

## The English Language and the African Identity, Globalization or a Lost Identity?

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### Abstract:

*English is the mother tongue of about half a billion people on the planet. English is the language of the United States, the country that influences all the societies and cultures of the globe. English is the second most learned language in the world. It often plays the role of a "universal language" to connect people of different languages. English is the first language of songs, films and Mass Media. Numerous high standard economic, scientific, political, sociological, psychological, and pedagogical books, reports and communications are usually published in English. British colonialism and American technological growth are certainly the major reasons for the spread of English all over the world. For more than two hundred years (1750 to 1950), the British Empire dominated about a quarter of the globe. So, for a reason or another, about twenty-one African countries out of fifty-seven have adopted English as their official (or national) language. A lot of those countries have been conquered by an English-speaking country like the United Kingdom. Such hegemonic language may menace not only the native language of other people but also their cultural identity. The fact that we are all human does not mean that we are all the same. Each ethnocultural identity has its own specificities. The present article's aim is to discuss the relationship between the foreign languages mainly English language, and the African cultural identity. The first part of the article sheds a slight light on the situation of languages in Africa. The second part tries to expose the African's attitudes toward both their mother tongues and English in a number of African nations, and how English is affecting every aspect of the*

*typical African life, culture, identity, beliefs and thoughts. The last part of the article is an attempt to check if this shift of the African culture towards the western one is an immediate consequence of globalisation or simply a disappearance of the African languages thus the melting of the Africanity. In other words, is it just an unavoidable effect of globalisation? Or is it the collapse of an old identity, since to destroy a language is to destroy an identity?*

**Key words:** English language, African identity, globalization, identity

## **INTRODUCTION**

The cultural identity is dynamic. Every moment it is being transformed, always growing. Human beings are changing - because of so many circumstances and conditions- and the culture is doing so. The life style the grandparents used to have is not the same as the one people have today, and children will have another different life style. We would never dare force parents to adopt our life style as we will never succeed, in the future, to make children live the same way we are doing today. The change is so gradual. Culture is a continuous process of change but in spite of the change, culture normally continues preserving the identity and the dignity of a given community. However, it is not the case in Africa. Africans have unwillingly and unconsciously boycotted their own dignity, identity and culture. When being asked about their true identity, most Africans always argue that this is globalisation. Perhaps it is. But, one has to bear in mind that globalisation is a two edges sword and it up to people to make the right choice. A common assumption is that people's mother tongue is essentially people's ethno cultural identity. So, to which extent are the foreign languages and the English language in particular influencing the African identity?

The language of an individual is the one of the nation to which his parents belong. If the two parents come from two different nations the native language is that of the father, in patrilineal system or mode. However, among the African people, the concept of “mother tongue” is not defined, because it does not have interest. Only the concept of “national language” is considered. How thus to define the cultural identity of an African child who can only speak English?

## **THE LANGUAGE SITUATION IN AFRICA**

Language is a system of gestural, graphic or vocal linguistic signs that enables communication between people. Such definition pays no heed to what really a language is. Languages are not only that favoured means of communication between human beings, but they also symbolize people’s identity, culture, views, feelings, emotions, happiness, sadness, and enthusiasm. Our world counts about 6703 spoken languages. Chinese is the most spoken language with about 1200 million speakers. However; the most influential language is English. It has a status of official language in at least 75 countries, with a total population of more than 2 billion people. Out of the estimated 6703 languages and dialects in the world, 2582 languages and 1382 dialects are found in Africa. This mosaic of world linguistic map has been depleted over time to homogenization due to globalization. So, is the language diversity seen as a barrier to the diffusion of knowledge and to the progress of any nation? Before going any further it is worth to shed a slight light on the African continent which covers more than 14.72 % of the world's land area. Africa stretches out on a total surface of almost 30.065.000 million kilometres square. It counts more than one billion inhabitants (1.031.472 according to “African Statistical Yearbook 2011”). That is about one-fifth of the whole world’s population. The earliest history of Africa goes back to millennia ago, when

the early life-forms roamed the Earth. It was only around 3,300 BC that ancient civilizations like that of Egypt came into existence. Most of the northern African countries were under the control of Roman Empire during its heyday. Islam started to expand in the continent by about 7th century AD, and to this day remains a major religion. Toward the last 200 years or so, Africa saw a dark period of colonization and slave-trade, when almost the entire continent was a colony of the European empires. The European powers were finally weakened during the Second World War when the continent witnessed a wave of independence movements. However, many African countries are still linked to the European culture at the expense of their own African one. Languages are very significant in preserving identities. The disappearance of the African languages would be dramatic. It would surely mean the disappearance of the African identity. Africans couldn't be satisfied with the imported foreign culture whatever its origin is. Africa shelters in its centre several ethnic groups having each a proper speech, a series of historical traditions, and a range of institutions, beliefs and behaviours. Besides, Each African country encloses within its borders a huge number of ethnic groups speaking each its own language. There are about 2035 African languages. This number is not fixed, because new languages are still discovered whereas others, which have few speakers, are disappearing. If we exclude the languages introduced during the last two millennia, like Arabic, Madagascan, Afrikaans, English, French, Spanish and Portuguese, this number of a little more than 2000 languages is broken down into four great language families:

- Niger-Congo which covers West, Central, and Southeast Africa, and counts about 1436 languages.
- Afro-Asiatic which spreads throughout the Middle East , North of Africa , the Horn of Africa, and parts of the Sahel with 371 languages.

- Nilo-Saharan which is centred on Sudan and Chad and includes about 196 languages.
- Khoisan is concentrated in the deserts of Namibia and Botswana with 35 languages.

By admitting the total of more than 2000 languages that represents one third of the world's languages, Africa is thus a multilingual area where contacts take place between various languages particularly the foreign languages and the local African ones. The degree of plurilingualism varies considerably according to countries and individuals. According to UNESCO approximately 105 million people speak 410 languages in Nigeria, 30 million people in Democratic Republic of Congo (ex-Zaire) use 206 languages and Ethiopia has 97 languages for a population of 45 million, in Cameroon 185 languages are used by 8 million inhabitants, 58 languages for 3 million inhabitants in Benin, 31 languages for two million Congo Brazzaville, 120 languages for 28 million inhabitants in Tanzania with the Kiswahili like "lingua franca", 12 languages in Mali for a population of 9 million. In Nigeria 397 languages out of 410 are minority languages but the total number of their speakers makes 60%. As far as individual plurilingualism is concerned, an investigation conducted by UNESCO in Nigeria show that the number of languages spoken by each member of the speech communities goes from two to four in the following way: 60% speak two languages, 30% speak three and 10% speak more than four. A similar report could be made for many countries of Africa where the tradition of plurilingualism is widespread.

However, our discussion concerns the foreign languages mainly English and its impacts on the African identity. Individuals and communities are becoming multilingual through the different languages they acquired during their life. The language acquisition process of a multilingual speaker allows the study of the mutual influences of the languages in contact. These influences may threaten the existence of many of

those languages. Just consider the manipulation of the linguistic materials such as the language selection in a given circumstance, the code-switching, and the code-mixing. Indeed, during his life, a speaker can change his language even a dominant one because of his education or his social or geographical shift. The degree of the multilingual competence among the African speakers varies according to interdependent social factors. People living in urban areas tend to use several languages than those in rural areas where monolingualism is so predominant. Schooling also tends to implement this linguistic competence, since in many African schools, the language of teaching is neither the mother tongue nor the preferred language of the children. The social contexts, the speakers' identity, their social role, the referential and emotional contents of the conversation are all factors that contribute to the choice of the language or the code i.e. the multilingual repertoires of the speakers. Some African intellectuals are increasingly aware of the seriousness of linguistic troubles. Thus, already in 1979, in Mali (Bamako) and during an international meeting held to discuss the language situation in Africa, they recommended the list of the following African languages hoping to restore the African identity through unifying languages.

- Fulfulde: Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Sierra Leone, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Benin, Sudan, Chad and Mauritania.
- Hausa: Niger, Nigeria, Sudan, Cameroon and Ghana.
- Kanuri: Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon.
- Manding: Mali, Senegal, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso.

## AFRICANS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THEIR MOTHER TONGUE

The attitude of some Africans towards their mother tongue is the story of THE COUNTRY-MAID AND HER MILK-JUG, a fable I used to read during my childhood. It is the story of a country-Maid who was walking along with a jug of milk on her head, when she began thinking: *«The money for which I shall sell this milk will enable me to increase my stock of eggs to three hundred. These eggs will produce at least two hundred and fifty chickens. The chickens will be ready to take to market just at the time when poultry is always dear; so that by the New Year, I shall surely have enough money to buy a new dress. In this dress I shall go to the fair, where all the young fellows will try hard to have me for a partner; but I shall refuse every one of them, and, with a disdainful toss of the head, turn away from them. »* Transported with this idea, she couldn't help acting with her head the thought that passed through her mind. Then down came the jug of milk, and all her imaginary happiness vanished in a moment.

Africans are today looking for the modernisation and globalisation at the expense of their languages and surely their identities. According to new social conceptions and beliefs in Africa, a child, who expresses himself in French or English, speaks his native language! The situation is so serious and so strange to evoke that this African child, deliberately deprived of his true native language, culture and identity, will constitute, tomorrow, a completely lost Africa. Some parents, who are considered guilty of this crime, pretend, as an excuse, that they do not share both the same native language. However, this is totally wrong for the simple reason that many parents in Africa, in more shocking cases, and despite the fact of having and speaking exactly the same native language, intentionally decide to speak French or English with their children. These parents do not realize how negative and stupid their behaviour

is. The English (for the English-speaking part) was proclaimed language of the babies. Indeed, almost no young mother, mainly in the urban areas, dares use her native language with her little baby. When being criticised because of their misbehaviour, some African parents always argue that the child will always end up speaking his native language. But, the experiments have shown that, if a child grows without being exposed to his native language in its social context, he will never be able to manipulate it. Others see that the world is progressing, and that it is much better to teach the child a language which enables him to communicate with the external world. This is obviously a completely wrong argument, because the child will join school for education, and will learn thus the French or the English languages. Others still claim that, the child will have many troubles to be integrated into the school if he leaves the home without knowing how to say an English word. However, all those who joined schools without any knowledge of the English language recognize that it is a meaningless argument. Moreover, communicating with a child in his native language would absolutely not prevent the parents to speak a little English in parallel. And, the young children would need only few months of classes to be able to communicate in English. They would have no troubles at all to be integrated into school. As for those couples formed of a man and a woman not sharing the same native language and as far as the African traditional context is concerned, a young woman who is getting married learns the language of her husband. And everything occurs easily insofar as the bride finds herself in a village or a district where only this language is spoken. But the context is increasingly different today with the increasing urbanization, the rural migration and the cosmopolitan character of the cities. It is, however, obvious that a child always speaks the language which his mother uses when addressing him. However the mothers spend too much time with their children without being able to transmit their native



language to them. Each child should, thus, speak correctly at least the language of his mother (English). One would wonder how a child could acquire a language if he could use it only with his mother. Children are not allowed to learn their native language yet they hear their parents regularly use it with other people, on various occasions, on the telephone, at home with guests, on the road to the market, etc. The native language is always everywhere around. The most disappointing case is when the father and the mother often use their native language, except when they address their children they shift to English making them, thus, foreigner in their own home. Why do people in Africa refuse the Africanity of their children? Is it what we refer to as the parental neo-colonialism? Moreover, it would be said now that the African children are already born being English-speaking, and incompetents to understand other languages. Many parents believe that if they address their babies using their native language, the babies will never understand a fraction of what is being said. What is worth mentioning is that the immense majority of the parents have very bad English. And thus, the child arrives at school with incorrect English that he will have all the troubles of the world to learn the correct school English. Besides his classmates also express themselves badly and the family keeps on speaking wrong English. He is thus confused. It is clear enough that future African generations will master neither their native languages nor the foreign languages (official languages) they are learning. They are hoping to build a civilization to stand high among the other nations. However they are just destroying a so precious cultural identity. Africans fear their past. They wish to join the developed nations but surely they are doing at the expense of many social and national entities. It's high time the African governments took serious measures to restore the African identity and to preserve the linguistic inheritance of their countries through introducing the national language learning into the school syllabuses. In their turn African

intellectuals would better increase the citizens' awareness by exposing the facts of linguistic extermination. What is it useful for to be used to speak English fluently if one does not even know who is he and where is he from? For some African people, language is simply a means of communicating knowledge, and if one already masters an international language, there is no need to speak his national language especially when this latter is used only by a few thousands of speakers. Nevertheless, a language is not simply a means of communicating knowledge. It is also an interpretation of ideas, a transcription of wishes, an expression of feelings and a behaviour. And the Africans own their proper way and style to view life, and to behave within a society. Moreover, the cultural unit of the Black Africa allows that, whatever the number of languages which can count an African country, each conveys values which are common to all African people. Those values permit the Negro nations to build brilliant civilizations through history.

### **THE LINGUISTIC EXTINCTION AND THE CULTURAL IDENTITY**

The cultural identity is an anthropological concept which indicates a historical period during which a community is recognized by precise values through its practices, its concepts, its thoughts, its beliefs, its art, and its language. Thus, the cultural identity is recognised within a space of time because the values which determine it are dynamic and evolutionary. We could not precisely quote the cultural values which identify people during a brief moment of his history. In Africa, such mosaic of people and communities who share a past marked by slavery and colonization could not boast, today, of an authentically African culture still expressing its identity. However, the hope is allowed. The possibility to restore the African identity exists.

The European colonization to Africa lasted more than a century (1830-1960). Indeed, most African leaders and intellectuals are the fruits of this colonial school. During the period of colonization (even afterwards) the school was the only reference in the education and the training of the children. Family education was relegated to the last plan, parents were regarded as savages. The few children who had the chance to go to the school reflected nothing but the school education. They were being gradually separated of their cultural roots. The programs taught at that time (even currently in some countries) could not take into consideration the cultural factors of the African atmosphere. The curriculum was a foreign model vehicling a foreign culture to the African realism. The historical and cultural references were the foreigners. The impact of colonisation is so great and so perceptible on the African languages and their cultural identity. The language is the whole spoken or written idioms proper to a community. It is that gift to communicate and to express our views. According to the previous definition, Africa counts more than 2000 languages. Thus, it counts more languages than any other continent with a high language density in the Sub-Saharan area. Most languages are spoken in some villages and sometimes only in one village. In spite of this evident diversity, there is real affinity between the majority of these languages. All these languages would be derived from a small number of them. The elites, having the responsibility to design the models of development and the projects of society, then to mobilize the illiterate populations and the interior and external resources around these models and projects, do not even know how to validly present their ideas, approaches, and working methods to their communities. It's obvious that the way to expose a problem may either facilitate or complicate its resolution. So, what to say about those who does not ever have a way to expose the problem Thus, the African intellectuals (educated) for a long time constituted a major obstacle for the evolution of

the African local languages pretending that they couldn't express scientific thoughts.

The disappearance of a language is not sudden, except in the case of genocide of the whole speakers of a language. The first indicator of the weakening of a language appears when people start not to use their language or simply when they give it up for another one. The process goes through different bilingualism phases until it reaches its final status. In the initial phase of the decay of a language, the minority is convinced that learning the language of the majority will enrich their cultural life, it will ensure better economic development, and will give them access to the contemporary internationalism. We can summarize the process of the language disappearance or extermination in four steps. The extinction begins with the systematic bilingualism of the social elite while the mass remains unilingual. Then, people in cities gradually become bilingual while the rural population remains unilingual. The cities then evolve towards a growing bilingualism, while the rural areas begin welcoming bilingualism. In the last step, the whole society shifts heavily towards unilingualism leaving only a few regions bilingual. Linguistically speaking, the phonetic system of the dominated language melts slowly in the dominant language. Its sentences will reflect those of the other language, and its vocabulary is gradually absorbed. The language disappears by transformation. The predominant language affects both its linguistic system and its status among its speakers. However, contrary to what one may believe, the process of death of a language is not necessarily irreversible. The language is not a biological organism that is born, lives and dies. This is a social reality that can ignore the biological determinism. The history witnessed that a language can be weak because of strong language. Thus, in the eighth century, English has almost disappeared in favor of the Norse Vikings; they had only a few battles to fight for complete elimination of the Anglo-Saxons.

English remained weak until the seventeenth century and many experts, at the time, had even predicted its imminent death.

So, it's obvious that the assimilation process, a prelude to the death of a language, may be stopped evolving. However, the natural tendency is that, once the process of regression began, the life of a language declines gradually before dying completely. The bilingualism promotes second language in most cases. The bilingual speaker threatens the existence of his language. The non-use of the mother tongue will provoke a loss of both linguistic ability and cultural identity. If the bilingualism extends to the entire community, the linguistic change is imminent. The change is so gradual in a single direction, with more and more new speakers for more and more functions, until the entire community uses the second language for all the usual needs and communications of the everyday life. The mother tongue is strongly influenced by the dominant language.

## **CONCLUSION**

The loss of the African cultural identity is the result of a power that works in favor of a dominant language, which controls both the number of users and the generator of the cultural products. The cultural domination at the school extends to the products carried by technological means such as film, radio, television and computers. Minority groups who lack even the school to promote their language have obviously no chance to survive. We must consider that the languages that are neither standardized nor codified can hardly resist the power of a strong language. This is the case of most African languages. Besides, even a written language that does not generate cultural products is doomed to extinction. The challenge of such African languages is both to fight the imperialism of the great languages and to excel in their own field, even though they

have neither the economic nor the technological resources. Targeting the international standards may be suicidal for the African languages because of the cost in case of failure. However, the example of the Swedes, Danes, Norwegians and Finns shows that it is possible to meet the challenge. Otherwise, this is suffocation and death of the languages that missed the train.

People who uses language and culture of others tend to become anemic language dependent in addition to contributing to the expansion of strong language. History shows us that only people who have a cultural weight based on strong and stable institutions, a network of schools and writing traditions, manage to survive, even after being conquered by arms.

The restoration of the African cultural identity may be carried out through an epistemological and historical study of those languages. The language founds the cultural identity. Therefore; the language is the pillar of the culture. It would be thus important to preserve the survival of the African languages as cultural components. Today, it is necessary to develop a written form recuperating perfectly the tones of the common African languages according to the linguistic family. The inheritance already exists but it is not favourably exploited. The national languages should be standardized. The process requires the involvement of the rural populations still linked to their traditions. African would better develop a genuine linguistic policy, proceed to the reform of the educational systems, and update their national curriculum.

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