Choosing a Working Language in Multiethnic Nations: Rethinking Ethiopia's Working Language Policy

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Abstract
The language policy of Ethiopia during the imperial and the military regimes prioritized Amharic as the state's sole official language and discriminated against all other Ethiopian languages. Though the current language policy is radical by comparison as it allows for the use of one’s language of choice in all public arenas, Amharic still enjoys paramount predominance because it is recognized as the sole official working language of the Federal Government in the current Constitution. This liberal language policy is unique in that no other country with a comparable socio-economic situation has the same language policy. This paper argues, however, that this policy can harm Ethiopia by slowing down its global economic integration and by fuelling conflicts that arise from disputes over language use. As a remedy, this paper proposes adopting English as the sole official working language of the Federal Government with a slight difference of implementation in the area of education in the federal territories.

Key Words
Language policy, Ethiopia, Ethno-linguistic discrimination

Introduction
Ethno-linguistic conflicts are a persistent problem in Africa. Owing to its repressive history of empire building, Ethiopia has suffered greatly from civil conflict inspired mostly by claims for ethno-linguistic equality. Regardless of the recognition of the equal right of different groups and languages by the current Constitution, Amharic remains the dominant language of the country. Based on this fact, this research aims to deal with problems around the current language policy of Ethiopia. It further seeks a policy recommendation that can solve the problems generated by ethno-linguistic disputes. Hence, the research tries to answer the following research questions: (1) what does the current language policy of Ethiopia look like? And (2) what is the best policy that fits the choice of a working language for Ethiopia at the national level?

In order to understand the context and provide a deeper analysis, the first section outlines contemporary language policy approaches while the third

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section looks at the language policies of three countries similar to Ethiopia in terms of linguistic diversity. The second section deals with the historical context of the language policies of Ethiopia. A descriptive discussion of the current language policy of Ethiopia in the areas of administration, education, and the judiciary is provided in section four leading finally to a discussion on possible policy options and a recommended policy option.

An Overview of Current Language Policy Approaches

The first approach or argument to the language-recognition problem is Disestablishment/Public Disengagement. According to this approach, a state should have no official language (Getachew and Derib, 2006) and should remain neutral in regard to language issues as it does in regard to people’s right to the religion of their choosing (Patten, 2001). However, this approach is impractical as decisions regarding communications in the public arena over such issues as education; health, media, and business have to be made. It may be de facto or de jure but, in reality, decisions that affect language policies are continually being made by the modern state. Hence, in the words of Patten this approach should be set aside as it does not offer any solution to the language-recognition problem.

The other approach is Official Multilingualism. According to this approach, the state extends equal recognition to all languages spoken in its territory. Equal recognition is provided regardless of the variations in the numbers who speak the language and their socio-economic status. This is the current position in South Africa, for example. In this case, the state is obliged to provide all services in all the languages spoken in its jurisdiction. This implies that a speech group has the right to claim all services in the country be provided in its language, whether it be education, administration, judiciary, business, and the media.

According to Patten (2001), adopting Official Multilingualism can have two benefits. First, the linguistic group whose language is recognized as official can satisfy their communication needs, enjoy respect and consideration by using their language (symbolic affiliation), and promote themselves as a certain speech group. Second, it serves as a wider tool to exercise public equality by providing equal opportunities, environment, and recognition to the different languages.

The challenges associated with this approach are: (1) it is costly to implement. In countries where there are dozens of linguistic groups, implementation will be prohibitive; (2) it may have a negative impact on social cohesion and integration. The existence of diverse and many working languages reduce the motivation to learn others’ languages. This results in less inter-group communication thereby delaying integration or, in extreme cases, leading to separation where there are other accompanying social or economic injustices. Overall, this approach of language policy is not always practicable when it comes to its implementation. This holds true for current Ethiopia as well.
The third common approach is Language Rationalization. According to this approach, the state deliberately supports the use of a certain dominant language and it prohibits the use of all other languages in certain areas of language use. Here, the state seeks to create social convergence around a specified language. The emphasis in this approach is to create linguistic homogeneity in running the key areas of private and public affairs. This does not, however, mean that the state limits itself to the use of a single language. Patten (2001) identifies the following advantages and disadvantages of Language Rationalization.

The advantages are ones of social mobility, democratic deliberation, developing a common identity and efficiency.

The main disadvantage is its inherently suppressive nature. It is against the basic assumption of equality among speech groups. It does not also necessarily follow that rationalization is the only way or is always helpful to achieve social mobility, democratic deliberation, or develop common identity.

Historically, different empires had imposed their languages on other peoples. Such impositions resulted in, on the one hand, the developing of a common dominant language, helpful in running international affairs and, on the other hand, much trauma by denying peoples their right to use and develop their languages that affect the possibility to fully exploit their potentials. This is because language use has a direct relationship with one’s sense of self and respect.

One may conclude, therefore, that since language rationalization denies equal rights to different languages, it is not a viable option in modern times. But in situations where there are large numbers of speech groups in a country and none of the languages is universally accepted by all, the state may have no option but to introduce some alien language and officially encourage its use, even though it may not necessarily ban the use of local languages in all language spheres. This can be done directly through legislations or indirectly; by attaching certain benefits to the speakers of the dominant language. At this moment, Amharic, a mother tongue of one of the ethnic groups, is the only official working language of the Federal Government of Ethiopia despite the claim that the country follows Official Multilingualism.¹

The final approach is Language Maintenance. This approach was originally concerned about the behavior of a certain language group towards their language when they come into a contact with other language group(s) i.e. to inquire why others converge towards their language while others diverge from it (Fishman, 1964) and the study was traditionally approached from a psychological perspective (Giles and Johnson, 1987). But when the concept is understood in the context of state policy towards a language, Language Maintenance becomes the primary instrument to sustain a vulnerable language. According to Patten (2001:16), "[u]nder such a policy, the more vulnerable

¹ For details, see the later discussion on ‘current Ethiopian language policy’.
language is given fuller public recognition than the more secure one, as a way of signaling to people that the vulnerable language is worth learning and using on a regular basis."

A language policy based on this approach has paramount importance in encouraging the use and thereby helping, though not guaranteeing, the survival of minority languages. This is because the survival of a language is dependent on many other factors such as economic importance of the language, fertility rate in such a community, and choice of language for education by the concerned community; among others. Currently, the Ethiopian language policy encourages the use of mother tongue, at least, for elementary education and local administration, hence, it can be said that this approach is relevant to the Ethiopian situation. Therefore, one can find an intricate interplay of all the dominant language policy approaches in today’s Ethiopia.

The Historical Context of Ethiopia’s Language Policy

The Imperial Era
The foundations of the modern Ethiopian state are attributed to the early Aksumite civilization that flourished from about 100 B.C. to 1000 A.D. in the present highlands of Tigrai. The Aksumite civilization began to gradually decline in the seventh century A.D. because of the emergence and expansion of Islam, the invasion of the port of Adulis and trade routes in the red sea area by the Arabian peoples from the north, and the loss of its vast territories in the Arabian peninsula till it came to its end around 1000A.D. (Aregawi, 2004: 243). The Aksumite civilization, however, left many legacies. Among such legacies was a language with its unique scripts called the “Fidel” and numerals called the “Kutir”. The language of the Aksumites called the Geez belongs to the Semitic language group. Geez is no longer used in the public domain in the present-day Ethiopia, even though it survives as the main language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The current Semitic languages of Ethiopia, namely, Amharic, Tigrinya, Guragigna, Harari, and Argoba are the descendants of the Geez language. They all use the Geez script.

Following the decline of the Aksumite civilization, many other civilizations prospered. Lalibella and Gondar are the ones that had direct linguistic, religious, and cultural connections with the Aksumite Empire. The Geez language was used as a written language in both civilizations. From 1760 to1855, the state experienced a time of complete anarchy called the “Zemene-Mesafint” or era of the lords where central power was completely replaced by warring regional lords. But yet, no change was witnessed to the primary status of the Geez language. In 1855, a man from Gondar by the name Kassa Hailu (later Emperor Tewodros IV) created something akin to a unified state by defeating the then regional lords. Among the changes introduced by Tewodros was the beginning of the use of the Amharic language in the recording of official documents. This gave Amharic the de facto status of an official language. Following the death of Tewodros in 1868, Kahsay Mircha, a Tigrayan, became Emperor Yohannes IV of Ethiopia. Yohannes did not introduce any change in the status of Amharic
perhaps for the sake of maintaining the unity of the empire. After the death of Yohannes in 1889 while fighting the Mahdists (Dirbush) in Metema (North West Ethiopia), power shifted further south where Menelik II of Shoa became the Emperor of Ethiopia. Menelik expanded the empire by conquering neighboring peoples to the south of the traditional Abyssinian polity. The people of the conquered areas were forced to adopt the language and religion of the conquerors (Alemseged, 2004, Aregawi, 2004). To make things worse, Amharic was imposed as the de facto sole official language of the empire even in Tigray-the historic core component of the Abyssinian Empire-forcing the people to not use their language for official purposes despite the fact that the Tigray people speak one of the oldest and richest of written and spoken languages.

Though without any legal justification, Amharic continued to be imposed on the people of the empire during the times of Lij (Prince) Iyassu, and Empress Zewditu who ruled after Emperor Menelik’s death in 1913. Emperor Haileselassie took control of government power following the death of Empress Zewditu in 1930. Haileselassie imposed the first modern Constitution on Ethiopia in 1931. The Constitution legitimized the absolute power of the emperor (Art. 5) but it did not say anything regarding language. In practice, the use of the Amharic language in all the public sectors was comparable to the absolute powers given to the Emperor by the Constitution. The medium of educational instruction all over Ethiopia under Haileselassie was only Amharic and English. Amharic was the only Ethiopian language that was offered as a subject in schools. The judiciary used only Amharic at all levels and it was the sole language of Administration at all national, provincial, and sub-provincial levels (Getachew and Derib, 2006:44).

Emperor Haileselassie introduced a second Constitution in 1955. The reasons for so doing were to: (1) introduce some reforms, (2) facilitate federation with Eritrea that had a more liberal Constitution at the time, and (3) give off a modern image to the country (Kassahun, 2007:16-17). The Constitution affirmed the absolute power of the emperor (Article 4) and the absolute privilege given to the Amharic language. Article 125 declares “the official language of the empire is Amharic”. Amharic language was also imposed in the partially autonomous region of Eritrea which joined Ethiopia through the decision of the United Nations in a federal arrangement whereby Eritrea was allowed to use Tigrigna and Arabic for running its affairs (Africa Watch, 1993). Thus, the language policy of Ethiopia during the imperial era was guided by Language Rationalization around the Amharic language. Alemayehu (2011) summarized it as follows: “Amharic was made the official language, and what is worse, it alone was used in all the newly established institutions”.

Owing to the then prevailing socio-economic injustices (discriminatory language policy being one of the main ones), different ethno-linguistic groups began to fight the central government for equality, justice, and self determination. The uprisings and armed resistance in Tigray (in 1943 and from1974-1991 respectively), the uprisings in Bale (1963-68), and the civil war in Eritrea (1961-1991) were inspired, interalia, by the then prevailing language inequality. In 1974, the resistance against the imperial rule from all corners of the society reached its
peak. In addition to the different uprisings in different regions of the country, urban dwellers, taxi drivers, and university students contributed to the downfall of the emperor and his regime once and for good. Despite the fact that the resistance against the imperial regime came from all sections of the society, the only organized force in the country was the military. Hence, part of the military hijacked the revolution and seized monopoly control of the post-imperial state (Young, 1998:192).

**The Military Regime or the Era of the Dergue**

The military regime, commonly called the Dergue, promised changes in many aspects when it seized power. Among those were issues related to land reforms, self determination and the equality of ethnic groups, cultures and languages. Apart from reforming land ownership from which the Dergue managed to gain some popular support, the regime evolved into a brutal dictatorship and it can be said that few or none of the promised rights and freedoms did come true (Assefa, 2005:287). Having said this, one should keep in mind the fact that in the 1987 Constitution the Dergue introduced a fairly liberal provision regarding language policy when compared to that of the 1955 imperial Constitution.

Apart from recognizing the equality of languages in the Constitution (Art. 2(5)), the Dergue took some actions that positively impacted on the use of other languages in the country. The most significant was the national literacy campaign where other Ethiopian languages were used for educational purposes for the first time (Getachew and Derib, 2006:47). According to McNabb in Getachew and Derib (2006:47), fifteen languages were used for conducting the campaign: They were: Amharic, Afan Oromo, Wolayta, Somali, Hadiya, Kembata, Tigrinya, Tigre, Sidama, Gedeo, Afar, Kafa-Mochinga, Saho, Kunama and Silti. This move was not only new but extraordinary in that it embraced almost all the major languages of Ethiopia. In addition, under the Dergue the state-owned broadcast media - including Ethiopian Television and Radio Ethiopia - began broadcasting in such languages as Tigrinya and Oromifa though the broadcast time remained ever dominated by Amharic.

On the other hand, Getachew and Derib (2006:48) identified as a defect in the new language policy the imposition of the Geez script - used by the Semitic languages - on all the other languages, as well as the continuing dominance of Amharic-speaking teachers, and the insufficiency of the resources devoted for the literacy campaign.

Overall, it can be said that the Dergue pursued the same Language Rationalization approach as pursued by the earlier imperial regime. Amharic remained the sole language of formal education. Amharic was the only language used in all administrative levels including the lowest level i.e. called the Kebele (equivalent to sub-district). Amharic remained the sole language of the judiciary.

The civil wars that ravaged the country in the Dergue era further intensified the resentments around the use of language. This is due to the fact that the Dergue
became identified with Amhara; hence, Amharic and the insurgents were identified with a certain ethnic group that speaks a distinct language. The TPLF and the EPLF in Tigray and Eritrea respectively, for e.g., were predominantly Tigrinya speakers, and they effectively used the language issue to mobilize the people to intensify the fight against the Dergue (Aregawi, 2004).

The Foreign Experience

Under this section, the language policy experiences of Nigeria, India, and Switzerland are examined. These countries are selected based on their similarities to Ethiopia in terms of diversity and their experiences on the subject matter. Nigeria and India are linguistically diverse and developing countries like Ethiopia but they have different language policies and, arguably, longer engagement with the issue. Switzerland is one of the developed countries and it is considered as one of the models of accommodating diversity particularly language diversity. Hence, their experiences are relevant to Ethiopia.

Nigeria

Nigeria is one of the ethno-linguistically diverse African countries, a factor largely attributable to its colonial legacy. The nation was formed in 1914 by merging the then three West African British protectorates (Akinnaso, 1991). Each protectorate comprised many ethnic groups speaking diverse languages. It is believed that around 400 languages are spoken in Nigeria. Hence, the newly-created nation had to develop a language policy that would ensure the running of its affairs smoothly within a vast diversity. Till independence in 1960, English was the major language used in such spheres as education. After independence, the move was towards recognizing multilingualism. Nigeria introduced English as its official language while the three languages spoken by the three dominant ethnic groups namely Yorba, Igbo, and Hausa were introduced as national languages. Other languages were used by the concerned community at the regional and local levels.

The reason for adopting English as an official language was a lack of agreement among the speakers of the three dominant Nigerian languages. On the other hand, the three languages were introduced in an effort to create a sense of national cohesion by encouraging linguistic convergence along the dominant languages. This sentiment is reflected in the 2004 national education policy document (Adebile, 2011).

This does not, however, mean that there is national consensus around the conception of the three languages spoken by the dominant ethnic groups as national languages i.e., speakers of other languages question the rationality of learning others’ languages because of their numerical superiority (Adebile, 2011).

Though it seems that Nigeria follows the policy of Official Multilingualism, the privileges extended to the languages are practically different; English—the inherited colonial language—is the most privileged followed by the three national
languages and the regional languages respectively. The minority local languages are the least privileged. It is claimed that the indigenous languages of Nigeria are suppressed heavily due to the increasingly dominant role played by English and the preference of the privileged elites to use it (Bamgbosede, 2000). It is or would be extremely costly, if not practically impossible; to deliver all the services provided by the state in every mother tongue but at the same time, the basis for the preferential treatment of some of the local languages can be questioned. Regardless of its defects, the language policy pursued by Nigeria is a helpful experience to look at when designing language policies for diverse countries such as Ethiopia.

India
India is one of the most, if not the most, linguistically diverse countries with over 1600 languages spoken at the level of a mother tongue (Bhattacharyya, 2007:5). India experienced colonial rule under the British for about three hundred years until its independence in 1947. Hence, the language policy discourse in India is highly connected with its colonial legacy as in the case of Nigeria. During the colonial era, English was used as the principal language of administration both at the national level and in the regions.

In 1950, India adopted Hindi as the official language of the Union but owing to resistance from the non-Hindi languages speakers (Dua, 1993); English was adopted as an additional official language, though with a subsidiary role, in 1963. In addition to this, India recognizes eighteen of its languages by putting them under the 8th schedule of the Constitution as a symbolic recognition of identity (Bhattacharyya, 2007:5). The language use in the education policy of India affirms the privileged status given to English and Hindi. The policy is based on a three language formula where non-Hindi speakers are required to study their own language, Hind, and English while Hindi speakers are required to study Hindi, English, and any one other language. Parliamentary deliberations at the national level use Hindi though one who can’t speak Hindi can use his or her own mother tongue. On the other hand, all authoritative legal texts are written in English and translated into Hindi. English is the most privileged language in the judiciary because the Indian Supreme Court and the high courts work in English. Members of the Union decide which language to use in their respective regions.

Though to a certain extent other Indian languages can be used in running the affairs of the government including education, Hindi and English are the most favored languages in the Indian system. This indicates that, despite the existence of resistance, the official language policy of India, in the national level, is more or less largely that of Language Rationalization approach. The status given to the English language both in Nigeria and India is a lesson worth learning for Ethiopia.

Switzerland
Switzerland came into existence as a state entity in 1291 through the alliance of small communities in the Alpine valleys (Grin, 1998:2). The country is, basically, constituted of people who belong to one of four linguistic groupings: German (63.7 %), French (20.4%), Italian (6.5%), and Romantsch (0.6%) (Office fédéral de
la statistique (2002) in Grin (2005:4)). However, there are other migrant residents who live in the country that belong to either the Swiss or other linguistic groups. Some of them even outnumber the Romantsch. The country is divided into administrative divisions called Cantons (26 in number). Language has played a central role in Swiss history. The 1848 Constitution originally recognized German, French and Italian as the national languages of Switzerland with equal importance. This has since been amended.

Currently, the Swiss Federation is considered as one of the best examples of Official Multilingualism. The present Constitution (implemented since 2000) recognizes German, French, Italian, and Romantsch as the official and national languages of Switzerland. The latter is recognized as official so far as the communications are between the federal government and its Romantsch speaking citizens (Fleiner, 2002:100). The Swiss model is peculiar in many aspects: (1) there is no language policy at the federal level as all decisions concerning the public use of language are made by the Cantons, (2) each Canton adopts its own official language without the interference of the federal government and they can bar the use of any other language apart from the official language of the Canton in public use, including in education and commerce though there is flexibility when it comes to private use, and (3) it recognizes all the ‘indigenous’ languages of the country as national.

This does not, however, mean that the Swiss model is free of challenges. The strict territorial nature of the language policy implemented by the Cantons makes communal interaction less easy which increasingly challenges unity at the national level. The other problem in relation to the territorial nature of the language policy is the fact that it denies residents from other Cantons and immigrants the chance to educate their children in their mother tongues. Nonetheless, the Swiss experience is helpful in identifying issues that should be considered in selecting an official working language in such diverse countries as Ethiopia.

**Current Ethiopian Language Policy**

The Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the current ruling coalition, came to power in 1991 by toppling the military regime through the force of the arms. The EPRDF is composed of four parties: the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), the Amhara Nation’s Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization (OPDO), and the Southern Peoples’ Democratic Movement (SPDM). All have their bases in the ethnic groups indicated in their names except for the SPDM that represents all the ethnic groups in the Southern Nation, Nationalities, and Peoples (SNNP) Region of Ethiopia. The TPLF is predominant in the EPRDF largely as a result of its contribution to the fight against the Dergue and the power dominance it exercises in the coalition (Alemseged, 2004:607, Vaughan, 2003).

The TPLF in its analyses of imperial Ethiopia concluded that the main defect in the nation-building process was ethnic exploitation. Hence, it used ethno-national
sentiments to mobilize the people to join the struggle against the central government (Aregawi, 2004). Among the indicators of ethnic exploitation for the TPLF was the imposition of the Amharic language of the Amhara rulers on the Tigray people that had its own distinct spoken and written Tigrinya language. This factor was, of course, used to mobilize people to fight against the center in other parts of the country, particularly in Oromia, as well. The TPLF, therefore, had a well articulated position regarding language issues before it controlled government power.

The 1991 Transitional Period Charter (TPC) (Article 2) recognizes the right of each nation, nationality, and people to preserve its identity, promote its culture and history, use and develop its language, administer its own affairs, participate in the central government on the basis of freedom, and fair and proper representation and finally exercise its right to self determination or independence, when the concerned nation, nationality, and people is convinced that the above rights are denied, abridged or abrogated. Despite the extensive rights given by the TPC to the nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia, article 19 of the same document declares English and Amharic texts to have equal authenticity ignoring the duty to translate the charter to any of the other languages as one could expect in situations of true language equality.

The 1994 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia implemented since 1995 has adopted a similar language policy that affirms the equal protection extended to all the languages of the country, in principle, but it maintains Amharic language as the only official working language of the Federal Government. Article 5 reads:

Languages
1. All Ethiopian languages shall enjoy equal state recognition.
2. Amharic shall be the working language of the Federal Government.
3. Members of the Federation may by law determine their respective working languages (Italics mine).

However, the other rights articulated by the TPLF/EPRDF long before controlling government power remained intact. A former leader of the TPLF wrote that: “The inclusion in the current Ethiopian Constitution of a right to secession for every nationality (article 39.1).... [is] intrinsically linked to.... the ethno-nationalist ..." sentiments developed in the earlier days of the struggle by, among others, members of the top leadership of the TPLF (Aregawi, 2004:592).

The following discussion on current-day Ethiopia’s language policy in the areas of administration, education, and the judiciary indicate that despite the official rhetoric of Official Multilingualism, the Amharic language still enjoys paramount dominance. This is not, however, to deny the existence of completely different stand by the government at all levels on language use. Currently, each community has the right to use its language in all public arenas, at least, in its locality which was unthinkable in the former regimes.
Language Use in Administration

Ethiopia is administratively divided into nine states and two chartered cities of Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa, both directly administered by the Federal Government. In terms of ethnic composition, the states can be grouped into two categories. The first group composed of Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromia, and Somali have one dominant ethnic group and they have the language of the dominant ethnic group as their official working languages. In other words, the official working language in Tigray is Tigrinya, in Afar Afarignana, in Amhara Amharic, in Oromia Oromigna, and in Somali Somaligna. But other minority ethnic groups live within these states. The minorities may be ‘indigenous’ people to the area who have their defined territory within the states or ‘immigrants’ who came in search of economic opportunities from the other regions. The minorities who are ‘indigenous’ are allowed to establish autonomous administrations either at a zonal or district (locally called Woreda) level depending on other factors such as population numbers. The latter use their languages for self-administration. Examples are the Oromia, Awi, and Waghimira zones in the Amhara state and the autonomous Woredas of the Kunamas and the Irob in Tigray. But there is no legally recognized right to self-administration for the ‘immigrant’ minorities who have left their ‘home’ states and, hence, no legally recognized right of mother-tongue-language use for administration. So far, there is no legal regime that governs the language of communication between the autonomous Zone or Woreda and the concerned State but, from experience, the official working language of the states remains the de facto language of communication.

The other group of states includes SNNP, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, and Harari. These states are home to different ethnic groups but there is no ethnic group that has an overwhelming majority in these states. Hence, they have followed a different path in selecting the official working language at the state level; while the first three adopted Amharic, the official working language of the Federal Government, as their official working languages, the state of Harari uses the two languages spoken by the two major ethnic groups of the region i.e. Harai and Oromigna. Regarding the treatment of minorities in these regions, the same trend is followed as the first group. The underlining policy behind adopting Amharic as the official working language in the multiethnic states seems to be to avoid conflicts that may arise from disputes over language use. It can also be justified by the associated costs of adopting all the languages spoken in the regions as official working languages. On the other hand, this denies the indigenous languages of the states the chance to develop to their fullest potential.

Amharic is the official language of administration in the federally administered cities of Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa though they are home to different ethnic groups. The justification for this may be the practical impossibility of recognizing

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2 See Article 47 of the 1994 Constitution.
3 A Chartered city is a city in which the governance system is defined by the city’s own charter document rather than by provincial, regional or national laws.
all the languages spoken by the resident people in these cities. But again, in such situations, the claims for linguistic, cultural, and ethnic equality as propagated by the incumbent party and government remains flawed.

**Education**

Education is one of the main areas where the impact of the new policy towards language has been concretely felt.

According to the 1994 Constitution (Article 51(2)), the Federal Government “shall formulate the country’s policies in respect to overall economic and social development; it shall draw up and implement plans and strategies of development” and, obviously education constitutes one of the core areas of economic and social development. Sub-article 3 of the same article puts it more explicitly: “[the Federal Government] shall establish national standards and basic criteria for the evaluation of policies in public health, education, science, technology, culture as well as for the protection and preservation of historical legends”. Hence, the final say, including on issues of language policy, regarding education resides on the hands of the Federal Government.

Accordingly, the Federal Government issued a policy document with the title ‘Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Education and Training Policy’ in 1994. The most relevant provision of this policy document is reproduced below:

3.5. Languages and Education
3.5.1 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.
3.5.2 Making the necessary preparation, nations and nationalities can either learn in their own language or can choose from among those selected on the basis of national and countrywide distribution.
3.5.3 The language of teacher training for kindergarten and primary education will be the nationality language used in the area.
3.5.4 Amharic shall be taught as a language of countrywide communication.
3.5.5 English will be the medium of instruction for secondary and higher education.
3.5.6 Students can choose and learn at least one nationality language and one foreign language for cultural and international relations.
3.5.7 English will be taught as a subject starting from grade one.
3.5.8 The necessary steps will be taken to strengthen language teaching at all levels. (Italics mine).

From the personal experience of the author, the practice in the country conforms more or less to the basic guiding principles and rules provided above. In other words, even though there are some languages whose day for education use has not yet come, the problem is attributed to lack of material and human resources than lack of commitment to implement the policy because 25
languages are already being used as media of instruction in primary education (Seidel and Moritz, 2009:1125)

Two points are worth noting. The first is the underlying philosophy behind adopting the use of mother tongue language for primary education i.e. the pedagogical advantages for the child and as a means of promoting nationality rights. There is, however, a disparity in implementing the policy of mother tongue primary education between states; some states, zones, or districts restrict it to the first cycle while others extend it to the second cycle (Getachew and Derib, 2006). The other defect lies with the practical implementation of this policy and in the fact that children in Addis Ababa are forced to learn their primary and kindergarten education in Amharic, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds, which seriously affects the promotion of identity. In some regions, particularly, in Oromia, due to the presence of non-Oromigna speaking ‘immigrant’ minorities mostly in the urban centers, the use of Amharic for primary education is allowed. This can be considered as a positive move in promoting identity, equality, and unity at the same time.

The other point is the predominant position given to the Amharic language by explicitly recognizing its importance as a language of country wide communication despite the historic association of the language with oppression and discrimination. A clear contradiction is observed here: on the one hand, discrimination and ethno-national inequality is least tolerated by the current regime but on the other, none of the languages in the country are on an equal footing with Amharic which indicates the presence of some form of inequality otherwise language equality should not be considered as an inherent manifestation of the existence of equality between nations and nationalities which is unacceptable.

Judiciary
The 1994 Ethiopian Constitution establishes two levels of governments: federal and state. Each level has legislative, executive, and judicial powers. Furthermore, each government has supreme powers in its area of function. Hence, judicial powers regarding federal matters are exercised by the Federal Judiciary and judicial powers regarding regional matters are exercised by the regional judiciary (Articles 78 and 79). The structure of the judiciary is inline with the administrative structures. Hence, the judiciary at the federal level uses Amharic as its official working language while the state judiciaries, mostly, use the official working language of the state concerned.

The current federal court system has three levels: first instance, high, and supreme courts. Amharic is the official working language at all levels. The State System has the same levels: Woreda, Zonal, and Supreme Courts. As mentioned above, the working language of the judiciary at the state level is, mostly, the official working language of the state. The exceptions occur when a zonal or woreda level court is found in a zone or woreda where the official working language of the area is different from the official working language of the state. For example, the official working language of the Oromia zone in the Amhara
state is Oromigna/Oromifa and, hence, the official working language of the Zonal Court in the Oromia zone is Oromigna though the official working language of the Supreme Court of the Amhara state is Amharic.

It can be concluded that people use their languages in judicial proceedings at their localities but when decisions are appealed, there is a chance that they will have to abandon their language and use the official working language of the next-level court -which is ‘others’ language- in their litigation. For example, a litigant who used his mother-tongue language in the Oromia Zonal Court of the Amhara State should get all his documents translated into Amharic and he himself is forced to litigate in Amharic if he files an appeal in the Supreme Court of the Amhara State. The same thing happens when there is a possibility for litigants to go on appeal from the state supreme courts whose official language is not Amharic to the Federal Supreme Court which is witnessed, at least, in cases of cassation.

These clearly indicate that the privileges enjoyed by the Ethiopian languages can be classified into three levels: (1) a language that enjoys predominance starting from the local levels to the highest federal institute i.e. Amharic, (2) languages that enjoy predominance starting from the local level to the highest state institute, i.e. Tigrinya, Oromigna, Afarigna, Somaligna, and Harari, and (3) languages used at woreda and zonal levels. This means, despite the rhetoric of Official Multilingualism preached both at the state and federal levels, in reality, there are pressures that encourage Language Rationalization around Amharic at the national level and the concerned state’s language at the state level though there is an effort to implement Language Maintenance by, at least, encouraging mother tongue use at local levels in the latter case.

**Rethinking Ethiopia’s Working Language Policy**

The Ethiopian language policy is unique in that no country with a comparable ethno-linguistic diversity has the same language policy. Compare it with the experiences of India and Nigeria. In India, the attempt to adopt Hindi as the sole official language by displacing English did not succeed. Nigeria has recognized three of its major languages as national but English still remains as the official working language.

Despite the privileged status given to Amharic, there is no certainty of advantage associated with speaking the language for Ethiopians (Alemseged, 2004: 613). Rather it symbolizes the dominance of its speakers, negatively affects the promotion of other languages, and seriously curtails the competence of Ethiopians in other essential foreign languages by consuming their time to learn it which otherwise could have been used to learn these foreign languages. But worst of all, the continued dominance of the Amharic language is a source of conflict. Hence, an alternative language policy for Ethiopia is a matter of necessity for two fundamental reasons: (1) Economic efficiency i.e. adopting a language policy that can make Ethiopia benefit from its booming population in terms of economic opportunities such as international employments and
engagement in international businesses and (2) Avoiding potential conflicts that may arise from disputes over the use of language which in turn, may seriously threaten the national unity of the country.

Alternatives:

i. Recognizing Oromifa as an additional official working language or recognizing all the ‘major’ languages as the official working languages of the Federal Government:
The Oromifa language of Ethiopia has the highest\(^4\) number of speakers at the level of mother tongue though with a slight variation of dialects from one place to another. Amharic comes next but it is better in terms of connecting the different ethnic groups of the country as it has a higher number of speakers as a second language. It can be said that both the Oromifa and the Amharic languages have strong justifications in their favor in claiming recognition as the languages of the state center. Hence, there is no reason to deny Oromifa the status or the privilege given to the Amharic language. But recognizing Oromifa as an additional language of the Federal Government of Ethiopia is not plausible for two reasons: (1) while the very wisdom of imposing Amharic, a language spoken by a certain ethnic group, as an official language of the Federal Government is questioned, it does not make sense to give the same resented privilege to Oromifa and aggravate the situation of the other languages. (2) Other languages in the country have good reasons to claim the same level of recognition. One can mention languages such as i) Tigrinya (a written and spoken language that has five million speakers in Ethiopia and the current official working language of Eritrea); ii) Somaligna (a language spoken by roughly the same number of speakers as Tigrinya in Ethiopia and a lingua franca in the Republic of Somalia); iii) Afarigna (a language spoken by two million people in Ethiopia, and a second dominant indigenous language in the Republic of Djibouti, and a language spoken by considerable number of population in Eritrea); iv) Sidamigna, Wolaitigna, etc. that have well founded and preceded justifications for recognition as official working languages of the Federal Government.

But recognizing all the major languages of the country is again not feasible for the following reasons: (1) there will be huge costs associated with translations of official documents, preparation of text books, financing the training of teachers, etc. (2) If the country recognizes some ten ‘major’ languages (say in terms of population number) of the country as official working languages, the remaining more than 60 languages will still be discriminated against or become less equal to the privileged ten. The experience from Nigeria is relevant here but it is difficult to apply it to the Ethiopian situation for the preceding reasons, and due to the fact that there is no consensus among the Nigerians themselves on the privileged status given to Yorba, Hausa, and Igbo. Hence, recognizing Oromifa as an additional official working language of the Federal Government or recognizing

\(^4\) inferred from Ethiopian census report 2007.
all the ‘major’ languages of the country as official working languages could have disastrous consequences.

ii. Recognizing English and Amharic as official working languages of the Federal Government:
While perhaps preferable to the above two alternatives, it nonetheless fails to remove the unnecessary and unjustified privilege given to Amharic. Using its already privileged position, Amharic will continue to curtail the attempt to introduce English as an effective language of communication. This will deny the country and its people the chance to share the benefits of globalization and international employment and business opportunities which certainly requires fluency in, at least, English.

Recognizing all languages of the country as the official working languages of the Federal Government, as is in the case of Switzerland, is unthinkable for obvious reasons; More than seventy languages spoken by more than seventy ethnic groups can not all be recognized as official working languages.

This leads to the conclusion that the Federal Government of Ethiopia should adopt one language that is neutral, feasible in terms of practical implementation, and economically advantageous to the country by helping the research, knowledge transfer, and integration endeavors of the country. This language should also be a language that helps the country’s large population to benefit from external/international employment and business opportunities. The obvious choice is English.

iii. Recognizing English as the sole official working language of the Federal Government:
Adopting English as the sole official working language of the Federal Government of Ethiopia by displacing the position of Amharic would have two advantages: (1) it would contain potential violent conflicts over language use and (2) maximizes economic benefits from global employment and business opportunities.

Arguments against are: (1) it is a foreign language. People may ask ‘how can a foreign language be adopted as a sole official working language in a country that has never been colonized?’ (2) Practically, Amharic is currently more widely spoken than English. As the author has seen in a policy document of the ruling party (EPRDF), this was the reason behind maintaining Amharic as the official working language of the Federal Government. The document further reads: either willingly or by force, the Ethiopian people have learned Amharic (though on average a very small portion of people from the other ethnic groups are fluent in Amharic), hence, there is no other language that can connect the Ethiopian people. (3) Amharic speakers may consider this as a threat to the use and development of the Amharic language.

However, these arguments are not convincing. First, one must remember that, in reality, Amharic is as alien as English to those who speak other languages as their
mother tongues; not to mention the traumas associated with the use of the
Amharic language that were experienced during the expansions of the imperial
Ethiopia and during the military dictatorship. Two, whether one likes it or not,
English is the predominant language of international communication; one needs
to master it, to benefit from global opportunities. Third, despite the claim that
Ethiopia has never been colonized, the main systems in the country are western
and similar to systems in other African countries that passed through the colonial
experience. Examples are university and governance systems. The country has
always attempted to ‘import’ what is thought to be good for its development
but has usually executed it badly. Poor performances in knowledge transfer
efforts, researches, and business communications are believed to be highly
related with poor use of the English language.

The current situation is basically that Amharic is unable to fulfill the country’s
demands and nor are the people learning English effectively. It may be argued
that this problem could be corrected by improving the teaching of English
language in schools but the practice suggests otherwise. Had it been possible to
improve English language skills by improving the way schools teach the
language, progress should have materialized by now. Rather, the problem is
related to the lack of incentives from the external environment. The country
teaches (attempts to teach is more appropriate because even most graduates
do not have good command of English) in English at higher levels but business
uses Amharic and other local languages. One may question the rationality to
argue so strongly in favour of English if the people are not that able to speak the
language fluently but the response is that learning the language has essential
benefits for the country.

The second argument against the adoption of English loses its relevance as the
literacy rate of the country has shown significant change in recent times and
English is no more an alien language to the ears of majority of the youngsters.5
Teaching English in schools will continuously help the language to be an
effective country wide communication and recognizing the language as
country wide communication will feed its effective teaching in schools.

Finally, the resistance that may come from some Amharic speakers wishing to
maintain the status quo is the other expected problem. But this is not justified
because: Amharic will not be denied the chance to develop as it will continue
to be used as a language of communication at state level similar to the other
languages and the issue is a matter of equality and economic efficiency and
not an attack directed against Amharic.

Language serves to express one’s identity and culture; it is also an essential tool
of communication, participation, employment, and the survival of groups (Watts
in Assefa, 2005:286). In the absence of language equality, all these essential
matters will be affected and the situation must be understood in this context. It is
sometimes said that whatever the constitutional situation English will in the end

5 CIA world fact book estimated the literacy rate to be 42.7% in 2003.
dominate anyway. Bisong (1995) disputes this arguing that in the Nigerian case English has not succeeded in replacing or displacing other Nigerian languages or in dominating, undervaluing, or marginalizing them. But even if it were to happen, I would suggest it as the lesser evil because there will not be horizontal inequality between the Ethiopian languages and such ‘evils’ will be compensated by the economic benefits associated with the use of English.

Regarding the Federal territories of Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa, primary education should be given in local languages though they will be under the direct rule of the ‘English-speaking’ Federal Government. This is important to avoid English-language elitism and to promote local languages. Students and parents should also be given the chance to choose the language of education as the current way of teaching all children in one language regardless of their ethnic background is against the principle of promoting nationality identity which is one of the pillars of the current Ethiopian Constitution. This practically means that as the residents of the Federal territories have diverse backgrounds, all state languages of primary education should be allowed to be used in Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa. Actual provision of such schools may depend on actual demands. This will not entail additional significant cost to the Government because the education bureaus of the Federal Territories can share texts prepared in local languages and other resources from the State Education Bureaus.

Conclusions

The current language policy in Ethiopia today is a potential source of conflict. The fact that the issue of changing the current language policy in the country is on the agenda of many opposition parties indicates that there is discontent on the matter. The imposition of Amharic as the sole official working language of the Federal Government threatens the equality of Ethiopian languages thereby representing the continuation of the dominance of the Amharic language and its speakers at mother-tongue level.

As a way forward, different options such as bringing some of the other ‘major’ languages of the country to the status of official working language of the Federal Government or introducing English as an official working language side by side with Amharic are recommended. However, as far as the analysis in this research is concerned, the solution proposed is to adopt English as the sole official working language of the Federal Government displacing Amharic; with a slight difference in implementation in the area of education in the Federal Territories. This is recommended because of economic advantages associated with the speaking of English as the language is becoming the single most dominant language of international and scientific communication and as a best tool to contain future violent conflicts fuelled by disputes over the use of language in the country.

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6 See Article 39.
References


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