

The National Language Issue in Congo-Kinshasa: Some Sociolinguistic Considerations

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Abstract

This paper attempts to show the importance of language in man's life in general and in that of the people of the Democratic Republic of Congo, in particular. After showing that 'national language' and 'nation' are synonymous for many countries/nations in the world, it is noted that the situation is different in Congo where one finds more than one language that qualify as national languages – Kikongo, Lingala, Swahili and Tshiluba.. There are also more than two hundred ethnic languages and most people in Congo are more attached to their ethnic than to the national languages. This plurilingualism makes it difficult for the Congolese people to communicate as one nation.

Some proposals have been made as to how the Congolese people can accommodate the four national languages as it is only through these languages that every inhabitant can show that he/she belongs to the Congo nation. Trilingualism has also been advocated as a solution to overcome the problem of communication throughout the country. Every Congolese national should speak an ethnic language, one of the four national languages and French, the official language of the country.

Introduction

The word 'language', is polysemic in that it can have more than one meaning depending on the context. For example, we can say 'bad language', Shakespeare's language', 'vulgar language', scientific language' etc. Not only can 'language' have several meanings but it can also have more than one definition. *The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2003:902-3) gives at least seven definitions among which "language is a system of communication by written or spoken words which is used by the people of a particular country or area". In this sense, language can be used in expressions such as the English/French/Arabic/Japanese language, how many languages do you speak? Apart from the important function of language as a means of communication, language also has other functions such as those of social, geographical, psychological and physical identification. Indeed, the

particular language that an individual uses can serve to identify that person socially and geographically.

Besides this primary role of language as a means of communication, identification and interaction, one should also think of the role that it plays in the social behaviour of man. Indeed, how would a society without language or means of communication look like? Such a society, as Hoijer (1965) states, would be incapable to involve itself even in the smallest enterprise of cooperation. There would not be any means of planning any activities or to communicate or transmit one's experience to other members of the group or to orient the action of the participants in a cooperative enterprise towards a common object.

A society without language would not have any means to assure within it the continuity of its behaviour and necessary education for the creation of its culture. It should also be emphasized that a society without culture would be reduced to its primitive level. Thus, if the importance of language is unquestionable in man's life, one should also admit that in every community or group of individuals, in each state or country, language is one of the key elements for the harmony (or conflicts, in some cases). It is one of the most important factors in the building of a nation.

In our debate of the question of the national language in the Democratic Republic of Congo, we should give definitions of two other key terms, 'nation' and 'national language' before we tackle the issue of whether there is any national language in Congo. If there is one, which language is it? If there is no one single language that could be a national one, how many languages out of the many 1 spoken in Congo, do qualify as national languages? Or should we simply leave out the question of national language in the case of Congo because of the plurilingualism which characterises the whole country?

Nation

There are many definitions for the concept nation. According to Reading (1976:137) in his dictionary of social sciences, "a nation is a large territorial group with common citizenship rights and possessing characteristics differentiating it from other similar groups. A nation is also an independent political unit". For Crystal (1993) a nation is an agglomeration of several societies under the same geographical space and political governance. For a nation to conserve its laws and cultural heritage, brief, its identity, that nation needs a language since it is through language that culture can be expressed by members of the same community and be transmitted to future generations. In the same vein, Abraham Lincoln, quoted by Tripp R.T. (1970), states that by nation, one should understand one territory, with its people and its laws.

As defined by the *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (1968), 'a nation is either synonymous with a state or its inhabitants or else

it denotes a human group bound together by common solidarity – a group whose members place loyalty to the group as a whole over any conflicting loyalties.’

From these different definitions, Congo is a nation as it comprises one geographical territory with its inhabitants under one political governance and a set of laws. However, considering the tendency in modern world for people to make the two concepts, ‘language’ and ‘nation’ synonymous, we shall try to find out if in the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo that symmetrical relation does exist. In other words, is there any particular language in Congo that would translate the nationalism of the Congolese people, therefore be considered as the national language? To date, that language is not identified in Congo. If there is no such Congolese national language, there should, at least, be some languages that can be considered as characterising the Congolese state/nation.

National language

From the definition by Deutsch (1968), a national language is spoken by a group of individuals who recognise themselves as geographically, culturally, politically and administratively part of the same country, the same nation. It is through that common language that every citizen recognises that he/she belongs to a particular nation. All the transactions, and national life are translated or expressed by that language inside as well as outside the nation. For example, in France, French is the national language, in Saudi Arabia, Arabic is the national language, in Japan, Japanese is the national language. As can be noted, there is a symmetrical relation between ‘nation’ and ‘language’. There is a language that is attached to each nation.

If such is the case, can we speak of a language by which the people recognise as belonging to the Congolese nation? Is there any language through which all the indigenous individuals in the territory recognise as part of one country, one nation, one community having a common destiny? Is there any language spoken in Congo which would be called ‘Congolese’ in the same way French is for France, Japanese for Japan or English for England? To date, no single language can claim that it fulfils the criteria of ‘Congolity’ considering the plurilingualism and the ethnic multiplicity characterising the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Currently, all the peoples know and define themselves, first from a linguistic, ethnic and cultural basis before they recognise that they are all citizens of the Congo territory. It is not surprising, to find socio-cultural communities created on the basis of their ethnic/tribal language. For example, we can just mention a few of such socio-cultural communities: the community of people from Bandundu, ‘COREBAND’ (in French ‘Mutuelle des Ressortissants de Bandundu’); the community of the students from

Western Kasai' 'MUTEKOC (in French Mutuelle des Etudiants du Kasai occidental) etc.

It is very rare to find a community or an association without linguistic or ethnic connotation. In fact, in all these associations, the language of communication is always linked to the region or the ethnic group of the association. In other words, all those who do not belong to the region or the ethnic group are unwelcome.

One or more Congolese nations

If a nation can be defined as 'one territory, its people and its laws' (according to Abraham Lincoln), or 'a set of several social groups living under the same geographical space and the same political governance (see Crystal 1993), then Congo is one nation. Indeed, Congo has well defined geographical boundaries. It also has well-identified social groups, a central power and its laws.

However, if one were to add other criteria such as those of a common language and the same cultural heritage, one realises that in the face of a multitude of ethnic groups and languages (more than two hundred according to Africana 1999), the Congolese territory can be considered as a mosaic of nations. This can be justified by the fact that at present, every Congolese citizen defines himself/ herself and is defined, primarily in relation to his/her region, tribe and language. Every Congolese feels attached to his/her small community of origin rather than to the whole Congolese territory. There is almost no spirit of nationalism within the Congo territory. It is rather outside the boundaries of the Congo territory that we feel that nationalism. Indeed, most Congolese citizens who live outside the country recognise that they have the same country of origin. They are generally driven by one spirit which forces them to unite, defend and protect their common interests as people living outside their country, Congo. Wherever they are, Congolese in the Diaspora do not unite or constitute groups under the etiquette of the region of origin, their tribe or any ethnic languages but simply under the Congolese label.

The language of communication is primarily, French; and sometimes one of the four – Lingala, Swahili, Tshiluba or Kikongo. In other words, Congolese citizens in the diaspora are more united than those who live in Congo. How can such nationalism be achieved within the Congo territory? If we agree with Reading (1976) that nationalism is the doctrine according to which nation and state should coincide, we also believe that one common language should be adopted in every nation. That language should be spoken, not only by a certain majority of the population within the nation, but it should also accommodate those speakers of minority languages. At present, such a language does not exist in Congo. Therefore, there is a possibility of having more than one national language to accommodate the Congolese people as one nation.

National languages in Congo

If naturally and from some historical facts, the Congolese territory comprises many ethnic groups and languages some of which are also found outside the Congolese boundaries, the inhabitants of Congo should combine their efforts to speak the same language in spite of the many languages which characterize them. Unfortunately, this multiplicity of languages generally tends to divide the Congolese people into many ethnic groups instead of uniting them because speakers of the same ethnic languages find it easy to associate in their own group.

Yet by the same language, it is meant that all the Congolese citizens should share the same vision of their world for the same interests, the same objectives for the same national life and a sincere collaboration between the different ethnic groups. Every Congolese should feel concerned by all that happens on the Congolese territory. All the Congolese should develop a sentiment of nationalism which should lead them to consider themselves as having the same destiny.

To come back to the question of speaking the same language within the diversity of languages, every Congolese citizen should, of course, recognise that he/she belongs to a specific given linguistic community. The language he/she speaks in that community should allow him/her to communicate and live in harmony with all the members of the community. However, besides one's community, one should not feel a stranger or foreigner vis a vis other communities or feel rejected simply because he/she does not know the languages spoken in those communities.

It is possible, indeed, to develop some languages among the many languages spoken on the Congolese territory to serve as *lingua francae* between different ethnic and linguistic groups. Those languages which are understood and spoken by different Congolese ethnic and linguistic communities could serve as national languages depending on the region where they are spoken. Therefore, we advocate for more than one national languages in Congo considering the plurilingualism which characterises the whole country.

In spite of the multiplicity of languages in the Democratic Republic of Congo, there are, nevertheless, four languages which, at present, depending on the different regions where they are spoken, accommodate the majority of ethnic groups in the region as those languages can be spoken or understood by members of different ethnic communities. Those languages are Kikongo, Lingala, Swahili and Tshiluba which all four, according to the Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations (p.356) serve as regional *lingua francae* in Congo.

In Congo, most of the ethnic groups are found within the linguistic areas covered by those four languages altogether. Therefore, we believe that first and foremost, every Congolese should feel attached to the

Congolese Nation by one of those four languages which cover the whole of the Congolese territory. In fact, all the Congolese national affairs can be treated in each of those languages depending on where they are spoken. For these languages to deserve the status of national languages, Government has some responsibility to assume in the linguistic situation prevailing in the country.

Government responsibility

In a multilingual country like Congo where it is not possible to learn and speak all the languages spoken on the territory, some languages should be selected and made compulsory all over the national territory as long as they can serve the people's interests within the country. Those languages should be selected on the basis of objective criteria such as acceptance by the majority of the people, the people's attitude to those language and make sure that they can be standardised and be well elaborated. (See also Holmes 1992). The learning of the four national languages should be made compulsory where they are spoken regionally. Government should make it a criterion that for someone to be given a job in public service and administration in the country, he/she should know at least two national languages including that of the area where he/she works.

Civil servants should be mobile and be prepared to work anywhere in the country and speak the national language of where he/she is working. Our culture should be revalorised by avoiding, for example, too much exposure to the Western countries' culture. It is unfortunate to note that in our public media such as Radio and TV, we find ourselves more exposed to the Western culture than we are to our own. This is a government responsibility to educate people and make them aware that their culture is as good as any other culture in the world and that they should not reject themselves in favour of the outside world. Some literature as well as newspapers and news broadcasting should be encouraged in the four national languages. Therefore standardization as well as the teaching/learning of these languages are imperative.

Standardisation of Kikongo, Lingala, Swahili and Tshiluba

The four languages – Kikongo, Lingala, Swahili and Tshiluba – though officially approved by the government as National Languages, should be standardised in terms of their orthography, vocabulary and grammar. Every Congolese citizen willing to learn and speak any of these four languages should be able to master its orthography and grammar for his/her integration in the community speaking that language.

It is true that there is already some kind of standardization, but our wish is that such standardization reflects the present situation of Congo. Indeed, when one considers, for example, the grammars of Swahili and Lingala, just to mention these two languages, one notices that these grammars are too

classical to the extent that they are not applied in those languages as they are currently and daily used on the ground.

For the moment, these four languages enjoy some favour to allow any Congolese citizen to express his/her nationality and nationalism through any of them. This sentiment of nationalism is already felt outside the country when one hears someone speaking Lingala, Kikongo, Swahili and Tshiluba. Automatically, one assumes that the person speaking one of these four languages is a country fellow, a Congolese citizen.

Although three of the four languages, namely Swahili, Lingala and Kikongo are also spoken in other African countries, there are linguistic characteristics which make them sound Congolese. For example, Swahili spoken in Congo is different from the Swahili language spoken in Kenya, Tanzania or Uganda. Every time a Congolese citizen hears someone speaking Swahili, be it in Congo or outside the country, he/she can easily tell whether that person is a Congolese or not.

In promoting these four languages which, apart from Swahili, are all ethnic languages, i.e associated with some ethnic or tribal groups in Congo, the ethnic or tribal feelings/sentiment should not be a problem to prevent them from being used with the status of National languages. In fact, one should note that the selection of these four languages was simply done on the basis of political decision. Those who speak these languages as their mother tongues or first languages should not feel superior to those people or ethnic groups whose languages have not been selected to be elevated to the status of National languages. Those communities whose ethnic languages have not been promoted should not fight against the promoted languages. These communities should even find it an advantage to know/speak one more language beside one's ethnic/tribal language as this bilingualism would ease communication and contact with other communities.

Teaching/learning African languages

As far as Congolese people and their national languages are concerned, they should start learning these languages from home. Every child should be able to speak one of the four languages spoken in the area where the child is brought up. Knowledge of at least one national language should be made compulsory by introducing the teaching/learning of these languages as a subject on the curriculum from primary to secondary school levels. At these levels, every pupil could be obliged to learn at least one national language as there is no choice given to the pupil as which subject to select from the curriculum. All the subjects are compulsory.

At the university level where students make a choice for the Faculty or department they want to register in, there is a danger that some subjects may not be chosen and taken at all by students. To avoid such a situation, the national languages should be learned/ studied with such subjects as Law, Mass Communication, Public Administration, Medicine, English etc.

Indeed, these subjects are on high demand at the University in Congo, and we believe that combining national languages with these subjects is the only way of reviving their study. There is good reason for this combination. A student doing Law for example, needs a combination with national languages as he/she will practise law at the grassroot level where the majority of people speak one of the national languages. The combination also has some justification in public administration since civil servants work primarily with the population. Hence, the necessity to speak their language. Students in Mass Communication should also take national languages as the information to be disseminated in the mass should be in national languages to make sure the message has got across. Newspapers and magazines in national languages should also be encouraged. It is sometimes embarrassing to find out that on the TV and radio news and programmes in French take more time compared to what is given in local languages. Yet not many people are really able to grasp the news and those programmes in French.

Four national languages and French

As Kikongo, Lingala, Swahili and Tshiluba, have been elevated to the status of National Languages, another step concerns the French language that we inherited from colonization. French should not be considered as the language of the Congolese elite only; it should be made popular in the different social classes of the Congolese population. Indeed, in the face of globalisation, if we want to be open to the outside world or the international community, we are obliged to continue using French as the official language of Congo, the language of education/ instruction and the language of transactions inside as well as outside the Congolese territory. Popularising the French language is of great importance for every Congolese citizen to feel concerned by the National life.

To fulfil that objective, literacy should be encouraged all over the Congolese National territory and across the different social classes of the population. Intertribal marriages should also be encouraged. Indeed, it is noticed that most children from such kinds of marriages speak either French or one of the four national languages depending on the environment they are growing in. Such individuals do not feel themselves attached to the tribe or the region of their parents as is the case with those individuals growing in their ethnic/tribal community/environment.

Urbanization of the country could also contribute to fostering the national spirit if towns inhabited by people from the four corners of the country are built. Kinshasa, the capital city, is an example of such towns as every 'Kinois' feels at home in that town. All the inhabitants of Kinshasa feel that they are from the same territory in spite of their different places of origin and their languages.

The mobility of Congolese civil servants throughout the country could also compel each Congolese civil servant to learn and speak the national language from his/her work place in the country if knowledge of that language was made compulsory for him/her to secure his/her job in that area/region.

Conclusion

In this paper we have attempted to show the importance of language in man's life in general and in that of the Congolese people in particular. We have also tried to show that although 'National language' and 'Nation' are synonymous for some countries/nations in the world, the situation reveals different in the Democratic Republic of Congo where we find a nation with more than one languages which qualify as national languages. This situation, as is the case for many African States (See Decottignie 1963), is dictated by nature and the history of the country.

If one can speak of a Congolese Nation, it is not the case when it comes to the question of National Language. There is no single language that would qualify as National language for the whole country. The prevailing situation as now is that Kikongo, Lingala, Swahili and Tshiluba, already used throughout the country as regional lingua Francae, have also been promoted as national languages for the country.

Although French, a foreign language, was imposed by colonization, it has now become established in Congo as an official language and the Congolese national and international survival depends on French in terms of communication and contacts between educated individuals nationwide. Therefore, every Congolese citizen should imperatively learn and speak French. Every Congolese citizen should be able to speak at least three languages: his ethnic language, one of the four national languages (Kikongo, Lingala, Swahili and Tshiluba) and French, the official language. By this trilingualism, all the Congolese people should feel united as belonging to the same nation. They should put aside the priority that some individuals (mediocre in general) tend to give to the ethnic group and its language to the detriment of the country's interests. Every Congolese should know and be aware of the fact that an ethnic sentiment to the extreme never promotes a spirit of unity, nationalism and development, it fosters hatred, separatism, exclusion and poverty as is the case today in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

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