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UNESCO/MELIT/INF/2  
Ibadan, 12 December 1964  
Original : English

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,  
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

in collaboration

with

THE UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN

Meeting of Experts

on

THE USE OF THE MOTHER TONGUE  
FOR LITERACY

LANGUAGES AND LITERACY  
(UNESCO/AFLIT/CONF/5)

A Paper presented at the Regional Conference on the Planning and  
Organisation of Literacy Programmes in Africa, Abidjan, 9-14 March 1964.

Ibadan

13 - 28 December 1964

26 AVR. 1965

REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE PLANNING AND ORGANIZATION

OF LITERACY PROGRAMMES IN AFRICA

LANGUAGES AND LITERACY

Importance of Language for Education and Literacy

1. Language is the principal means of expressing and communicating ideas. If two people are unable to speak the same language they can communicate only by gesture or pictures. Since education is a process of communicating ideas, language is an essential basis for education. And Literacy is really an extension of the use of language, for learning to read and write is only learning a new way to use language.

Definition of Terms

2. The problems that arise from a diversity of languages in many countries led Unesco to undertake a series of studies from 1950 to 1953 which culminated in two published reports.<sup>1</sup> A group of language experts brought together to take part in this study found it necessary to define a number of technical terms used in their discussions. These included: "mother tongue", "indigenous language", "lingua franca", "regional language", "national language", "official language", "world language", and "dialect". Three of the most important must be quoted here, since they are so often misused. "The mother tongue" or "indigenous language" is defined as "the language which a person acquires in early years and which normally becomes his natural instrument of thought and communication". A "vernacular language" is "the mother tongue of a group which is socially or politically dominated by another group speaking a different language". The word "dialect" is used to describe "a variant form within a single language".

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1. See "The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education", Paris 1953, 154 pp. (Monographs on Fundamental Education, VIII) and "African Languages and English in Education"; a report of a meeting of experts on the use in education of African languages in relation to English. Jos. Nigeria, November 1952, Paris 1953. 91 pp. Educational Studies and Documents, No.11.

## African Language Problems

3. This complexity of terms reflects the real complexity of the linguistic situation in many countries of Africa. Some African countries have more than 50 distinct languages, some spoken by comparatively small groups of people, and some having several dialects. Many of these languages have no written form and no accepted alphabet. Some have more than one alphabet in current use. Sometimes an African language is the national language of the country, as in Madagascar; in other cases a non-African language, such as English or French, has been adopted. Where ethnic groups, like the Hausa, are divided by national boundaries, one indigenous language may be in relationship with two official languages. Again, people in some ethnic groups must communicate with neighbouring groups in a lingua franca such as Swahili, which is neither their mother tongue nor the official language. In such situations the first necessity before a literacy programme can be launched may be to determine what language or languages are to be used for various purposes in education - a decision which may be different for adult education and for education in the schools, for oral adult education and for adult literacy.

## Choice of Languages for Education

4. The following views were expressed by the group of experts taking part in the Unesco study in 1950.<sup>1</sup>

"It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue. Psychologically, it is the system of meaningful signs that in his mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, it is a means of identification among the members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium". For similar reasons, the experts suggest that adult education should, whenever possible, be carried out in the mother tongue, because "the great majority of adults will not have the time to master a foreign language sufficiently for it to be used as an effective medium of education. Moreover the new ideas which teachers desire to convey to adults, .... can best be conveyed if interpreted to the people through the medium in which they are accustomed to thinking. Where people of many tongues are gathered together (e.g. in towns or work centres) some form of lingua franca is usually already used between them and this can then be used also as the medium for adult education."

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1. The use of Vernacular Languages in Education, p.11

5. The experts further expressed the belief that "in teaching adults to read it is always best to let them begin in the mother tongue .... However, these adults who having learnt to read in their mother tongue, want to learn a second language, should be encouraged to do so. In townships and elsewhere, where a lingua franca is freely used among the people themselves, this can usefully replace the mother tongue as a first literacy language, for it usually has the advantage of already being used for the production of news sheets, public notices etc... Thus new literates would be assured of some reading matter on which to exercise their new skill".<sup>1</sup>

6. Whatever expert opinion may propose, however, there are often serious obstacles to the use of a mother tongue as a vehicle of literacy. These may be: political, linguistic, educational, cultural, economic, financial and practical.

#### Language Teaching as a Prelude to Literacy

7. Where it proves impossible or undesirable to use the mother tongue for literacy, the first step may be to organise mass language teaching, using oral methods and modern media, such as radio, to give as many people as possible a working knowledge of a second language of wider use. This will generally, but not always, be the national language. This possibility has been demonstrated by the successes achieved in teaching immigrants a new national language, for example in the USA, Australia and Israel. Literacy teaching in this second language may follow more or less immediately on, or be simultaneous with, oral teaching.

8. Programmes for teaching second languages are, of course, equally or more important for the literate sectors of society.

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1. Op cit p.59

## Preparation of Unwritten Languages

9. Where a decision is taken to make people literate in a language which has never been written, or has an unsatisfactory written form, or more than one alphabet in use, then technical problems arise which demand the employment of language specialists.

10. "The main linguistic problem lies in making literature an unwritten language, fixing first its grammatical and phonetic structures, giving it a working vocabulary and then providing it with a practical script and orthography. But it is an equally difficult task to recondition for general educational purposes a language with an old aristocratic literary tradition but unfitted for modern teaching, or to improve a written vernacular so that it can become an official language as well as a suitable instrument for scientific and technological education".<sup>1</sup>

11. "Where the attitudes of the population towards their orthographic traditions permit a choice in matters of orthography, one should prefer:

- spelling in conformity with contemporary pronunciation;
- agreement with phonemes of the languages;
- simplicity in typography (available types, limited numbers of characters, etc.);
- letters without diacritics (if equally satisfactory);
- digraphs in preference to new characters, unless they cause ambiguity;
- derivation of new characters from prevailing scientific usage;
- agreement between different languages of the region or country, especially with the national or official language".<sup>2</sup>

12. This advice was given by a group of specialists with much practical sense. There is, however, a tendency among research workers in linguistics to wish to record as accurately as possible in writing all the distinct sounds or phonemes of the language and for this purpose to use very complex alphabets with many letters and diacritical signs.

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1. Opcit p.13

2. Opcit p.62

This may assist accurate linguistic research but it greatly adds to the cost of printing and the difficulty of learning to read and write in the language. Few of the old established languages of the world have phonetically accurate spelling, and in many cases the sounds differ from dialect to dialect so that a standard spelling can never accurately represent the different forms of speech. So the basic aim should be a working compromise between phonetic accuracy and practical simplicity.

#### Language Study and Language Reform

13. In 1961, Commission IV of the Addis Ababa Conference on the Development of Education in Africa concluded:<sup>1</sup>

"The choice of the language to be used for adult education rests with governments and should depend on linguistic, social and economic considerations, which will vary from one country to another. The languages chosen for adult education may not be the same as those chosen for school education. In order to ensure that the wisest possible decisions are adopted, linguistic and pedagogical studies should be carried out wherever necessary, and once the choice is made, such studies should be further developed so as to make the use of the chosen language or languages more effective and to facilitate their adjustment to changing conditions. International assistance may be useful in carrying out such studies."

14. Certainly language study and language reform is a very necessary basis for literacy in many countries of Africa. It is also a field in which experimental study of a highly technical order will have to continue for years to come. This study may be needed: to determine the choice of languages for literacy; to prepare unwritten languages for literacy use; to improve those already in use; to guide the production of teaching and reading materials; to prepare the way for instruction in a second language; and even to give to specialists and teachers the necessary knowledge of a local language which they must use in their work for literacy.

#### CONCLUSION

15. Few subjects are more controversial than the choice of languages for education.

16. One view on this matter may be crudely expressed as follows: the mother tongue is for any individual the natural vehicle of his thought, and for any community a natural expression and symbol of its culture; it is therefore preferable to teach everyone to read and write in his mother tongue rather than in a foreign language.

17. Against this is set the opposite view. It is a waste of money and effort, and a cause of frustration, to teach people to read and write in a language which will never serve for communication outside their small social group and which has not, and may never have, a literature.

18. Between these two extremes are many possible shades of policy; for example, that the people of smaller language groups should learn to read and write in their mother tongue, but only as a 'bridge' to literacy in the national language or in a language of wider communication; or again, that only languages spoken by comparatively large numbers of people should be used and developed for literacy.

19. In determining its language policy, a government - for it is the government which is ultimately responsible - must take account not only of the sort of political, social and psychological factors indicated above, but also the factor of cost.