



TRANSLATING INTO AFRICAN LANGUAGES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN A GLOBALIZING WORLD

Nwanne Felix-Emeribe*

Department of Foreign Languages & Literatures, University of Port Harcourt Port Harcourt, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Despite the availability of massive information on various fields of human endeavour, some peoples of the world still do not have access to information on new trends that ensure sustainable development as a result of language barrier. In Africa, for example, where the majority of the peoples still speak and practice the numerous indigenous languages of the diverse linguistic communities, nothing could be more beneficial if the various initiatives for development in areas such as environment, health, technology, economic empowerment for poverty alleviation etc, are made available to the indigenes in their native languages. Translating into these languages would not only enhance the lives of the people, it would also create activity in those languages, thus ensuring their viability and eventual preservation from their obvious march to extinction. This article examines the possible ways in which translation could play a positive role in ensuring sustainable development in a world that is undergoing globalization.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is borne out of two concerns; the first is the need for the rural populations of Africa to benefit from the available information in different domains of knowledge, for the enrichment of their lives, while the other is for the survival of Africa's numerous indigenous languages, in the face of the current trend called globalization. The paper reflects on the possible role of translation in helping to get needed information to the indigenous peoples in their languages and by so doing help in maintaining and preserving such languages. Presently, the languages of Africa's erstwhile colonial masters, English, French, Portuguese and Spanish, but especially English, are the languages of globalization. The other smaller, economically and socially non-viable ones are progressively being sidelined. This state of affairs is weakening these languages and setting them on the path of eventual extinction. Yet the indigenous languages are the languages of identity, the languages that confer a sense of belonging to the individual in his environment of origin and beyond. These languages maintain the linguistic diversity and ecology of the world. The current endangerment and the possibility of the extinction of most African indigenous languages are worrisome to many language users. What could be done to reverse this situation? Salikoko Mufwene, (2001), in a study on language endangerment, submits that the subject is better discussed in the "context of language vitality, with special attention to

factors that have favoured particular languages at the expense of others; factors which lie in the changing socio-economic conditions which speakers respond adaptively for survival". This means that socio-economic concerns, not power, determine the fate of languages. If this position is true, then African languages may not have a great chance of survival, since they cannot compete with any of the world languages in terms of socio-economic validity.

Still, the fact that most African languages are languages of limited diffusion, that is, that they are spoken by a small number of people and have a limited geographical spread, does not warrant or justify their extinction. This is because each language, as a cultural entity, is a repository of the shared intangible human heritage and therefore should be preserved. This fact should make speakers of every language to strive to do whatever is necessary to use their language so as to keep them from extinction. Part of such effort is to actively engage in translating into and out of such languages in order to keep them alive as the world globalizes.

Globalization

Globalization is a concept that depicts the ever increasing phenomenon of interdependence of countries of the world in the social, economic and political areas of life, not forgetting cross-border dealings among people of diverse regions of the world.

According to Osuala, (2005:11), globalization consists in the multiplication of linkages, global interconnectedness in spheres of trade, information communication cultural, crime, pollutants, drugs,, fashion, food, beliefs, images etc. It is a

*Corresponding author: **Nwanne Felix-Emeribe**

Department of Foreign Languages & Literatures University of Port Harcourt Port Harcourt, Nigeria

global phenomenon that ties together the fates of different nations, increasing the need for one state to interfere in the business of others and promotes the consumption of information and the internationalization of means of production. International systems of trade, finance, and production generate linkages that influence communities around the world. Territorial boundaries become less important as transitional networks of regionalization, social relationships and movements intensify. These linkages generate information in diverse spheres of life on how to enhance the quality of life and living for sustainable development.

Sustainable development efforts by the United Nations

Since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio (1992), sustainable development has remained elusive for many African countries. According to a United Nations document, (<http://susdev.org/index.php>), poverty is still a major challenge as 41% of the Sub-Saharan African population, (roughly 300 million people) were living on one dollar a day or less in 2004. So Africa is one of the themes of the third implementation of the Commission of Sustainable Development, which also examines agriculture, rural development, land, drought and desertification.

These themes are of particular relevance to Africa where most economies continue to be heavily rural-based agriculture-dependent, and where poverty eradication will depend on boosting the productivity of the agricultural and rural economy. Most of the continent's countries are nowhere near reaping the full benefits of globalization. Poverty, armed conflicts, poor access to education, pandemics, such as HIV and malaria, not forgetting serious environmental threats like desertification, deforestation and climate change, continue to pose stout challenges to the continent. Most of the information on ways and means of remedying these challenging aspects of life are usually in either English or French, languages which are not well understood by most of the rural populations of the continent.

A word about language

Language is a social phenomenon pertaining to a given society. It is the soul of a people. An individual cannot belong to a community if he does not speak the language of that community. Language is not only a means of social communication but is equally and especially a witness of the cultural values of a civilization. It defines a people in relation to the world at large. The language of a people is the vehicle for transmitting its myths, education, and information. Consequently, it reflects all that is specific and authentic to that culture or society: human beings, animals, objects, beliefs, customs, institutions, etc. It is a network of symbols, of group identity and of collective solidarity. It helps the group to identify itself and to strengthen feelings of belonging to a given linguistic or ethnic entity. In view of all these, dependence on foreign languages by Africans at the detriment of their own languages is tantamount to intellectual dependence, which is far more unfortunate than economic or political dependence. In this regard, intellectual dependence is a humiliation akin to slavery

Indigenous Languages of Africa

Africa's indigenous languages and cultures which define the African and ensure the transmission of the core values of the peoples of the continent are in danger of extinction. This is so

because there is and has been a general disregard for these indigenous African languages by the elite of various countries of Africa. Happily, it was in recognition of the importance of indigenous or local or mother tongues of the world that the UNESCO, at its General conference in November, 1999, proclaimed the 21st day of February of each year as the International Mother Language Day. At the first celebration of the day in 2000, the then Director-General of UNESCO, Koïchiro Matsuura, in the opening ceremony, underscored the importance of mother tongues/languages as not only an essential element of the human cultural heritage, but the irreducible expression of human creativity in all its diversity. (<http://webworld.unesco.org/imld/>). Of the about 6,000 languages spoken the world over, the Director-General opined that each of them "is a mirror of the soul of the society in which it is born and also reflects the history of its contacts. For him," encouraging the promotion of cultural diversity and the development of multilingual education from the earliest stages of life is to preserve the cultural pluralism as well as the conditions for international understanding. Vigdis Finnbogadóttir, the former President of Iceland and the then good will ambassador of the United Nations spoke of languages "as the most precious and most fragile treasures of humanity". Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the United Nations Organization, at the same occasion, called for redoubled efforts for the defense of "this shared human patrimony". (<http://webworld.unesco.org/imld/>)

Language endangerment

According to Wikipedia (en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lar), an endangered language is language that is at risk of falling out of use as its speakers die out or shift to speaking another language. UNESCO operates with five levels of language endangerment: "safe", "vulnerable" (not spoken by children outside the home), "definitely endangered", (children not speaking), "severely endangered", (only spoken by the oldest generation), "critically endangered", (spoken by few members of the oldest generation), often semi speakers.

Michael E. Klauss, a linguist, according to the same source, proposes another interesting classification. A language is "safe" if it is considered that children will probably be speaking it in 100 years ; "endangered" if probably children will not be speaking them in 100 years (about 60 -80% of languages fall into this category) ; and "moribund" if children are not speaking them now.

Children are presently not speaking most African indigenous languages. This is so because parents are gradually shifting away from the mother tongues for the languages of the work place which ensure economic and social progress. The example of Nigeria may well be instructive regarding the way African languages shift. According to Osuala, (2005:140) language shift in Nigeria can be located in a change of the language of work of the different ethnic groups from the vernaculars to the English language. Colonialism disrupted and dislocated the agrarian economy which was centred around the close-knit kinship system and the vernacular used for intergroup and inter personal communication. The wage-based economy was introduced. This change in structure of work impacted on the lives and thinking of parents who adjusted their perception regarding the need of their children (for the English language) who must be prepared for life. The indigenous languages were progressively abandoned in favour

of the English language, the new language of the work place, a language of power.

Languages and power

To the extent that power, be it political, economic, cultural or religious, is an important factor in the determination of language empowerment or endangerment, to that extent, globalization has clear links with language use. This is because, according to Osuala (2005:11), “the balance of language vitality tilts towards the powerful at the expense of the weak nations”. The powerful nations are those ones that have the “needed economic, technical, political and even military muscle and wherewithal to advertise and impose themselves and to create a mind-set of their brand and image and accord themselves loyalty and relevance from weak countries which are compelled by their need for such a language”. Thus economic advantage and cultural relevance are important factors that favour some languages to the detriment of others.

Thus, it could be seen that the issue of language endangerment has close ties with the socio-economic climate in which users of a language find themselves; with the result that language shifts tend towards the language that affords greater economic/social benefit to the speakers’ changing situation. The language from which the shift is made progressively suffers endangerment. It is a grave play of power in which most African indigenous languages are sure to lose out and that for obvious reasons.

The state of African languages

In his long poem, *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, Aimé Césaire (1960), lamented over the black race who were enslaved, downtrodden and vilified because they were a people “who had not invented anything”. Césaire put the finger on one of the major causes of Africa’s backwardness: technical and economic underdevelopment.

Most African economies are still under developed. Many years after independence and years into the new millennium, most African countries are still only just producers and exporters of raw materials. An economy becomes developed and begins to be reckoned with only when it begins to transform its raw materials into exportable industrialized goods. Such goods would carry the name and language of the source country to the rest of the world, thus creating an international brand to be reckoned with. This is far from the situation of most countries of the continent for now.

Africa and globalization

All things taken together, African countries may stand to lose almost all and gain almost nothing from globalization. The cultures and languages of these regions are seriously threatened in the emerging world order for the simple reason that language, creativity, ideas and the entire body of knowledge in the new global is tilted towards the rich countries. Given this state of affairs, indigenous African languages are under siege from the forces of global economic integration; for as distance, time and borders diminish, culture becomes a commodity to be sold and language is reduced to protecting what can be bought and sold in the open markets” (Osuala 2005: 15). And one cannot but ask with this author, “What does Africa sell or contribute to the global market on equal terms that any of her languages needs to

courier?” It becomes a very difficult task to preserve African languages with the removal of barriers against importation; the poorer countries watch as all kinds of products, from fashion, foods and entertainment of questionable quality, flood their markets.

Preserving and maintaining African languages

In spite of the near hopelessness of the situation, Africans can still do some things to preserve their languages and culture. If they do not do it for the major reason of keeping alive their linguistic identity, they should do so because the languages and the cultures they vehicle belong to the shared human patrimony. This is so because, as we had stated earlier, every language, even those ones that are of limited diffusion, all carry with them a wealth of traditions and cultures that contribute to the overall wealth of the human patrimony, therefore the death of any language should be bemoaned as a great loss to the entire human community. The major problem here seems to be the lack of understanding of the value of our languages. When the value of and need for the indigenous languages are understood and put in their proper perspective, greater roles would be assigned to them in their various localities. They would be spoken and passed on to the next generations. Literacy in these languages would be encouraged as a means of preserving them.

Literacy in African Languages

It is all now history how the colonizing masters relegated the African languages of the colonized peoples to the background and exalted their own to the hapless envy of the colonized. Ngugi wa Thiongo, in his book, *Decolonising the Mind* (1992), describes in detail, how the colonizing masters vilified and denigrated African languages to the point that even after independence, African countries still depend almost completely on the colonial masters’ languages for the most basic cultural tool – language. Thus, English, French, Portuguese, still speak for the continent. But the colonial missionaries in their civilizing mission did not only impose their languages but also worked, in some cases, to develop the indigenous languages. They invented the written forms of some local languages and taught the same to the indigenes. Thus, the evangelization mission was hastened as Africans learnt to read the Bible and write in their local languages. In Nigeria, for example, the Bible was translated into Igbo and Yoruba, major languages of the south of Nigeria. Most converts to Christianity learnt to read and write in Igbo and Yoruba. Strangely, these individuals are not considered to be literate because their literacy is not in the white man’s language. This state of affairs has helped in no small measure to stall enthusiasm in the learning of the indigenous languages of Africa. A person who can read and write in any language, should, by any definition, be considered as literate. Until now, the colonial mentality of arrogating a place of preeminence to the English language is rife in Nigeria. Upward social mobility and progress is predicated first and foremost on the mastery of the English language. No wonder that this language is perceived as a necessary tool for progress to be put very early in the hand of even the suckling infants, to the detriment of the local languages; a practice that is prevalent among illiterate and semi illiterate parents.

African governments should, as a matter of urgency, take steps to ensure that every African can read and write in at least one of the indigenous languages of their country. Adult education

centres should be set up in the urban and rural areas and the priority should be to make Africans literate in African languages. Since the medium of instruction should necessarily be in the local languages, the subjects taught and the materials used should also be in those languages. Thus, the products of both formal and informal centres of education would be able to read and understand different materials in any subject area. Such materials should be in abundance since translators should be encouraged to translate all kinds of documents into the indigenous languages.

The role of translation in language preservation

The scenario that was discussed in the preceding paragraphs has worked to dampen interest in the local languages of most African countries. Even where these languages are made subjects of study in tertiary institutions, they only record very low and reluctant patronage from students seeking admission into such institutions. For these students, it is infinitely more fashionable to say that they are studying French, English, German or even Chinese languages, than to talk about studying Igbo, Hausa or Yoruba, in the Nigerian context. Due to the dearth of scholars in the indigenous languages over the years, very little publishing is being done in some of these languages and therefore these languages are not growing. They are not being seriously engaged in current political, economic and social discourse. Some of them still do not have a written form.

Since many writers may not be ready and equipped to write in the many languages of Africa, the shortest and fastest means of creating reading materials in these languages would be through translation; translating already existing works in various domains of knowledge, in creative and non creative works. The Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiongo, is already blazing the trail by writing in his native Kikuyu since 1977, and translating his works into English. (Ngugi 1992)

Translators, linguists, writers and concerned language users belonging to the same language group need to organize themselves to carry out this onerous task for the love of their language and for posterity. This would be following the example of writers and translators of some Scandinavian countries who, for this same purpose, engage in translating into and out of their native languages, just to keep their languages of limited diffusion alive.

The enterprise that we are advocating here would be carried out, not only by trained translators but also by engaged language users of the different indigenous languages, translating into and out of these languages, to produce materials for schools and for general reading.

What to translate

Literary works readily come to mind as works that qualify for translation, since literature is the arena for the highest and most sublime use of the resources of a language. The translated literary works will bear testimony to the beauty of the languages in question. We are living in a day when the many challenges facing Africa are being confronted; individuals and bodies are searching for solutions. Information that is capable of alleviating poverty and enhancing living conditions in different areas of life abound in print and on the world wide web. But this information, for most part, is inaccessible to the teeming populations of rural Africa, due to language barrier. Translating such information and documents

into the languages of Africa would make it accessible and useful to the target audiences upon whom they would make the desired impact. That is the major thrust of this present paper.

Different countries would decide on the appropriate arm of government to coordinate and bankroll these translation activities but the essential issue is to have information in all possible areas that ensure sustainable development in the languages in which the people think and dream. When such is the case, the people would identify with the information transmitted to them and would be better disposed to practice them. Globalization seems to be an unstoppable wheel that has a will of its own. It seems to be sweeping and compelling all nations and tongues to obey its whims and caprices. But it does seem that from the beginning, the world was not intended to be a one- language community, thus, Babel happened. In the same vein, it did not seem right to the Creator to have a one-colour world. The colours of the rainbow, with their infinite shades and hues, make our planet a more colourful place to live in. In the same way, the different indigenous languages of the world remove monotony and give diversity and flavour to the world. That is reason enough to preserve them, irrespective of compelling economic and social imperatives that necessitate language shift, endangerment and extinction.

The speakers of the diverse languages of the world, and of Africa in particular, while being drawn by the socio-economic lures, should aspire to lose their identity but maintain it while reaching out to the languages of globalization, since no nation can afford to be an island.

In 2001, African heads of state launched the New Partnership for Africa Development, (NEPAD), to provide a framework for sustainable development to be shared by ALL Africa's people (emphasis mine). This framework emphasizes the role of partnerships among African countries themselves and between them and other countries of the world and proposes a shared and common vision to eradicate poverty through economic growth and sustainable development.

Translating for sustainable development

It is the submission of this author that none of these efforts would yield sustainable dividend if the underlying principles and practical outworking of these measures and efforts do not reach down to the rural dwellers in their native languages and in print, too. It is evident that the greater percentage of Africa's population still lives in the rural areas, not in the town and cities. Any policy that precludes this majority is doomed to fail. This majority population and its activities or in activities are crucial to the success of the various efforts that are being made to reverse the many challenging issues that have been mentioned earlier.

It is true that the advent of the transistor radio has helped very much in the dissemination of information to the rural communities of Africa. Thanks to the transistor, radio programs are diffused in some of the languages of the diverse language groups of the various communities. The leap in development that the television brought, by associating images to the audio impression, is definitely impressive. But in spite of these advancements, this author maintains that until the rural dweller is able to apprehend the various developmental proposals and strategies in print, that is, in a form that enables him to make multiple references to them at will, he may not readily align himself with current trends. The point that is

being made here is that hearing about a new thing alone on radio or television may not convince an individual. By the nature of things, the spoken word is transient and the written word is permanent. The individual who is literate in his indigenous tongue and who reads and rereads a document in that language at his convenience, is more likely to make informed decisions about things that he understands from his reading than someone who may have heard snatches of utterances over the radio and who may not have a repeat of the information on the spur of the moment.

The NEPAD framework is supposed to be shared by ALL Africans, after all. All Africans are not literate in the official languages of their various countries. If the documents conveying the strategies and propositions by the diverse international bodies and agencies are presented to the people in their own languages, they would most likely become more engaged, being able to relate to the ideas expressed in them. They themselves would see that the international community has their interest at heart and would be eager to take whatever action that is expected of them to better their condition.

Otherwise, all the talk about African Union, the Heavily Indebted and Poor Countries (HIPC), International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, Monterrey Consensus on Financing for Development (<http://susdev.org/index.php>) and such like, would be mere barren, intellectual exercise that could never impact the lives of the teeming populations of Africa. The handful of men and women that attend the meetings and conferences where those developmental ideas are hatched are not the ones that use wood as fuel, causing desertification, neither are they the ones that engage in agriculture; they are not likely to be easily infected with Ebola virus disease because they are eating bush meat and bats caught in their traps. Africa's rural populations should be addressed in the languages of their milieu. The documents that carry information on strategies for sustainable development, because they are conceived and written in the official languages that are not African, should, of a necessity, be translated into the various languages of the continent if the messages they carry are to benefit the people that need them.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the fore going, we conclude by recommending as follows

1. That no effort should be spared in making children, especially in Africa, acquire the basic competences of speaking, reading and writing, in their mother tongue at an early stage in life. These languages are imbued with the culture and traditions of the diverse language groups and they seek to transmit positive morals of the particular group;

2. That in order to preserve the indigenous languages of Africa, government legislation is a sine qua non. Language policies that seek to make the teaching of endangered languages compulsory in educational institutions, from the nursery to the tertiary levels, should be enacted and be seen to be implemented;
3. That non- governmental organizations (NGOs), linguists, members of endangered language communities and international organizations like the UNESCO, should work actively to save and stabilize endangered languages.
4. That the home should be encouraged to revert to the responsibility of socializing the younger members of each community in the language of their community. The mother tongues of the world are supposed to be the languages spoken by the mothers. If the younger generations are not speaking their mother tongues, one should ask what tongues the mothers are speaking in their homes;
5. That since no country can be an island to itself, since globalization is an on-going process, and since it is essential to preserve the indigenous languages of Africa, it is strongly recommended that African countries should adopt plurilingual policies that make it mandatory for children to acquire, first, the indigenous languages, early in life and then, the official languages of globalization. By so doing, Africans would relate with the world with confidence in their African identity.

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