In other words, the first step in language planning, i.e. need assessment was overlooked in

favor of political decisions. Some minority societies were forced to educate their children in a language that is neither their mother tongue nor the default alternative (Amharic). As McNabb (1989) puts it, there was some form of imposition on these minority groups.

The absence of conscious language planning also made the region pay a huge cost. A political decision to form a blended language called Wogagoda (from Wolayta, Gamo, Gofa and Dawro) and introduce it into the primary school education resulted in burning of textbooks worth 40 million birr, death of seven people, transfer of hundreds of teachers, and chaos that resulted in the demolition of infrastructures and even hotels.<sup>42</sup> These problems could have been avoided easily, as a chief in Dorze put it, if the government asked whether the people needed education in such a language or not.<sup>43</sup>

The confusion between languages and dialects, which contributed a great deal to the introduction of the Wogagoda, was also a major problem in the region.

The four languages that make up the Weogagoda are highly intelligible, and can be considered as a dialect of one language. However the speakers of these languages identify themselves as a separate ethnic group or nationality, and hence any 'foreign' sound or word was considered an invasion into their identity. In the areas where these languages are spoken, despite linguistic similarity, the social definition of language dominated, mainly due to the contemporary political thinking.

Immediately after the opposition, Wolayta on one hand and Gamo, Gofa and Dawro, all three as one language, on the other hand continued to be the medium of instruction at primary schools in the then North Omo Zone. Currently, all the four languages are used separately in the zones they are spoken, though Gamo and Gofa still use the same material.

In very pluralist societies like the SNNPR, given the countries' socioeconomic development, it would be quite impossible to implement the multilingual language policy and satisfy the society at the individual level. Choosing one language over the other,

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<sup>42</sup> Daniel Abera 2001

<sup>43</sup> Ifoyta November-December 1992

thus, is inevitable. Clear criteria for selection of languages, need assessments conscious language planning in general would help reduce such problems to a great extent.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that Ethiopia has showed a significant change in terms of developing and implementing language policy from the reign of Tewodros to date. The covert language policies that were implemented by Tewodros II, Minilik II, Haile Sellasie I and the Derg all promoted the use of one language. At paper level, though it was late in the reign of Haile Sellasie I that a clear language policy came out. The language policy that the Derg developed seemed to give a hope for the development of many Ethiopian languages, but ended up in vain as the implementation was just a continuation of the use of one language.

A movement towards the implementation of a multilingual language policy came into the scene in Ethiopia since 1994 with the rule of the EPRDF (the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Forces) after the downfall of the Derg. Currently

about 5 languages in addition to Amharic (Afar, Aderi(Harari), Afan Oromo, Tigrignya and Somali) are used as official languages at regional level. There are also about (Sidama, Kambata, Kafa, Hadiya, Gamo, Gofa, Wolayta, Dawro, Silti, Gedeo) languages that are used as official languages at zone and woreda level. Primary education is available in more than 20 languages. Books, newspapers and radio broadcasts are available in a lot of languages as well. In general, there is a possibility for the society to appreciate and use the language it chooses for any purpose.

Despite the achievements in the implementation of the multilingual language policy, the current practice is not totally righteous. Patterns of acceptance and recognition of the language policy has been evidenced in many parts of the country. In very pluralist societies like the SNNPR, there is a need to follow a conscious language planning practice if the policy is to succeed and produce the desirable results. So far it seems that political decision took over the conscious planning and consultation with professionals. The implementation of a

multilingual language policy without careful planning would result in a disaster as seen in the case of the introduction of the Wogagoda.

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