

The Ethiopian Language Policy: A Historical and Typological Overview¹

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Abstract: This paper describes the Ethiopian language policy from the historical and typological perspectives. In the historical overview, the different covert and overt language policies so far encountered are examined. A comparison is made among the language ideologies of the Imperial (1930-1974), the Derg (1974-1991) and the EPRDF (1991 –) governments. In the typological overview, the language policies implemented by different governments are classified by type based on the existing literature on language policy. Issues surrounding language diversity, status and corpus planning and policy formulations are addressed. An attempt is made to assess and compare the Ethiopian experience with experiences of other multilingual countries. Ethiopia is not only a multilingual but also a biscriptual country in which the Ethiopic and Latin scripts are competing. Due to its historical trajectory, Ethiopia is neither Anglo-Phone nor Franco-phone in the strict sense of the terms. It promotes an endoglossic language policy with English playing an important role, but without connection to the colonial legacy. These and other complex sociolinguistic profiles make the prevalence of an optimal language policy in Ethiopia somewhat complex as compared to other Sub-Saharan African countries that promote exoglossic or mixed language policies.

Key words: Language policy, Language planning, Language diversity, Linguistic human rights, Lingua-franca

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¹ I am deeply indebted to Ato Ayalew Shibeshi, Dr. Bekale Seyum and Fitsum Abate for their valuable comments on the first draft of this paper.

Introduction

Language policy (henceforth LPO) is a field of inquiry in social sciences and humanities and addresses social problems often involving language as in Africa (Ricento, 2006). In short, it refers to regulations and guidelines set by governments regarding language issues. As pointed out by Alexander (1989), language issues in Africa are among the most serious issues such as racial, land, housing, clean water, health and good governance. Language policies in Africa have been criticized for being alien to the African objective reality and, hence, incapacitated to solve language-related problems erupting especially in multilingual nations. In this connection, Heine (1992:23) writes that "Most African nations have retained the overall structure of the language policies which they inherited from the respective colonial powers."

Ethiopia is known to be the mosaic of ethnolinguistic groups speaking about seventy languages (see the statistical tables of the 2007 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia). It is the only country south of the Sahara with its own script called "Ethiopic" which is more than twenty centuries old. According to Ayele (1997), the Ethiopic writing system is syllabic and is one of the greatest cultural accomplishments of Ethiopians. Among the four language phyla in Africa, two of them are found in Ethiopia. These are Afro-Asiatic spoken by nearly ninety-nine percent of the population and Nilo-Saharan spoken by the remaining one percent.² Out of the six branches of Afro-Asiatic languages, three of them, namely Cushitic, Omotic and Semitic are spoken in Ethiopia.³ This linguistic profile is the most profound evidence to consider Ethiopia as the home of Afro-Asiatic languages and peoples. Unlike ancient Egyptian and Berber, most of the Afro-Asiatic languages in Ethiopia are still vibrant. Together with Sudan and Chad, Ethiopia hosts the majority of the Nilo-Saharan languages, namely East Sudanic and Koman (Bender, 2000). It is one of the African nations where one indigenous language (Amharic) is spoken by the vast majority of the population as a lingua-franca like KiSwahili in Tanzania; Sango in Central African Republic; Bambara in Mali; Wolof in Senegal; etc. (see Wolff, 2000). Afaan Oromo and Amharic are the two major languages of wider

² The other two major African language phyla are Niger-Congo and Khoisan (Heine and Nurse, 2000).

³ The other branches of Afro-Asiatic are Ancient Egyptian, Berber and Chadid (Hayward, 2000).

communication (henceforth LWC) in the linguistic ecology of Ethiopia and are among the major African languages next to Kiswahilli, Hausa and perhaps Yoruba. As checked from the 2007 census data, in addition to Afaan Oromo (24,929,268) and Amharic (21,631,370); Somali (4,609,274), Tigrinya (4,324,476), Sidaama (2,981,471), Wolaitta (1,627,784), Gurage cluster (1,481,783), Afar (1,281,278), Haddiya (1,253,881), Gamo (1,070,626) are among the major languages of Ethiopia. Gedeo, spoken by nearly one million speakers (the landmark for a major language) is also approaching the major language status. Some of these languages and others are cross-border languages spoken in the neighboring countries too. These include Afaan Oromo (Ethiopia and Kenya), Tigrinya (Ethiopia and Eritrea), Gumuz (Ethiopia and Sudan), Kunama (Ethiopia and Eritrea), Burji (Ethiopia and Kenya), Afar (Ethiopia, Djibouti and Eritrea), Anywa (Ethiopia and Sudan), Nuer (Ethiopia and Sudan) and Berta (Ethiopia and Sudan). Ethiopia, together with Tanzania, Kenya and Nigeria, is one of the areas of linguistic crises in Sub-Saharan Africa where several languages become endangered at different levels because of the strong pressure of hitherto dominant indigenous languages (see UNESCO's 2002 report and Zelealem *fc.*).

This paper reviews the trends of Ethiopian language policies. The review is based on document analysis. It gives an outline of the different language policies implemented in Ethiopia until today. The paper also provides a comparative analysis and a typology of the Ethiopian language policies following Batibo, 2007; Bloomaert, 2006; Cartwright, 2006; Fishman, 2006; Heine et al., 1982; Hornberger, 2006; Kloss, 1969; Phillipson, 1992; Ricento, 2006; Schiffman, 2003; Spolsky, 2004; Stewart, 1968; Tollefson, 2006. In these pioneering works, language policies are typologically classified as: covert or overt; pluralistic or assimilationist; multilingual or monolingual; symmetric or asymmetric; egalitarian or restricted; promotive or tolerant; endoglossic, exoglossic or mixed; and territorial or non-territorial.⁴

⁴ The *overt* vs. *covert* typology is based on the presence or absence of explicitly-stated written legal documents (Kloss, 1969; Schiffman 1996, 2003). The *pluralistic* vs. *assimilationist* typology is based on the presence or absence of efforts to empower and promote languages (Ricento, 2006; Schiffman 1996, 2003). The *multilingual* vs. *monolingual* distinction of LPOs is based on the presence of

Language Guidelines before 1930

Ethiopian language policies have often been overviewed to date in terms of the three eras which tally with the modern systems of rule in Ethiopia after WWII (see Derib and Getachew 2006; Dereje, 2010; Hailu, 1993; Bekale 2012). These are the Imperial System (the Haile-Sellase Era), which lasted until 1974; the Socialist System (the Derg Era), which lasted until 1991; and the Federal System (the EPRDF Era) which has been operational since 1991. It is believed that the Ethiopian LPO, in its crudest sense, has a long historical trajectory. In order to understand the nexus of the different types of LPOs better, the unconstitutional and covert guidelines geared towards languages before the reign of Haile-Sellase have been assessed in this paper. Besides, an in-depth analysis has been made on the three major overt language policies since the 1930s.

As a matter of fact, before the reign of Haile-Sellase (1930-1974), there was no written LPO that was officially recognized by law. During the Axumite Empire (100-1100), Ge'ez was the language that served as *lissanā nīgus* 'the language of Kings' and as the lingua-franca among ordinary people with some sort of official status (Bahru, 1991). It was also the language used in education by the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church as far back as 330 A.D. (Ayalew, 2000). After the transfer of power from Axum to Lalibela (1150-1270), Ge'ez was apparently replaced by Amharic. During this time, whereas the former remained to be the

absence of state recognition of all languages as national and official languages (Batibo, 2007; Schiffman 1996). The *symmetric* vs. *asymmetric* classification relies on the presence or absence of de facto and de jure equal treatment of languages (Schiffman 1996). The *promotive* vs. *tolerant* classification depends on the presence or absence of government support and encouragement to develop languages (Schiffman 1996). The *egalitarian* vs. *restricted* typology dwells on the presence or absence of unrestricted and democratic treatment of languages (including minor ones) encouraging societal bilingualism (Schiffman 1996). *Endoglossic* vs. *exoglossic* typological classification of LPOs rests on the language that plays the official function at a national level. If *endoglossic*, it is an indigenous language that plays the official function. If *exoglossic*, it is a foreign (ex-colonial) languages that plays the official function. The *mixed* type of LPO refers to the mixture of *endoglossic* and *exoglossic* types (Batibo, 2007; Stewart 1968). *Territorial* vs. *non-territorial* typological distinction is based on the demarcation of regional/territorial boundaries by taking language as a major variable (Cartwright, 2006; Schiffman 1996).

literary language *lissanä s'ihuf*, the latter took over the status of *lissanä nīgus* 'the language of Kings' together with its vital role as a vehicular language (Hailu, 1993; Baye 2007).⁵ Since then, Ge'ez in Ethiopia has been a classical language like Latin in Vatican, Yaqui in Arizona and Sanskrit in India. Teshome (1997:391) writes that Ge'ez is "The liturgical and devotional language of the Ethiopian Orthodox church and the language of literature and learning for those who would pursue vocations in that church."

Bender (1983) reports that Amharic emerged as an oral language after the 4th century and became the lingua-franca around the 3rd century, i.e. first of the soldiers who spoke their own respective mother-tongues (like Kiswahili in present day Uganda). Roughly in the same century, Amharic became the vehicular language of the ordinary people and started to enjoy its status as a LWC for the first time. Historical records prove that after the decline of Axum up until the reign of the Zagwe dynasty in the 12th century, Ethiopian emperors and kings who were speakers of other Ethiopian languages used Amharic together with their own languages (Rubenson, 1987). The prolonged language contact situation among speakers of different Ethiopian languages has paved the way for some scholars to consider Amharic as a creole language that emerged from the substratum Cush-Omotc grammar and the superstratum Semitic lexicon (Bender, 1983). There is evidence that proves that Amharic (compared to Ge'ez) became a written language around the fourteenth century by inheriting and modifying the writing system from Ge'ez. Since the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty around 1270 and the transfer of power to Shoa rulers, Amharic continued to be the only language serving as lingua-franca and for official purposes (Teshome, 1997). (For comprehensive overviews on the history of Amharic, read Bender, 1983; Bender and Hailu, 1978; Baye, 2000; Hetzron, 1972; Ullendorf, 1955; and very recently Girma, 2009).

The Fetha Negest 'laws of Kings', which served as the basic reference during the reign of Tewodros (1855-1868) up until the time of Emperor Haile-Sellasie (1930-1974) appears to have language guideline (see Cooper, 1976). The book stated that a judge was appointed to an area on the basis of his multilingual and multicultural

⁵ In some literature, we find that the Zagwe Kings (1150-1270) used Ge'ez as the language of the palace, as ecclesiastical, literary and ceremonial language.

orientations of the people of his jurisdiction (Cooper, 1976). As for Rubenson (1994), during the time of Emperor Tewodros, three chronicles of himself and his reign and a considerable number of letters to European monarchs were written in Amharic. The Emperor promoted persuasive and forceful language guidelines which were also applied to foreign diplomatic missions and to visitors. According to Pankhurst (1955), when Europeans visited the Emperor, they were expected to use Amharic for communication through or without an interpreter. During his time, correspondences and poems were written in Amharic. He was anxious to see foreign residents learn and speak Amharic. Though there was no formally written LPO, Emperor Tewodros was the first King to formulate the formal and written use of Amharic (Pankhurst, 1969). Bahru (1991:34), in this regard, writes: “Culturally, Tewodros’ reign is significant because it witnessed the birth of a fairly well-developed literary Amharic.” Its role as a common language and its promotion to a written language status have greatly contributed to Amharic so that it can be considered the sole candidate as a national lingua-franca.

Emperor Yohannes came to power in 1872 and ruled Ethiopia until 1889. Like his predecessor, namely Tewodros, he maintained Amharic as the language of the court and the major lingua- franca. Though Yohannes was himself a native speaker of Tigrinya, he was cautious about the strong relationship between language and power and hence tried to win the hearts and minds of Amharic and non-Amharic speakers in his territory. Rubenson (2000), as quoted in Bahru (2008:84) states that “While it is conceivable that Yohannes used Tegrēña in his consultations with his close advisors in his capital, first Adwa then Maqale, his official correspondence – be it with European powers of his Ethiopian vassals – was invariably in Amharic.” The resolution of the Borumeda council of May 1878 which recognized Amharic as its official language proved the significant role of Emperor Yohannes to the promotion of Amharic. Yet, there were no written documents explicitly stating language issues by the then Ethiopian Emperors. Hence, by type, the unwritten language guidelines witnessed during Emperors Tewodros and Yohannes as well as their predecessors were covert and implicit.

The Ethiopian LPO, in the relatively modern sense, was introduced during Emperor Menelik II (1888-1910), the founder of modern Ethiopia. Like Tewodros and Yohannes, Menelik also used Amharic for writing his chronicles (Meyer, 2006). The focus on Amharic as a symbol of national unification was given due attention further during his reign, which is well-known principally for the spread of Amharic among the non-Amhara ethnolinguistic groups. Obviously, the greater momentum given to Amharic was mainly connected to its strong association with the dominant political power and its relatively better stage of development. Amharic was used to be not only a means of communication but also one of the ways of strengthening state power. In the effort to combat illiteracy in Ethiopia, the first large-scale literacy program called *Hullum Yimmar* 'Let all learn!' was introduced during the reign of Menelik II in 1898 and his daughter Empress Zewditu in 1921. According to Tilahun (1997), it is believed that Amharic was used by its native speakers and speakers of other languages during these adult literacy programs. The establishment of printing press for the first time toward the end of the 19th century in Dire Dawa and then in Addis Ababa made Amharic the only language to be used in printed media (Pankhurst, 1963). In education, the first modern school, namely Menelik II school was established in 1908 using French as a medium of instruction. The use of a foreign language as a medium of instruction was witnessed in Ethiopia for the first time. Later, foreign-based missionary schools started to flourish and were able to use other foreign languages such as English, German, Swedish, Italian, etc. Missionaries were also allowed to translate the Bible into, for instance, Afaan Oromo and Tigrinya. These relatively liberal language guidelines were perhaps connected to the overall ambition of the Emperor to modernize Ethiopia. Despite the fact that all the institutional and non-institutional supports were geared toward the entrenched use of Amharic for both written and oral communication, the state policies were not explicit on language issues. Generally, Menelik's preference to Amharic, similar to his predecessors, was not supported with any written legal document and, hence, what continued was a covert and implicit kind of LPO.

Typologically, the LPO before the reign of Haile-Sellase was like a "no-policy policy" (term used by Fishman (2006) in his description of the American LPO). If we take the "no-policy policy" of Emperors Yohannes and Menelik II alone, it was obvious that a covert, endoglossic, asymmetric, restricted, tolerant, assimilationist,

monolingual and non-territorial language guideline indicators were prevailing. Meanwhile, it should be made clear that absence of written language policy does not necessarily imply absence of language policy in general. Hence, the 'no-policy policy' category of Fishman needs to be perceived 'no-overt-policy policy'.

Language Policy 1930-1974

The LPO of Emperor Haile-Sellasie (1930-1974) is well-known as the Imperial LPO (henceforth ILPO). The then Imperial government was illustrious for promoting a centralized policy in safe-guarding its power and running nation-building smoothly. The LPO too was dominated by the perception which promoted linguistic and cultural homogeneity as the necessary requirements for social and economic progress and political stability. This was an ideological tenet inherited from the Westerners who strictly considered monolingualism as a gateway to development especially in the 1950s and 1960s during which most African countries got their independence (Alexander 1996, Ricento 2006). Its LPO was enmeshed in hegemonic ideology with very little or no attention to minority and non-dominant interests judiciary. The decrees which came out in those days of Haile-Sellasie regarding language use were still in favor of Amharic as the sole national official language.⁶ The Haile-Sellasie regime was remarkably known for introducing an overt LPO for the first time in the long Ethiopian history. Consequently, the linguistic hegemony of Amharic officially continued with legal backing. The policy proclaimed Amharic as the national official language of the imperial state. Since then, Ethiopia has become the only endoglossic African nation where an indigenous language has started to serve as the sole national official language. Amharic was recognized as a national language for two reasons: (a) it is an indigenous language widely spoken across the country, and (b) it was supposed to be associated with one's Ethiopian identity like a national anthem or national flag irrespective of differences in ethnic background. As an official language, the country's laws or legal systems were formulated in Amharic (see Abraham, 1966). It was widely used in government administration, mass media and education. After Haile-Sellasie I, who

⁶ A national language has more of a nation's symbolic function whereas an official language possesses a utilitarian function.

claimed be the father of modern education in the country, came to power in 1930, church education was conducted in Ge'ez and Mosque education in Arabic (Teshome, 1997). The indigenization policy of the imperial state made Amharic the medium of instruction for elementary education all over the country since 1958/59 (Tesfaye and Taylor, 1976). Amharic as a medium for elementary education and a school subject at all levels continued up until 1993. The mass media including newspapers, radio, and latter, television were all dominated by Amharic broadcasts. The administration at different levels was run through Amharic. The government offices from the smallest sub-district up to the state administration; the judiciary, from the sub-district up to the parliament; used Amharic. Bahru (2008) mentions two main reasons that contributed for the virtual prestigious status of Amharic in the country. These are the territorial expansion of the nineteenth century, and Ethiopia's resistance to the European colonial rule which, as a consequence, left no threat from any European language or no colonial policy to replicate.

Apparently, the "one language – one nation" motto was the ideological tenet in post war 'nation buildings' in Africa. The predilection to this motto could be subjected to at least two interpretations. One interpretation could be the recognition of one and only one language in the expense of others – an assimilationist LPO. The other interpretation could be the promotion of one language to serve the multilingual state as a LWC and as part of a strong national identity. Of course, beyond the national anthem and the national flag as well as ethnic and cultural factors, the Ethiopian national identity was defined mainly in linguistic terms. The assessment of the policies of most multilingual African countries, both Tanzania and Ethiopia included, certainly deserve the second interpretation. In connection to this, Bahru (2008) writes that the LPO of the imperial regime arose from the idea of national integration and the corresponding angst about the centrifugal tendencies latent in a heterogeneous state like Ethiopia. Kembo-Sure and Webb (2000) have pointed out that, the legacy of the European concept of nation state which can be attained through national integration which, in its turn, can only be achieved through linguistic homogeneity or the introduction of a unifying language was the motivating factor for undermining linguistic pluralism in multilingual African countries. Immediately after the liberation of most of the African countries from the colonial masters, pan-Africanists were keen to the use of one language to avoid

obstacles that could possibly emanate from ethnic and linguistic diversity. According to Eastman (1983), the then African governments have invariably sought to promote one national language among many others because they took linguistic heterogeneity as a threat to national unity and a hindrance to development. Abraham (1990) expressed his worry by saying that language-based ethnicity remains the primary cause of conflict in the horn of Africa. One of the success stories of suppressing linguistic contention by promoting a LWC is the case of Ki-Swahili in multilingual Tanzania. The promotion of Kiswahili as the national official language of Tanzania was first initiated by Mwalimu Julius Nyerere and was officially declared immediately after independence in 1967 (Kembo-Sure and Webb, 2000). This east African country is, hence, triumphant in utilizing language as a unifying force and one of the instruments for national integration and strong national identity. Kembo-Sure and Webb (2000) also acknowledge the 1987 constitution of Kenya which recognized the pivotal role of Kiswahili in Kenya as the official language (together with English), a compulsory school subject up to the end of secondary education and the language of the parliamentary. Kiswahillization in Tanzania, Bhasa Indonesiazation in Indonesia, Malayization in Malaysia, Tagalongization in Philippines, etc. as LWC and of national symbol are well-utilized yielding fruitful results among peoples who belong to different ethnolinguistic groups. The fact of the matter is that the motto 'one unified country - one unifying language' undoubtedly jeopardizes the development of other languages and can even lead to their gradual demise. The lack of attention to and suppression of the other little-known languages is one of the major reasons why we presently witness a number of languages suffering from endangerment in the aforementioned countries including Ethiopia.

Though the use of many languages instead of one is perceived by African policy makers as too complicated and too expensive, the choice of two or more official languages has been implemented at least by de jure, for instance, in India (23 languages), in South Africa (11 languages), in Switzerland (4 languages) and in Belgium (3 languages). Guinea applied a multilingual policy in the 60s by promoting eight indigenous languages as important media of national communication side-by-side with French and hence was one of the best models in Africa (Heine & Reh, 1982; Heine, 1992). Even in these countries, the fact on the

ground (de facto) reveals that Hindi and English in India, English and Afrikaans in South Africa, German and French in Switzerland, French and Flemish in Belgium and French in Guinea are the incomparably widely used languages. Language choice especially among competing languages has always been a challenge especially in the absence of institutionally-supported language planning activities. The serious language-related conflicts witnessed in Nigeria in 1960 and in India in 1947 immediately after independence are unforgettable experiences pertinent to issues of LPO and language choice for multilingual nations.

Among other reasons, the exposure of Emperor Haile-Sellasie, his dignitaries as well as the educated elite to the outside world, particularly, to countries such as Japan, Germany, England and the USA has significantly contributed to favoring monolingualism than multilingualism. The good indicator for the excitement of the emperor in monolingual nations was the 1931 first written constitution which was drafted on the earlier Japanese model which undoubtedly affected the guidelines regarding language (Mohammed, 2004). For the emperor and the policy makers under his imperial rule, whereas multilingualism or linguistic heterogeneity was perceived as painful, monolingualism or linguistic homogeneity was perceived as a painless path to unity and development. Such a perception coincides to the positivist approach of LPO and planning which equally views linguistic heterogeneity as a problem (Ricento, 2000). Fishman (1968:60), in his comparative work between linguistically homogenous and linguistically heterogeneous countries, has concluded that, "Linguistically homogenous polities are usually economically more developed, educationally more advanced, politically more modernized, and ideologically-politically more tranquil and stable." For Fishman (1968) and his proponents, developing nations are fertile grounds for obtaining an "indispensable and truly intriguing array of fieldwork locations for a new breed of sociolinguistics" and to better understand language diversity and its ramifications. The extraordinarily high levels of development of monolingual countries such as Germany, Japan, France, etc. are mentioned in the forefront. The synopsis of empirical evidences could bolster Fishman's claims of considering monolingualism as a safe way to development. However, whether or not linguistic homogeneity is an asset whereas linguistic heterogeneity is a nuisance requires a deep-rooted understanding of the handling of issues pertaining language management. Not every monolingual country

is honored and every multilingual country is dishonored. The unstable situations for over two decades in monolingual and monocultural Somalia prove that language uniformity alone cannot guarantee development. Any close observation of the booming economic, social and political sectors of multilingual countries such as Brazil, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, South Africa, etc., testifies that language diversity, on its own, may not be taken as detrimental to development either. According to Alexander (1989:8), "The idea that nations are groups of people who speak a particular language under particular historical and geographical circumstances has come down to us from the experience of European nationalist movements during the last two hundred years or so." Ricento (2006:14) shares the same idea and writes that the many obstacles witnessed in African countries immediately after independence can not be associated all to language diversity. He further underlines that, "The ideology of monolingualism as necessary for social and economic equality, were imposed on new states comprised of multiple national (and linguistic) groups." In his article titled, "The curse of Babel", Haugen (1973:40) tries to argue that, "Language diversity is not a problem unless it is used as a basis for discrimination." For advocates of the post-modernist approach of the critical language policy and planning (CLPP) who view multilingualism as opportunity, what matters a great deal is whether or not language is manipulated as a unifying or a divisive instrument by governments in multilingual countries such as in sub-Saharan Africa (see Pennycook 2006).

Cooper (1976:187), who was one of the scholars involved in the survey of Ethiopian languages in the early seventies, capitalizes on the vital role of a common language by saying, "It was without saying that, in a linguistically diverse nation, a shared language can serve as an agent of unification, a facilitator of economic development, and a symbol of nationhood. The government of a linguistically diverse country, therefore, often has an interest in promoting the shared knowledge of a single language." To maintain his power and to see a stronger and civilized Ethiopia, therefore, the Haile-Sellase government sought to establish a national official language for all Ethiopians. In so doing, however, the quest for other languages was not taken seriously. The language ideology generally revolved around empowering the central government while the power of local elites was considerably disregarded. There had been a strong fear that encouraging and advocating multilingualism is like

encouraging disintegration, economic and social backwardness and political unrest. In the pursuit to keep the national unity stronger, some writers like Perham (1948) perceived the ILPO as an Amharization process of the entire population. When viewed from its strong side, the special attention given to Amharic could be connected to the ambitions evoked to see speakers of different languages communicate in one language which in its turn could lead to close relationship and united efforts to development. On the other hand, the adoption of a single vehicular language and neglecting other languages in multilingual Ethiopia could be considered a linguistic orthodoxy. Many scholars believe that the choice of Amharic as the national official language during the reign of Haile-Sellase was strongly linked to the following three reasons (see also Mohammed, 2004):

- Due to its long-standing status as the language of the palace and the people, roughly since the time of the Zagwe dynasty and surely after the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty around 1270.
- Because of its role as a second language (vehicular media) to the overwhelming majority of bilingual Ethiopians whose first languages were other Ethiopian languages, and finally
- Because of the relatively better developmental stages in its literary tradition, grammatical descriptions and lexicon.⁷

The foundation of the Haile-Sellase award for Amharic literature and the establishment of the Amharic language Academy in 1972 flourished the status of Amharic further. Because the overwhelming majority of Ethiopian languages were till then unwritten, it was not simple to bring them into the school system. Hence, Amharic has had a better chance to be used widely for official purposes including in the education system. In several Anglo-, Franco- and Luso-phone African countries, the ex-colonial languages English, French and Portuguese are either one of the official languages, or in few instances, the sole official languages (cf. the historical role of Portuguese in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea Bissau; of English in Botswana, Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Ghana, etc. and of French in

⁷ It is believed that Amharic spread further south and started its literary tradition during the reign of King Amde Tseyon (1314-1344).

Mali, Niger, Togo, Senegal, Burundi, Rwanda, etc.). In Ethiopia, the influence of a colonial language has not been a worry as it is the case in other African countries. As an endoglossic nation state, our country has not suffered from what is termed as ‘linguistic imperialism’ by Phillipson (1992) which refers to the promotion of ex-colonial languages in the expense of indigenous ones. Bahru (2002a&b) mentions that intellectuals of the time had the impression that Amharic, as a secular language, and Ge’ez, as a classical language, in Ethiopia are like that of the respective national official languages and Latin in European nations. The evolution of Amharic, for the then intellectual group, has enabled it to be able to express Ethiopian ideas through Ethiopian medium. In general, according to Bahru (2002a), the early decades of the twentieth century marked the flowering stage in the development of Amharic.

Coming back to the monoglot ILPO, there were various guidelines in favor of Amharic during the 1931 first written Imperial constitution which came out without including any article regarding language use. Later, the revised constitution came out in 1955 including an overt LPO for the first time in the Ethiopian history. This was together with the real modernization of Ethiopia in education, nation building and other local development agendas. Article 125 of the constitution clearly articulated that, “Amharic is the official language of the Imperial government”. This implies that Amharic instantaneously became the official language of judiciary, mass media, education and other government services. The article simply gave the *de facto* role of the language a legal ground (Hailu, 1993). Incidentally, the constitution said nothing about other major languages as well as minor, endangered and least-known languages. Hence, the ILPO was assimilationist as well as exclusionist for it only strived for Amharic to be the language of all. Behind the ideology of the policy makers, diversity could wither away as a result of the spread of Amharic which was strongly connected with the expansion of modern schools, urban centers, and modern infra-structures. Ricento (2006:7) writes his experience of the assimilationist and pluralists views of language policies on the ‘inequality’ and ‘equality’ of languages in the US as follows:

In the US context, assimilationists believe that the key to equal opportunity for Non-English speakers is a shift to English as rapidly as possible; therefore, according to assimilationists, policies that might encourage non-English speakers to continue to rely on their native languages, such as bilingual education, bilingual ballots, etc., are actually *hindering* their chances of achieving social equality. On the other hand, pluralists believe that the US has always been a multilingual society, even though English has always been the dominant language.

The expansion of towns, the spread of education and commerce and the requirement of fluency in Amharic to be employed as civil servant in the country contributed considerably to the spread of Amharic especially in urban areas of Ethiopia (Cooper, 1976). The spread of print and audiovisual media also played a significant role in the promotion of Amharic among non-native speakers. According to Cooper (1976), during the time of Emperor Haile-Sellase, some language provisions which contributed to the promotion of Amharic were stipulated in the law. These provisions include (a) the need to publish laws and proclamations in Amharic and English, (b) the need to display names of Ethiopian ships and port of registry in Amharic and Latin characters, (c) the need to file statutes of domestic companies in Amharic or English, (d) the need for translating any customs document from foreign languages into Amharic, and (e) the need for foreigners to know Amharic (oral and written) perfectly in order to become Ethiopian nationals. These promotional decrees show that Amharic from local languages and English from foreign languages were favored during the ILPO. All these measures prove that the ILPO upheld a kind of interventionist LPO due to the fact that Amharic, for instance, was promoted as a result of the government institutional support throughout the state. On the other hand, the intervention of the government was minimal for the promotion of other Ethiopian languages as it was adherent to the one-language one-country state policy. In that regard, a certain LPO can be taken as interventionist and at the same time non-interventionist depending on the ideology it adheres on the major and minor languages of a country. For some, Ethiopian languages other than Amharic were proscribed like the Basque in Spain during Francisco Franco's rule and Macedonian in Greece. It is true that there were no sound language planning attempts to develop

Ethiopian languages other than Amharic especially during and before the Imperial time. Meanwhile, unlike the aforementioned European languages, no Ethiopian language was officially banned not to be used by its speakers.

As in many other African countries, the contribution of especially the Jesuit missionaries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was considerable in the development of Amharic as a literary language (Bahru, 2008). In addition to Amharic, the influence of the missionaries in the nineteenth century was noteworthy in developing Afaan Oromo and Tigrinya through translating the Bible for the first time (Bahru, 2008; Dereje, 2010). Beyond their evangelization duty, the missionaries who started establishing schools in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, contributed significantly in writing down the hitherto unwritten languages, translating the Bible or parts of it still into other indigenous languages and in few instances teaching in them. The major focus of the missionaries was supposed to be preaching of the gospel and dissemination of their denominational Biblical knowledge among Ethiopians. Some missionaries were expelled for their attempt to convert King Susnyos way back in the sixteenth century. Since then, missionary activities by and large were seen in contempt for their attempts to threaten the Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity and for trying to interfere in internal matters. A few of them were blamed for facilitating the aggression of foreign invaders at different times until the last invasion by Italian fascists (Tilahun, 1997). Through their efforts in language planning activities, they tried to attack the LPO of the government. According to Cohen (2000), the missionaries criticized the policy of the government and promulgated to the different ethnolinguistic groups that their languages were acknowledged but disfavored. The imperial government did not like the missionaries mainly for two reasons. Firstly, they caused religious diversity by attracting people to their factions. Secondly, they encouraged linguistic diversity and language maintenance by teaching in different languages. Though the government tried to ban the activities of the missionaries by law, their influence in the non-orthodox areas remained strong. To regulate the activities of missionaries, a decree which required the missionaries themselves to learn Amharic and teach in Amharic, came out during the reign of Haile-Sellase. Since the activities of missionaries were wide spread in areas where people were not practicing any religion (Christianity or Islam), this situation brought Amharic to the non-Amharic speech communities who could not

otherwise get the chance to learn the language (Cooper, 1976). In fact, in areas where there were only monolinguals without any knowledge of Amharic, missionaries were allowed to use local languages for basic adult education and oral communication. Tilahun (1997) has fairly underscored the major educational contributions of missionaries. He has pointed out that one of the denominations of the protestant church, namely the Lutheran Mekane Yesus, in its literacy campaign, which run between 1962 up to 1975, played a significant role in educating the hitherto uneducated population and in the spread of Amharic among the young generation in almost all parts of the country.

During the turbulent five years of Italian occupation (1935-1941), there was an attempt to change the LPO of the country to make it fit to their interest and colonial stay in the country. Mohammed (2004:1) writes that, "In 1936, part of the criminal acts of fascist Italy came to be the eradication of all local initiatives, probably as a pretext to justify what they described as their "civilization mission". The role of Amharic, as the official language, was deliberately dismissed. To promote their divide and rule policy, the fascist agents assumed to give more chance for other local languages, an attempt which did not succeed (Sbacchi, 1985). Article XXXII of the educational guideline of the fascists (1935-1941) was supposed to use local languages as mediums of instructions in the six administrative divisions they fully occupied.

Administrative Region	Language of Instruction
Eritrea	Tigrinya and Arabic
Amhara	Amharic
Addis Ababa	Amharic and Oromifa
Harar	Harari and Oromifa
Sidamo	Oromifa and Kafficho
Somali	Somalia

(Adopted from Pankhurst (1974))

According to Ayalew (2000), the attempt to use different languages in different regions by the Italian colonialists was made not for pedagogical or cultural values but rather to promote their “divide-and-rule” policy of colonialism. Tsehay (1977) has pointed out that, like many of their measures, the LPO of the invaders was never endorsed into practice merely because they controlled only the capital Addis Ababa and few other towns. Also, they did not have peaceful time to go through language planning activities other than trying to stay longer in the country by force. The fascists, though they tried to prolong their stay by force, were frequently attacked by the strong patriotic struggle and as a result they hardly had time to implement their LPO (Abraham, 1966). At the back of their mind, they planned Italian to have strong hold in the country. In Eritrea, for instance, ‘The Italians disallowed the locals to enroll beyond basic numeracy courses as they felt teaching the Italian language would ensure the supply of casual labour’ (Minga, 1997). Eventually, the Italians were driven out from the country in 1941 and, according to Mohammed (2004), that same year marked the rebirth of local initiatives which had earlier been jeopardized by the fascist aggression which came up with their own colonial agenda against the indigenously evolved efforts designed to modernize Ethiopia. In 1941, the imperial government came to power once again and reintroduced the 1931 constitution which was later revised in 1955. Among others, the 1955 constitution included the first LPO and the publication of the first premiers for primary schools in Amharic. The jubilation that accompanied the Italian withdrawal in 1941 once again resulted in the allocation of resources and institutional and government supports to the Amharicization process (Tekeste, 2006).

As mentioned earlier, the first modern school was founded in 1908 during the reign of Emperor Menelik II under his name. The second modern school was opened in 1927 during Emperor Haile-Sellase and was named after his former name before coronation “Teferi Mekonnen”. French continued to be the medium of instruction in both schools. Except during the brief Italian colonial occupation, French continued to be the language of instruction until 1947. According to Amanuel (2000), in Teferi Mekonnen school, whereas Amharic was given to all students, there was a kind of tug of war between English and French-preferring students. He writes that two among three students joined the French medium. The French-favoring students were even puzzled on the choice of English by their fellow friends and used to say, “What

would you do with English?”. One of the major factors for the choice of French by more students was due to the preference by Prince Teferi Mekonnen (later Haile-Sellase) and later by the Ethiopian intellectuals sent to France for higher university education. The upper-hand influence of French until around 1947 can be clearly observed from the frequent occurrence of French loanwords such as *muse*, *komisiwon*, *administrasiwon*, *deligasiwon*, *legasiwon*, *sisayti dä nasiwon*, etc. in the writings of the then Ethiopian scholars and members of the nobility such as Teklehawariat T/Maraim (2006), Merse-Hazen W/Kirkos (2008), Emiru H/Sellase (2009) and many others. The strong diplomatic relation, accompanied by the recognition of French as a medium in Ethiopian schools, contributed, among others, to the construction of the railway all the way from Djibouti to Addis Ababa. English took over the role of French and started to serve as a medium of instruction until it was replaced by Amharic in 1958/59. In 1947, the national curriculum for elementary schools recognized English as the main language of instruction even in elementary schools. Amharic was taught only as a subject. According to Cooper (1976), there was some use of Afar, Afaan Oromo, Somali, Tigrinya and Tigre from national languages and Arabic, English and French from foreign languages on the radio and newspapers. Amanuel (2000) has stated that, especially after the II world war, when English started to gain the upper hand over French, French-favoring students regretted for ignoring English during their school years. As mentioned earlier, the shift away from French to English during the time of Haile-Sellase was further reflected in the currency, postage stamps and government forms which were written in both Amharic and English (Cooper, 1976). Missionary and community schools used their own languages such as English, German, Italian and Swedish. The 1958/59 revised curriculum introduced the new education act which made Amharic the language of instruction in primary and English in secondary education.

The history of English in Ethiopia is not connected to colonialism unlike in the rest of Anglo-phone African counties. In Ethiopia, a person, to write, read, listen and speak English, should go through college education. English has become a dominant international language during the reign of Emperor Haile-Sellase who changed his mind and became affiliated more to English than French for the fact that Great Britain helped him to drive Italians out of Ethiopia. Bahru (2008) writes that English replaced French as a result of the essential role of the British in the liberation of

Ethiopia from Fascist Italy and the predominant position they had occupied in the country in the 1940s. Spencer (1984) writes that as a result of their significant contribution in the struggle to expel the Italians from Ethiopia, the Emperor was very much grateful to the British and started to follow the British way of doing things. Aleqa Lemma once said about the British: “We had to learn their language because they were the ones who helped us expel the Italians” (Mengistu 1996 quoted in Heugh et al. 2007:52). English, as an international language, still plays a significant role among the elite. Getachew (2008) writes that, in the Department of Ethiopian Languages and Literature of the Addis Ababa University, during the first years of the establishment of the Department some sixty years ago, even Amharic and Ge’ez were taught in English through the explicative method of language learning. In International Organizations, Banks and NGOs, English has been widely used. There has been English broadcast on the radio and television. There is at least one official newspaper under the title “Ethiopian Herald” coming out in English. Slowly but surely English became the preferred language for higher education and international communication in Ethiopia.

According to Tekeste (2006), after the withdrawal of the Italian invaders in 1941 up to 1970, the Imperial time was the golden age of Ethiopian education. In 1944, Amharic was announced to be the only language in education (Meyer, 2006). Following this change of the sectoral LPO in education, the two senior schools, namely Menelik II and Teferi Mekonnen started to teach subjects in Amharic, and gradually but surely, it became the most learned language, the common medium of intelligentsia and the primary medium of the growing literature, education and mass media in Ethiopia (Cooper, 1976). The Emperor himself became the pioneer of modern education and strong believer of its contribution for development. There was well-trained staff and enough resources for free education which made the poorer section of the population beneficiaries around urban and semi-urban areas. However, the strong pressure from critical scholars and especially the then Haile-Sellase I University students and teachers intensified in order to bring about social, political and economic changes which included linguistic human rights of small ethnolinguistic groups. Pankhurst (1969) writes that the spread of Amharic in the Eastern, southwestern and northwestern Ethiopia was not an attempt without challenges. Such a resistance together with the ethnic and linguistic diversity and

lack of modern teaching aids to teach Amharic to non-Amharic speakers were impediments for the top-to-bottom policy of the imperial government to fully implement its “one language, one country” policy as was initially envisaged. Similar to the strongly promoted “one language – one nation” motto, the aphorism regarding script choice during the imperial time was “one nation, one writing system” and was determined to use the Ethiopic script as the sole writing system.

The ILPO, in general, was a monolithic LPO favoring the development and further expansion of the historically dominant language, Amharic. Such a monolithic language ideology did not give enough attention to develop other languages commensurate with Amharic in the holistic approach. There was no guideline regarding other Ethiopian languages (major as well as minor). In the real sense, planning for one language has negative repercussions on other languages and ethnolinguistic groups (Hornberger, 2006). Comparatively speaking, the language treatment efforts were poor during the imperial time. Though there were many language-related problems that needed solutions, the initial fact-finding process of language planning was deliberately undermined. Equally, efforts to come up with norm selection, codification and modernization (cultivation) with clearly identified goals were not taken seriously basically because language issues were left aside. The absence of any fact-finding step in language planning activities inevitably jeopardized the forthcoming steps in the empowerment of languages and the description of grammars, production of dictionaries and reading materials, training of users, etc. All status and corpus planning activities, which in one way or another, affect language policies, were devoted to the promotion of one major language for all activities. Mother tongue education was not encouraged. The introduction of a writing system (codification), the choice of script and spelling (graphization), the development and modernization of vocabulary (elaboration) and other related language planning activities on other Ethiopian languages were non-existent. Irrespective of the strong pressure, especially from the student movement, the imperial regime remained defiant and insolent for long to answer questions revolving around ethnic groups. It was only towards its downfall that the regime

tried to reduce the tension by introducing a draft constitution in 1974.⁸ Ultimately, the same year marked the downfall of Haile-Sellase's imperial regime and the transfer of power with several unanswered questions on table to the military regime. In a nutshell, the major typological features surrounding the ILPO are shown in Figure 1 below:

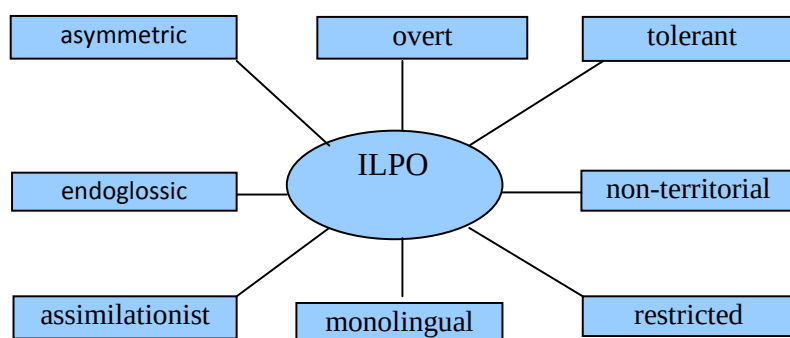


Diagram 1: The typology of ILPO

Language Policy (1974-1991)

Between 1974 and 1991, Ethiopia was declared a republic under the name: Peoples Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (henceforth, PDRE) and was ruled by the Provisional Military Administrative Council (better known as Derg 'committee') and then by the socialist/communist-oriented Ethiopian Workers Party. Immediately after Derg took power, the National Democratic Revolution program rectified the equality of Ethiopian ethnolinguistic groups and their respective languages under the banner of socialist ideology. Regarding the equality of ethnic groups, it says, "In the Peoples Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, all ethnic groups are equal". Article 5 of

⁸ Article 45 of this constitution which remained on paper without Ethiopians enjoying its application reads: Ethiopian ethnic groups have the right to preserve and develop their respective languages and cultures (translation mine) (Hailu, 1993).

the National Democratic Revolution Program of Socialist Ethiopia which came out in 1976 reads as follows:

The right of self-determination of all nationalities will be recognized and fully respected. No nationality will dominate another one since the history, culture, language and religion of each nationality will have equal recognition in accordance with the spirit of socialism ... each nationality will have regional autonomy to decide on matters concerning its internal affairs. Within its environs, it has the right to determine the contents of its political, economic and social life, use its own language ... (Bender, 1985:273)

As indicated in the article, the inclusion of 'self-determination' of ethnolinguistic groups and the equal recognition of their languages and cultures by the state were the major reformations witnessed for the first time in Ethiopian history. It was believed that the ILPO was backward and suppressive and hence the new LPO which proclaims equal recognition of languages and their speakers was taken to be a step forward for nation-building and reduce interethnic tensions.

It appears that the rights of nationalities including linguistic freedom are integral parts of the establishment of a socialist ideology. Hence, the socialist-oriented LPO of the Derg was an adoption of the LPOs of the then multilingual and multiethnic Eastern European socialist republics. In its various proclamations, it was pointed out that the problem of Ethiopian ethnic groups can be resolved if and only if each nationality is offered full rights on matters of its internal affairs (Hailu, 1993). One of the components of these rights obviously was the linguistic human right as stipulated by Skuttiabb-Kangas (2000). In such a way, the ILPO monolingual LPO was replaced by a semi-multilingual, the assimilationist by a semi-pluralistic, the asymmetric by a semi-symmetric, the tolerant by a semi-promotive and the restricted by a semi-egalitarian at least by de jure. One of the measures taken by Derg to show its progressive nature was the establishment of the then "Institute of Nationalities" in mid 1980s consisted of eminent linguists, economists, geographers and political scientists. The major aim of the institute was to rigorously study the ethnic composition and the social, political and economic situations of ethnic groups and

make its study results utilizable for policy makers. The then ‘Ethiopian Language Academy’ (formerly known as ‘Amharic Academy’ and currently the Ethiopian Languages research Center) was established in 1985, and was given the responsibility to follow up language-related issues in the country. Among the assignments given to the academy, the major ones were: to make a comparative study on the relationship and differences of languages, to register and make inventory of Ethiopian languages, to introduce a writing system for the hitherto unwritten languages, to prepare dictionaries, grammar books and literary works, to enrich the vocabulary of languages, and to make grammatical and sociolinguistic documentations (Amsalu, 1982). Later around 1978, the academy was rearranged into three teams focusing on dictionary compilations, literary works and linguistic descriptions. The dictionary compilation was allotted to Amharic, Afaan Oromo, Tigrinya and Wolaitta. The literary team collected and studied stories, proverbs and folktales of several ethnolinguistic groups. The linguistics team, on its own, made grammatical descriptions, comparative, lexicological as well as phonological and orthographical explorations of the four languages. All these attempts seem to be evidences for a shift of emphasis towards the development of more Ethiopian languages together with Amharic (Amsalu, 1982). Such endeavors prove that language planning activities (corpus and status) were underway more-or-less in a coordinated pattern during the Derg time. The measures taken after 1974 to some extent laid the ground for the change from the monolithic to the relatively holistic treatment of Ethiopian languages. It was at this time that multilingualism was taken as a fact on the ground in multilingual and multiethnic Ethiopia.

The famous “National Literacy Campaign” took off in 1975 on the basis of the Soviet experience as a model where a nationwide adult literacy program was introduced in minority languages. Among the pronounced contributions of the (1975-1990) national literacy campaign, the institutionalization of the literary use of fifteen local languages was one (Tilahun, 1997). The languages were Afaan Oromo, Tigrinya, Tigre, Wolaitta, Sidaama, Haddiya, Kambaata, Afar, Saho, Gedeo, Somali, Kafinono, Silt’e, and Kunama (Hailu, 1993). These fifteen languages (including Amharic) which amount about 95% of the total population were used as mediums of instruction. A weekly Oromo newspaper called Bariisaa ‘dawn’ was in print for the first time in 1975 for the first time by the Ministry of Information. Most of these

languages became written languages for the first time and hence the codification effort was quite a formidable experience. In 1974, the illiteracy rate in Ethiopia was almost 93%. Thanks to the mass adult education under the motto 'National Work Campaign for Development through Cooperation' and to the use of several languages as mediums of instructions, in 1989, illiteracy rate dropped to about 23% and as a result the then government was honored by UNESCO (Minga, 1997; Tilahun, 1997). With all these drastic changes in the handling of Ethiopian languages, the Derg LPO still favored the majoritarian or dominant interests at the expense of minority and non-dominant interests which of course violates the critical approach of language policy (CLPO) as promoted by Tollefson (1991, 2006), Luke et al. (1990). CLPO emphasizes the central role of economic forces, the key role of government, the value of language rights and the possibility of language maintenance and revitalization in LPO formulation (Tollefson, 2006).

When the Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Republic was established in 1987, the overt LPO of the government was part and parcel of the PDRE constitution. Article 2 – sub-article 3 of the constitution recognized the equal recognition of all languages and the right of speakers to develop their respective languages. Article 116 of the constitution stipulates that, "The working language of the Democratic Republic of Ethiopia is Amharic". The constitution also asserted the rights of self-determination for Ethiopia's nationalities which were defined mainly on the bases of language. These rights rectify freedom of preserving, practicing and developing cultural, religious and linguistic heritages of ethnic groups.

According to Bender (1985), the Derg followed pretty much the same LPO as its predecessor in promoting Amharic as the national official language. Mother tongue education in the informal education did not get the chance to be transformed into the formal education (McNab 1988). The medium for elementary education in all schools all over the country continued in Amharic. As a result, whereas the imperial regime was devoted to produce Amharic-speaking educational elite, the Derg attempted to spread Amharic across the board (Tekeste, 2006). As mentioned above, unlike the imperial time, there were considerable improvements in issues pertaining language treatments between 1974 and 1991. Though the state television was broadcast in Amharic and a small portion of English, in the Ethiopian radio were

aired Afaan Oromo, Tigrinya, Somali and Afar among the indigenous and French, English and Arabic among foreign languages. That was one step forward in language use in the mass media. The literacy campaign in fifteen Ethiopian languages was a major breakthrough for speakers of other languages and a real excitement for all Ethiopians. There were lexicological measures taken to develop the vocabulary of Amharic and to make it a language of science and technology through modern means of lexical development such as coinage, borrowing, compounding, loan translation, acronym, blending, back formation and semantic extension (see the different volumes produced by the then Ethiopian Language Academy and Takkele 2000). Hence, in addition to the development of the language through daily use by its first and second language speakers, Amharic considerably developed in its Marxist-Leninist technical terms between 1974 and 1991.⁹ According to Tekeste (2006), when Ethiopia first joined the socialist camp in 1974, language and education policies were geared towards promoting the socialist ideological goals. The education policy rested on the ‘education for development’ motto based on the spirit of socialist ideology, which was a complete antithesis of the Imperial regime. The aims of education were to cultivate the young generation with Marxist-Leninist ideology, to develop knowledge of science and technology and to integrate and coordinate problem-oriented research and produce productive citizens (Hailu, 1993; Tekeste, 2006). The socialist government, in its draft policy, underlined the wider use of the Ethiopic script by other Ethiopian languages with modifications where necessary (Hailu, 1993). Regarding foreign languages, the relationship with western countries was disrupted and instead the Eastern Marxist-oriented education system became operational. The role of English hence considerably declines as a medium of instruction in Ethiopian schools. Native speakers of English (American Peace Corps) whose number reached up to 400 at the peak of American-Ethiopian relations during the Imperial time stopped coming and those who were supposed to teach English in Ethiopian schools withdrew. The

⁹ Hailu (1993) writes that after the formation of EPDR, a detailed LPO that embodies the implementation of Article 2/3 was on the table. Regarding education, the detailed LPO included the introduction of mother-tongue in primary education and in selected language(s). In addition to the education sector, the draft constitution also contained directions of language use in the central and regional government bodies, mass media, arts and translation and research. It also incorporated guidelines on the use of foreign languages. Both the Derg and Haile-Sellase regimes were too late to implement their plans in their final moments.

considerable decline of English proficiency among Ethiopian teachers and students was felt within few years after the repatriation of the peace corps and when there was an attempt to replace English by Amharic as medium of instruction in grades 7 and 8 (Tekeste, 2006). The same author writes that a large number of students were sent to the then socialist countries, such as East Germany, the former USSR, Czechoslovakia, etc. to pursue their tertiary education and hence the importance of English was lowered and instead elites from the socialist countries outnumbered elites from the west. Having seen such rampant situations in education, Tekeste, in his article which was published in 1990, has suggested the use of Amharic in all secondary schools in the country. The same suggestion of replacing English by Amharic was forwarded by the education review committee in 1983. Amharic was supposed to be used even at tertiary level of education and for this effect there were experience sharing efforts between Ethiopian scholars and scholars in Indonesia and Malaysia who have had a successful story of using Bhasa Indonesia and Malay in their respective higher education institutions (Amsalu, p.c.).

Generally, the language planning efforts during the Derg/PDRE regime were, more progressive than that of the imperial time. As acknowledged by different writers, the equal state recognition given to all ethnolinguistic groups, their languages and cultures has awakened the moral and psychological makeup of Ethiopian ethnic groups. The use of local languages in the literacy campaign, not only reduced the rate of illiterates, but it also left its trace as a good experience in the use of vernacular languages in education. The LPO between 1974 and 1991 was a kind of interventionist LPO for two reasons. First, like its predecessor, the Derg/PDRE promoted Amharic as the sole working language. Secondly, the government somehow promoted some languages as a language of instruction and some as languages of mass media. There were many other language-related issues to be treated indeed. The initial fact-finding process of language planning was for the most part undermined. The absence of concerted fact-finding activities of course jeopardized the other steps of language planning processes such as the production of dictionaries, reading materials, training of users, etc. The efforts to standardize languages were minimal, though the standardization of all Ethiopian languages seems to be an uneasy road as mentioned by Savà et al. (2008). The small attempts that were about to flourish toward the first few years of the Derg time regarding minor languages were either aborted or largely used as political devices. Eventually, with no more attempt on the ground, the Derg/EPDR government was

overthrown by EPRDF forces in May, 1991 and left hanging the unresolved and complicated language-related issues to its successor. The major typological features surrounding the DLPO are shown in Figure 2 below:

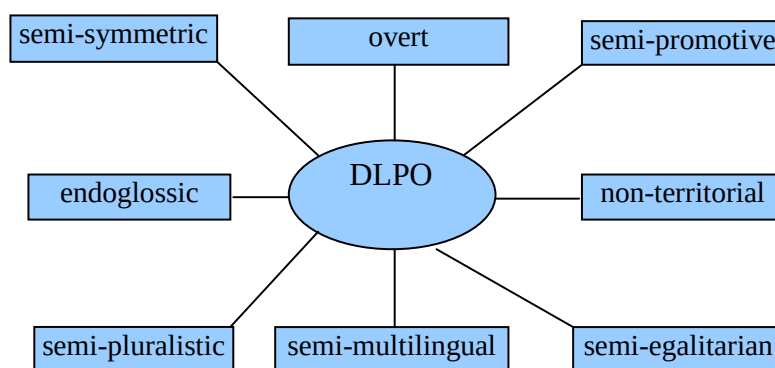


Diagram 2: The typology of DLPO

Language Policy (1991 – to date)

In 1991, EPRDF came to power and took over, among other things, the LPO and education system both in deep crisis. The handling of language issues by the EPRDF was reflected first in its four-day conference which was held in Addis Ababa in 1991. The main objective of the conference was to draft a provisional charter on the core issues of the country including linguistic human rights (Bahru, 2008). The conference was the first event that spelled out how the future LPO of EPRDF which is being practiced until today would look like. In the deliberations of the conference to which several representatives of ethnic and political groups participated, Amharic and English were selected to be the working languages. It was therefore decided that representatives could use their own languages so long as they have interpreters. Bahru (2008) has mentioned the representatives of EPLF and OLF who made their speech in their respective languages with interpreters but at the same time exhibited their competence in Amharic by expressing their dissatisfaction on every bit and pieces of misinterpretations. During the conference, Amharic stereotypically ‘enjoyed’ the first disregard on its official vehicular status during this conference. Languages such as Afaan Oromo and Tigrinya that have long been marginalized to be used for official

purposes have proved to be functional. Following the 1991 conference, Ethiopia has been reconfigured as a federal state consisted of nine regional states, namely Afar, Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambela, Harari, Oromia, Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Regional State, Somali, Tigray, and two chartered cities, namely Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa. Apparently, the division of the Ethiopian federal states ethnically carved prevails how language plays a central role in the ideology of the current government (Bahru, 2008; Meyer, 2006). Among other things, Article 1, section B, of the charter encapsulates that all ethnic groups have the right to preserve their identity, promote their culture and history and develop and use their language. In such a way, the charter laid the ground for the constitution ratified in 1993. The whole idea was to reinvigorate the linguistic and human rights more and prove the language planning activities and policies of the pre-EPRDF eras were undemocratic and even the language planning and policy of the Derg LPO was nominal.

Articles 5.1, 5.2, 5.3 and 39.2 of the 1993 national constitution reveal that each ethnic group in Ethiopia can use and develop its language without any restriction. In article 5.1 of the constitution, assurance is given to all Ethiopian languages to enjoy equal state recognition. In this way, since 1993, Ethiopia is witnessing an official multilingual/pluralistic LPO which gives equal recognition for all languages in the country. Article 5.2 states that Amharic shall be the working language of the federal government. Hence, since 1993, Ethiopia has a working language but not a national official language. This article also portrays that the current government follows the same endoglossic LPO where an indigenous language has been chosen to serve as a working language of the central government within and with regional governments. Article 5.3 underlines that members of the federal state (regional governments) can determine their respective working languages. This proclamation has given the opportunity to emerge regional official languages, namely Amharic, Afaan Oromo, Tigrinya and Somali. It also reveals that the federal government follows a kind of non-interventionist LPO where the rights of regional governments have been preserved to make their own language management and to decide on matters related to language in educational. As can be seen clearly, whereas articles 5.1 and 5.2 have almost similar versions during the time of Derg, article 5.3 currently put in place is considerably unique. When we refer to the first two articles in terms of their practicability, there is meaningful implementation on the ground by the current government than in any of the previous governments. Amharic was the sole national official language of Ethiopia during the previous governments. Currently, it is the *de jure* working language and the

de facto country-wide LWC. The difference is that, formerly, the status of Amharic was not limited in government offices, mass media, education, etc. but at all levels ranging from the smallest administrative unit up to the central government. As a working language, however, Amharic has almost the same status at the level of central government but not necessarily at the lower level government offices. As a lingua-franca or LWC among speakers of other Ethiopian languages, Amharic has gotten a chance to be used as a regional official language in Amhara, SNNPR, Benishangul Gumuz and Gambela regional states. It is also the working language of Addis Ababa and Dire-Dawa special regions. Though Afar is the de jure official language of the Afar region, Amharic is the de facto language serving many official functions in this region. Hence, though, the policy is officially an equalitarian LPO, it is at the same time a kind of “language rationalization policy” which gives preference to some languages in some spheres of use to others. Like the Imperial and the Derg language policies, the EPRDF LPO is an overt LPO in which the guidelines of the government regarding languages are included in its major legal document - the constitution.

The prime function of language is communication. The role of language in the smooth running of education is also extremely central and, hence, LPO issues in multilingual nations like Ethiopia have remained important educational policy issues (EHRC, 2003). According to Heugh et al. (2007), the multilingual policy introduced by the EPRDF-led government is perceived as the better resort to solve the linguistic hegemony of one language over many others and hence a solution to the problem around the long-standing linguistic human rights of Ethiopian ethnolinguistic groups. The sharp dichotomy of the present government LPO, unlike its predecessors, is its pluralistic multilingual LPO which encompasses the introduction of a new decentralized educational policy which has become operational since the introduction of the 1994 ‘Educational and Training Policy’ designed and implemented with the aim of reducing poverty. The core issues in the “Ethiopian Education and Training Policy” regarding language use are the following:

- Bearing in mind the pedagogical advantages of the child and the rights of ethnic groups to develop their languages, primary education will be given in the ethnic languages;
- Ethnolinguistic groups can select either their own ethnic language or a language of wider communication as a medium of instruction;

- The language of training of teachers for kindergartens and primary schools will be the ethnic languages;
- Amharic will be given as a subject on the basis of its historical status as a language of wider communication across the country.

Regarding English, the policy stipulates that, as a foreign language, it should be taught as a subject starting from the first grade and shall be the medium of instruction for secondary and higher education. Beyond its role as a medium of instruction in higher institutions (see Table 1 below), English is a medium of instruction from grades 5-6 in SNNPR and Gambella and from grades 7 and beyond in many other regions. In some schools, it serves as a medium for sciences together with indigenous languages which assume other subjects. This is what is called bilingual education in the real sense.

The above guiding principles noticeably show the implementation of mother tongue education and the respected rights of Ethiopian ethnic groups to use their languages as instructional media and school subjects. The guideline also guarantees ethnic groups to use another language with wider currency until they make sure that their language is ready to be brought to school. As has been advocated strictly by UNESCO since 1953, MT (mother tongue) education is perceived as an unprecedented system of educating children. The promotion of ethnic languages to be used in formal education for the first time has been implemented since 1993 with Tigrinya, Afaan Oromo and Sidaama. Currently, about twenty-two languages have been brought to school as instructional media and school subjects.

Table 1 shows the languages used as MOI and school subject with regions and grade levels (adopted from Heugh et. al (2007)).

Regional state	MOI at Primary I	MOI at Primary II		
		Grades 1-6	Grades 7-8	
Addis Ababa	Amharic	Amharic	English	All content subjects
Dire Dawa	Amharic Af. Oromo Somali	Amharic Af. Oromo Somali	English	All other subjects except Civics
			Amharic Af.Oromo Somali	Civics
AFAR	Amharic Afar (ABE)	Amharic	English	All content subjects
AMHARA	Amharic Awñi Xamt'aña	Amharic Awñi Xamt'aña	English	Sciences & Maths
			Amharic Awñi Xamt'aña	All other subjects
	Af.Oromo	Af. Oromo	Af. Oromo	All content subjects
BENISHANGUL GUMUZ	Amharic	Amharic	English	All content subjects
GAMBELLA	Nuer Anguak Majang	English	English	All content subjects
HARARI	Harari Af. Oromo Amharic	Harari Af. Oromo Amharic	English	Sciences & Maths
			Harari Af. Oromo Amharic	All other subjects
OROMIYA	Af. Oromo Amharic	Af. Oromo Amharic	Af. Oromo Amharic	All content subjects
SNNPR	Amharic Dawro Gamo Gedeo Gofa Hadiya Kembata Kafinono Konta Korete Sidama Silti Wolaitta	English	English	All content subjects
SOMALI	Somali	Somali	Somali	All content subjects
	Amharic	Amharic	English	Sciences & Maths
			Amharic	All other subjects
TIGRAY	Tigrinya	Tigrinya	Tigrinya	All content subjects

Key: MOI = medium of instruction

It is widely believed that mother tongue education is the best remedy for better achievements by children in their pedagogical and cognitive accomplishments. There are however challenges posed by scholars to the 1953 recommendations of UNESCO on mother tongue education. Fasold (1984) has mentioned the following points revolving the challenges in mother tongue education: (a) some languages do not have grammatical descriptions and alphabets, (b) teaching in a mother tongue, the language which the child already knows, is less useful, (c) teaching in a mother tongue makes the latter task of the child to learn a second language difficult, and (d) using vernacular languages in education impedes national integrity and unity, and (e) it does not have a feasible cost-benefit advantage. In Ethiopia, mother tongue education has been jeopardized mainly due to one or a combination of more of the above mentioned obstacles (see also Tilahun, 1997). According to Haugen (1969), in language planning underpinnings such as the choice of languages as medium of instruction and school subject, there are two major factors to be considered well. These are cost-benefit analysis and acceptance. The cost-benefit analysis refers to the financial aspect which should be incurred in the promotion of languages whereas acceptance refers to the support given to linguistic measures by the society without any top-to-down imposition. Smith (2004) writes that, "Choices of language of instruction in education are not only about what helps children learn best, but also about what their identity is, particularly what identity is recognized by the state. Therefore, in culturally diverse societies such as Ethiopia, LPO is a crucial indicator of the nature of the nation-state project, even when such a policy is informal or unspoken". But quite often, the criteria for choosing the languages of instruction, mass media, administration remains acute.

As shown in Table 1 above, mother-tongue education is applied differently depending on the decision made by regional governments guaranteed to them resulted through the newly introduced decentralization measures. It has three different applications: the 1-4 as in Nuer, Anywa, Kambaata, Kafinono, etc.; 1-6 as in Afaan Oromo and Somali in Dire Dawa; and 1-8 as in Afaan Oromo, Tigrinya, Somali in their respective regions. The policy of the MOE (Ministry of Education) stipulates the use of mother tongue education to be implemented in primary I and primary II schooling. This has been applied so far in three regions, namely Oromia, Somali and Tigray. Since 2003, in Oromia, Afaan Oromo is being taught up to grade

12 and Amharic is given as a subject as of grade 5. The Somali region follows the same pattern. In Tigray region, Tigrinya is taught as school subject up to grade 12 and Amharic is given as of grade 3. Except English, in Tigray and Oromiya, textbooks are prepared in the regional official languages. In addition to Amharic, there are now units of Afaan Oromo and Tigrinya languages offering first and second degrees. In Amhara region, the medium of instruction in junior secondary schools is both Amharic and English. In the majority of cases, however, native languages are being used up to grade 4. Though UNESCO has proposed MT education from grade 1-6, there are other possible applications in different countries depending on the internal and external conditions. These are 1-3 and 1-4. Since there are various applications in Ethiopia, it would be of great value if the Ministry of Education decides on one of the three possibilities having considered the advantages of students, teachers, parents and the future development of the country at large.¹⁰

Another worth considering issue is the level of Amharic proficiency by non-Amharic native speakers. The use of Amharic as medium of instruction and school subject varies from one to the other region. It is the medium of instruction from 1-6 in Addis Ababa, Afar, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gurage zone and some other places in SNNPR and from 1-8 in the Amhara region. The other dichotomy is observed in the use of Amharic as a subject: 3-8 in Tigray, 5-8 in Oromia and Somali, as of the 1st grade in Amhara region and from grade 3 onwards in other areas. Concerning this, Tekeste (2006:50) writes that, "The fact that Amharic is taught in non-Amhara areas only as a subject is not sufficient to make Amharic a trans-ethnic media of communication. Hence, there is now a huge task for the policy to address, among other things, to break down communication barriers that we witness today among speakers of ethnic languages and bring about maximum interaction through language. The author complained that the LPO of the country is formed and guided by political ideology than pedagogical merits. The territorial LPO and the minimal efforts exerted in primary and secondary schooling have resulted in students coming

¹⁰ The educational policy of the country leaves it open that whenever a language is proved to be ready with enough teachers and resources, ethnic groups can upgrade the use of their languages as medium of instruction up to grade 8.

to colleagues and universities without working knowledge of Amharic. This situation in one way or another can affect their scope of communicative competence, intellectual development and even their movement to all corners of the country on temporary or permanent bases. Heugh et. al (2007) argue that more attention should be given to the stronger role for Amharic, both as a medium of instruction – optionally in a dual-medium combination with the mother tongue, depending on regional language distribution - and as a subject at second language level. The fourth dichotomy in the Ethiopian education system regarding language is exhibited in English as a medium of instruction. It is the sole medium of instruction from grade 5 and above in Gambella and SNNPR, grade 9 and above in Oromia, Tigray and Somali and in grade 7 and 8 partly (for natural sciences/bilingual education) and above grade 9 in Amhara region.

In Ethiopia, the speedy application of mother tongue education under scarce financial and human resources and above all without going through the routine language engineering activities has been criticized by experts in the area (see Tekeste 2006; Tilahun, 1997; Teshome, 1997). According to Teshome (1997), the policy does not provide information on human, budgetary and physical resources and their implications on the application. The replacement of Amharic medium schools by local languages hurriedly has created a great deal of stress on parents, teachers and students (Tekeste, 2006). Lack of opportunities to open schools for the benefit of children of minority ethnolinguistic groups in other regions is mentioned as one of the major problems facing Ethiopia today. Though the idea is to promote mother tongue education, there are misapplications on the ground in the form of ethnic language education. The former allows and should allow members of other ethnolinguistic groups for instance, Amharic, Afaan Oromo, Tigrinya, etc. speakers, in Gambella to learn in their respective mother tongue. They should not be forced to go to Anywa and Nuer medium schools, the languages they do not know. In Oromia, children of members of other ethnic groups should have the right to go to schools where they can learn in their respective mother tongues. This is a question of applying the principle of non-territoriality which allows a person to obtain services in the language of his/her choice throughout a country as in South Africa or applying the principle of territoriality which refers to the individual or group rights to get service in the language of the majority of the population as it is the case in Belgium

and Switzerland (Cartwright, 2006). The partly non-interventionist policy of the government on local matters exasperate the situation further and hence such sensitive issues need intervention and the right of children to go to a school where their mother tongue is the medium of instruction should be respected irrespective of their ethnic background and a potential presumption that they should limit their choice of schools to their birthplaces. In fact, the rights of parents and their children to choose any school of their preference should be respected without any hurdle.

The equal recognition of languages and the right of speakers of each language to promote and use its respective language is constitutionally respected. Assurance is given to all Ethiopian languages to enjoy equal state recognition. Incidentally, when we move to the real implementation of the policy which contains golden promises, the question of accommodating all languages at equal footing is undeniably evasive and indeed a real challenge. According to Teshome (1997), though the constitution guarantees all local language equal recognition and rights for development, it does not specify which languages, why and in what order they can enjoy state support for further development. This problem of course calls for the government and language planners to intervene and provide with all the necessary authentic status planning (allocation of functions) and corpus planning (adequacy of the structure) information to policy makers to launch sound LPO. Scholars believe that in the implementation of a truly egalitarian LPO in multilingual states, in addition to administrative and political costs, there are significant democratic costs to ignoring language diversity, or pursuing a policy of choosing a language of wider communication (Smith, 2004). Clyne (2007), by mentioning the experience of Singapore, Switzerland, Australia, Namibia and Canada, writes that equality of languages in its real sense on the ground is a tough challenge and hence not easily applicable. Dell Hymes (1985:vii) has pointed out the normality of different statuses of languages and the discrepancies between too ambitious policy statements on paper and the challenges during applications on the ground as follows:

Were there no political domination or social stratification, in the world, there would still be linguistic inequality... Allocation and hierarchy are intrinsic... Effective change in the direction of greater equality will only partly be change in attitude, or removal of external domination; it will be inseparable in many cases from change of social system.

In Africa, we have at least three kinds of LPOs in terms of the use of official language(s): endoglossic (e.g. Ethiopia), exoglossic (e.g. Sera Leone, Nigeria, Ghana, etc.) and mixed (e.g. Kenya, Madagascar, Botswana, etc.) (see Heine (1992); Batibo (2007)). It is axiomatic that Ethiopia is perhaps the only country in sub-Saharan Africa where a genuine endoglossic LPO is being promoted to date. The current LPO has an interventionist tone in the sense that the federal and regional governments at different levels intervene in the use of languages for one or another function. The constitution itself has an interventionist implication in the LPO of the country. As mentioned earlier, education, for instance, is the affair of regions and hence regions have the authority to decide on the use of local languages for primary education. On the other hand, the decisions especially on language and script choice has been criticized for leaving aside the public but to the orchestration of politicians. Smith (2004) writes that, “The interesting thing is that most people in Ethiopia today will tell you right away that language choice is political”. The central government has enunciated that it does not intervene on regional matters as each region is given total autonomy including education and language issues. According to Mohammed (2004:1), “Where diversity is suppressed or subjected to unrealistic political objectives, then the outcome could be wider discontentment, retardation of social development and growing destabilization”.

Bahru (2008) reports that the disestablishment of Amharic in the real sense started during the 1974 popular revolution. Some other scholars feel that Amharic has started to lose its ground since the EPRDF LPO started to function in 1991 and thereof. Most people would imagine the replacement of Amharic by ethnic languages especially in the primary education as the point of departure for the diminishing role of the language. In fact, any close observation on the current role of Amharic throughout the country reveals something different. Primarily, Amharic is the constitutionally recognized federal working language. The federal government is connected with the regional governments in Amharic. Amharic is still the LWC in the country. It serves as the regional official language in the SNNPR, Benishangul Gumuz and Gambela regional states. It also serves as the *de facto* official language in Afar. In the SNNPR, for instance, a Wollaita speaker uses Amharic to communicate with regional government officials and speakers of other languages such as Sidaama, Kambaata, Gedeo, Silt’e, Kafinono, etc. At the national level, the

same Wollaita speaker uses Amharic with speakers of other languages from other regions such as Afaan Oromo, Anywa, Awnji, Harari, Somali, Afar, Gumuz, etc. Speakers of Shinasha, Gumuz, Berta, Mao and Komo in Benishnagul Gumuz regional state use Amharic to facilitate communication in both formal and informal settings. They also use the same language with fellow citizens from other regions. A Tigrinya speaker from Tigray, Afaan Oromo speaker from Oromia and Somali speaker from Somali region use Amharic when they meet each other and when they meet speakers of other languages in their respective regions and at the federal level. Within the Amhara region, speakers of Awnji, Afaan Oromo and Xamt'anja use Amharic as their vehicular language. Amharic has penetrated into the small language communities and hence Nyangatom speakers, for instance, comfortably address their speech in it (ETV, May 4, 2009).¹¹ Cohen (2000) underscores the high prestige given to Amharic by speakers of other languages through linguistic migration to towns where it is a medium of instruction in schools. In Gurage zone of the SNNPR, the medium of instruction (in grades 1-6), by choice, is still Amharic. The division of regions mainly based on ethnic and linguistic lines and the existence of several small ethnolinguistic groups within a region have given Amharic robust positions as a second language which make its number of L2 speakers noticeably increasing. If the role of Amharic in a certain region dwindles in the school system, it does not alone prove to be the determining factor for losing its ground. Meyer (2006) has pointed out that Amharic is spoken by 80% of the population in Ethiopia both as first and second language. The role of Amharic is therefore still preponderant in national and public functions.

Apparently, bilingualism/multilingualism, at both individual and societal levels, has a number of advantages. A polyglot person or society obtains more economic, social, political and cognitive advantages over a monoglot person. Hence, knowledge of two or more languages which is a norm but not an exception in the African context (Wolff, 2000) should be encouraged in Ethiopia too. Speakers of major languages, especially Amharic, should realize the advantages and start to learn

¹¹ Nyangatom (Ethiopia) is a Nilo-Saharan language mutually intelligible with Turkana (Kenya) and Toposa (South Sudan) (Bender, 2000).

a language or languages of their interest. Afaan Oromo and Tigrinya would be better candidates in this regard for knowledge of the three languages may enable speakers to communicate with at least seventy-five percent of the whole population. In the twenty-first century, the number of bilinguals is by far exceeding the number of monolinguals all over the world, especially in urban areas, for bilinguality has multifarious advantages. In this connection, additive bilingualism should be encouraged and speakers of both dominant and non-dominant languages should be vigilant that it brings no threat to the mother tongue.

English is still an international language in Ethiopia. Apparently, the young generation, especially in towns and cities, give more prestige to it. Able parents send their children to English-medium schools just to listen to their children speaking good English irrespective of their skewed performances in natural or social science subjects. The attitude that most people have towards English, as the key for an easy entry to Australia, United States and United Kingdom and as the most efficient language for secular life and personal success, seems to be deeply entrenched. It is customary to listen to government officials addressing their speech in international conferences in English than Amharic. There is no significant difference in the role of English in the three language policies, namely the Imperial, Derg and EPRDF. English, as an international language, was widely used by the previous governments in Ethiopian high schools, colleges and Universities. As noted earlier, irrespective of the frustrating proficiency problems, English has gotten an entrenched application in Ethiopian education system today than ever before. As the result of cumulative factors that affect the quality of education, the frustrating knowledge of English by students in speaking, listening, reading and writing skills is obvious today than ever before. Tekeste (2006) mentions the deteriorating and exasperating English proficiency on the part of teachers in high schools and even in colleges and universities today than ever before. Regrettably, the very low proficiency of English hampers communication and hence students cannot follow and understand other subjects too. In the majority of cases, though the language of instruction is supposed to be English, the classroom situation reveals the use of local languages and code-switching between English and the local languages (Tekeste, 2006). The problem of English proficiency among students and teachers is persisting and has become the concern of parents, students, teachers and educators in general. It has often been

pronounced by the Ministry of Education as there have been attempts to improve proficiency. In the mean time, none of the measures taken has been able to reverse the alarming situation considerably. According to Michael (2003:249), “Students at the end of the second cycle of primary education can hardly read in English. Nevertheless, they are expected to continue their studies in English as English changes from a class subject to be the medium of instruction in secondary schools”. The proficiency of English is infuriating in Ethiopian higher education institutions. The problem is serious in all the skills: speaking, writing, listening and reading. Lack of historical stronghold, lack of native English teachers, classroom size and poor facilities for second language teaching are believed to be among the major factors contributing for the skewed English proficiency in the Ethiopian education system.

Regarding writing system, in the history of Ethiopia, the Ethiopic (also called Ge’ez) writing system was exclusively used to write Ethiopian languages.¹² The writing system is still widely used locally and by Ethiopians abroad. It is the only vibrant writing system in sub-Saharan Africa. First Ge’ez and then Amharic and Tigrinya have exclusively used the Ethiopic writing system to date. Later, the Cushitic languages Afaan Oromo and Somali used it until they shifted to the Latin writing system since 1993. In the previous Ethiopian governments, since the choice was one and only one, every Ethiopian language was projected to use the Ethiopic script. Under EPRDF, Ethiopia is entertaining not only a multilingual but also a bi-script policy. The choice is from two scripts (Ethiopic or Latin) and speech communities have been given the chance to choose one of the two scripts for their respective languages. Hence, Ethiopia is the only country in the sub-Saharan region with its own writing system but also the only country in this region facing the challenges of script choice and the phenomena surrounding it.

The sensitivities of script choice in Ethiopia have been seriously considered by different writers. Baye (1992) has professionally and profoundly described the history of writing and the emergence and development of the Ethiopic writing

¹² There are Ajemi manuscripts proving that some Ethiopian languages were written in the Arabic script.

system in Ethiopia. He tells us convincingly the adequacy of the Ethiopic writing system to treat all Ethiopian languages, Cushitic, Omotic and Nilo-Saharan included. By non-professionals, Semitic languages are supposed to be using only the Ethiopic script whereas Cushitic, Omotic and Nilo-Saharan only the Latin script. They make a remark that the Ethiopic, while it can accommodate Semitic languages, its capacity to capture the phonetic and phonological properties of Cushitic and Omotic languages is inadequate. On the other hand, the successful application of the same script by non-Semitic languages is still a fresh memory. Its application by Onasimos Nasib (almost a century ago) when he successfully translated the Bible into Afaan Oromo could be the optimal proof for the completeness of the writing system to be used by any Ethiopian language. Awnji, K'abeena and Xamt'anja are Cushitic languages successfully using the EWS since 1994. A number of materials were produced and are being produced in Basketo, Benchnon, Gamo, Wollaita and others from Omotic languages using both the Ethiopic and Latin scripts. The wider use of the Indian script under the motto "All India Alphabet", the Cyrillic script for all the former USSR languages and other Slavic languages of Eastern Europe, the Chinese character to write Mandarin and Cantonese, the ever-increasing demand to write languages of the Moslem world in Arabic, etc. are lively examples for script maintenance and loyalty. In principle, there is no natural connection between a writing system and a language to be written and hence every writing system is capable of serving any language with or without modification. Hence, there is no doubt that the EWS can serve all Ethiopian languages including foreign languages if necessary. Likewise, Ethiopian languages can be written in other wiring systems known to us. Proponents of the Ethiopic script have a strong justification for a wider use of the Ethiopic script by making association with a national pride, long history and phonetic clarity (Ayele, 1997). Leaving aside this fact, in Ethiopia, the choice of script is strongly tied with the mere decision or preferences of outspoken individuals, groups and NGOs together with other socio-political factors accompanying the historical relationship among ethnolinguistic groups. Appleyard and Orwin (2008) write that the motto behind the decision by the OLF to turn its back to the Ethiopic writing system was neither linguistic nor socioeconomic rather political – just 'purifying the Oromo people from 'anything Abyssinian'. Advocates of the Ethiopic writing underline the inadequacy of even the Latin script to serve Ethiopian languages without modification. Hence, they say, if the Ethiopic script is

slightly modified, every Ethiopian language can use it without any problem, and above all, can foster and enjoy the result of our civilization all together. Accommodation of two writing systems is possible with its inconveniences such as disregarding one's own national heritage, making citizens literate in two scripts and transliteration tasks of one script into another. Like any other writing systems of the world, the Ethiopic writing system has been challenged mainly for the nearly 317 symbols and the representation of the same sound by different redundant symbols which seem to be burden for learners. Ethiopian intellectuals have suggested considerable changes since the publication of Afework G/Eyesus' contributions which came out almost a century ago. According to Bahru (1991), irrespective of the strong resistance, in addition to Afework, other intellectuals in the 1920s suggested to indicate gemination, to introduce a symbol for zero, to extend the punctuation marks and above all to eliminate the redundant symbols to rationalize and simplify the alphabet. Though spelling reform has been suggested for long, due to the strong resistance, especially from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the reform has never materialized so far. The main reasons for the resistance from the Church are (a) its enduring and deep-rooted history as indigenous heritage and pride still vibrant in the country, and (b) its long literary tradition in different languages which should be maintained and transmitted to next generations.

Standardization efforts are so imperative in language development activities, to save the public fund and manpower as well as to increase the participation of people and arouse their interest in language planning activities. Standardization of orthography, lexicon and grammar of a language is of paramount importance especially in education. Its importance seeks great care and thoughtful attention from the outset especially in linguistically heterogeneous communities. We should learn from the current practice all over the world that standardization of a language is attainable in two ways: either through a composite dialect formation or by simply choosing a specific dialect. The first mechanism which refers to the contribution of linguistic elements (mostly words) from the existing dialects is less practical than the second one which refers to the choice of a certain variety (mostly the metropolitan one). For the first mechanism, Shona of Zimbabwe, and for the second mechanism, Amharic of Ethiopia, Ewe of Ghana and Kiswahilli of Tanzania would be good examples. Otherwise, unwisely handled standardization efforts which lead to the creation of

house-coined languages such as WOGAGODA (Wolaitta, Gamo, Gofa and Dawro) in the SNNPR are by any measurement not only futile but also disastrous which can end up in a huge loss of resources and above all human life (Bahru, 2008; Cohen, 2000; Daniel, 2001; Hirut, 2007). We should learn from the killing of Soweto citizens, many of them school children, as a result of the riot erupted following LPO decisions (Childs, 2003). Likewise, language was one of the major causes for the Nigerian-Biafran civil war which claimed a large number of lives after independence.

Language policy is generally perceived as a decision of government to attempt or select a language that serves the people of one nation in social, political and economic interactions. In short, LPO is language planning by a government body (Tollefson, 1991). In a wider perspective, language planning can refer to any concerted effort revolving corpus, status and acquisition planning activities by individuals, groups and non-governmental and governmental institutions. Language planning and policy formulation are exigent undertakings in multilingual countries. The task is even more complex in a situation, on the one hand, where there are competing languages, and on the other, where several languages are tolerated (neither promoted nor proscribed) like the native American languages in the US. Countries, which formulate a kind of LPO promoting multilingualism, should have at the back of their mind social, political and economic issues strongly attached to development. The social motivations should try to guarantee equality for all groups and give emphasis to facilitate language and cultural maintenance. The political motivation should try to ensure participation of all groups and/or secure their electoral support during elections. The economic motivation ought to try to make use of language assets to the advantage of the country's balance of payments (Grin, 2006; Clyne, 2007). Policy makers have to try to break the deep-rooted perception of correlating monolingualism and cultural homogeneity as the prerequisites for social and economic progress, modernization, and national unity as pointed out in Ricento (2006). In present day Ethiopia, issues surrounding language planning are for the most part assigned to regional governments. Essentially, regions are working under the auspicious of the policy of the federal government. In Ethiopia, cultural and linguistic heterogeneities are objective realities which should be taken as assets. The former regimes are often criticized for restricting the development of languages

other than Amharic. EPRDF has benefited from the mistakes made by the former governments regarding the treatment and promotion of indigenous languages. Besides, there seem to be a realization of heightened ethnocentrism cropped up all over the world especially in ethnically and linguistically diversified African countries. This implies that the application of an assimilationist LPO cannot be a long-lasting option for obvious reasons. In 1993, Nelson Mandela, in support of the pluralistic LPO of South Africa said, ‘If you speak in a language they understand, you speak to their head. If you speak in their own language, you speak to their heart’ (Childs, 2003:1). The excerpt teaches us that language is the main cultural component and at the nucleus of an individual's and society's identity. As Kembo-Sure and Webb (2000:119) have pointed out, the ‘one-language, one-nation’ policy cannot be optimal in the 21st century but a relic of the nineteenth century ideology. Yet, the need for a lingua-franca in a multilingual nation like Ethiopia is essential as in the case of Kiswahilli in Tanzania and Kenya, Ewe in Ghana, Bambara in Mali, Wolof in Senegal, Chichewa in Zambia, Bhasa Indonesia in Indonesia, Malay in Malaysia, etc. The overall assessment of the ongoing EPRDF LPO makes it more pluralistic, more multilingual, more symmetric, more egalitarian and more promotive than its predecessors. The major typological features are shown in Figure 3 below:

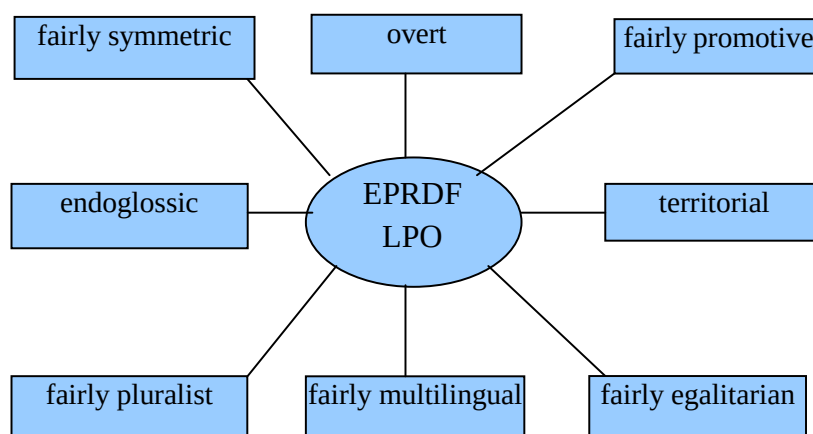


Diagram 3: The typology of EPRDF LPO

Concluding Remarks

As mentioned in the preceding sections, LPO is executed by governments and hence features some kind of political nature. The German term *Sprach Politik* which literally means "Language Politics" implies that language issues are not only linguistic or pedagogical but also political. Ricento (2006:8) says that, "Language-policy debates are always about more than language." As well-known, LPOs are vulnerable to change in Africa following two major factors: during the aftermath of liberation from colonialism and during change of government. In Ethiopia, the language treatment efforts, as we see it from the current perspective, were poor during the imperial time. No due attention was given to other languages except nurturing Amharic. There were many language-related facts to be treated. However, tribulations revolving language(s) were deliberately undermined. Equally, efforts to come up with norm selections, codifications, modernizations (cultivation) with clearly identified goals were not taken care of during the imperial time basically because the linguistic facts on the ground were left aside in the name of national unity. The absence of planning activities of course jeopardized the next steps of language planning processes such as the production of dictionaries, grammatical descriptions, reading materials, pedagogical grammars, etc. and the efforts to standardize languages.

In multilingual countries like Ethiopia, LPO and language planning, which are inseparable and hence complement one another, are central in fulfilling development goals. The pivotal reason here is that failure in language planning implies multifaceted social, economic and political challenges. Educational failure, particularly, implies language failure. The prominent Africanist linguist Ekkehart Wolff (cited in Heugh (2007)) writes that 'Language is not everything in education but without language everything is nothing in education.' The time has come that language issues are thematized issues that cannot be swept away anymore. Ostensibly, the prevailing situations are warning us to give more attention to language-related matters today than ever before. The time requires to equally considering language planning as seriously as economic, educational, family and other vital policy and planning activities. Hence, researches on language planning and policy should be treated from a multidisciplinary perspective in the sense that

theories and methodologies should be integrated to tackle economic, social and political issues pertaining challenges involving languages. The tension between the politics of language and the facts on the ground may at times go beyond the limit with purported negative effects. We therefore need to open public debate on issues surrounding language management or practical language-related problems. Dell Hymes (1992) reminds us the need to understand the difference between actual and potential equality among languages. According to Hymes, while all languages are potentially equal, they are, for social reasons, not actually so. The Fishman (1965) “WHs”: “which?” (the language), “what?” (the topic), “where?” (the setting), “by whom?” (the participants) and “why?” (the purpose) should be well digested.

In this piece of work, I have described the historical developments of LPO in Ethiopia and where these LPOs fit among the different types of polices we know in the literature. It is believed that the brief assessment of language use in pre-Haile-Sellase eras could give some insight on the evolution of language treatment in Ethiopia. A comparison is made mainly among the three well-known Ethiopian LPOs: the Imperial times, the Derg and the EPRDF. Though the three governments seem to be similar in their interest to maintain national unity, they do vary in the ways to maintain and bolster it. Language diversity has been accommodated differently. Whereas it has been perceived as a source of problem and hence assimilationist policy was encouraged by the ILPO government, the next two governments assume diversity inevitable, tolerable and even admirable. Constitutionally, both the Derg and the EPRDF LPOs preserve the rights of ehnolinguistic groups to use their own language and promote their cultural heritages. The linguistic human rights include mainly the introduction of writing system, the use of ethnic languages in education and the promotion of these languages to be used in mass media and other public domains. The most discernible changes regarding language development during EPRDF are the introduction of mother-tongue education, the use of Afaan Oromo, Tigrinya and Somali (in addition to Amharic) on the Ethiopian television daily programs; and the use of quite a number of languages in the Ethiopian radio and other local radio broadcasts. Hence, one would conclude that, whereas the LPO of the PRDE was full of promises with little implementation, the EPRDF LPO is full of promises with efforts to implement them. As mentioned earlier, Derg made an eye-opener measure in using ethnic languages

for the first time in informal education. However, through mother tongue education, ethnic languages have started to be brought to the formal education by the incumbent government.

Nevertheless, there are certain criticisms that should be seriously considered for better positive attainments in the future. First and for most, the application of the constitutional promises on the ground are challenging indeed. The ambitiously taken measures have their own consequences worrying a lot of people. The very loaded question to be answered sooner or later would be whether or not the Ethiopian LPO which guarantees the use of each and every language in education would be applicable in the Ethiopian economic, logistic and trained man power capacity. In other words, though the right of ethnolinguistic groups to promote their languages should be respected and is in principle democratic, would upgrading all the seventy or so languages as mediums of instructions and school subjects be feasible? Shouldn't we consider the three faces of Ethiopian citizens into consideration when we design the policy: local, national and international and design the LPO accordingly? In other words, how can the LPO approve the proficiency of the child in the first language, Amharic as a LWC and English as the international language? These are concrete issues to be dealt vigorously. We Ethiopians belong to Ethiopia, a country we love. Our nation is multilingual and this linguistic landscape is inevitable. Hence, we have to start promoting the respect for diversity. In the meantime, as Ricento (2006:11) has pointed out, we have to bear in mind that, "To justify enactment of particular policies; the assumption, for example, that linguistic diversity is a tangible social "good" requires evidence beyond moral or "naturalness" arguments". The truth of the matter from this statement is that we need to be realistic and careful in handling language diversity. Saying that diversity should not be suppressed does not mean that it should be exploited as a means of promoting political agendas either. Languages can be used by splitters to divide ethnolinguistic groups and by mergers to unite them. Unity in diversity is not impossible; rather enjoyable. LPO is a tempest in a tea pot which all citizens, language planners, and above all, government bodies should show their concerns on an unprecedented scale. The set up of national unity in a multiethnic and multilingual setting is a real challenge which we have to face and try to find scientific and well-thought of solutions.

There are a number of possibilities we can think of regarding status planning: either follow a symmetrical LPO where all languages enjoy “equal status” as English and French in Canada or Flemish and French in Belgium, or an asymmetrical LPO where one of the languages (sole official language) has more status than others like Arabic in Algeria; English in Nigeria, Gambia, Ghana, etc.; French in Gabon, DRC, Guinea; or Portuguese in Brazil, Mozambique and Angola, etc. (Webb and Kembo-Sure, 2000). Note that English, French and Portuguese are all ex-colonial languages to the respective African countries. In Tanzania and Botswana, much attention is given to the promotion of KiSwahili and Tswana as the respective national lingua-francas. Mikhalchenko (2002) writes about the LPO being applied in the Multi-ethnic and multilingual Russian Federation where Russian is constitutionally introduced as the state official language and the native languages of the respective twenty-one republics to have one co-official language each. This means the introduction of one nationally recognized official language which can automatically be taken as one of the official languages of the respective regions and one other regional official language in each region can be possible. Still in another type of LPO, two or more languages can be recognized as joint official languages as it is the case in South Africa, Switzerland, India, the African Union and the European Union. In actual fact, beyond the constitutional recognition, in South Africa, Afrikaanse and English; in Switzerland, German and French; and in India, Hindi and English are the most influential languages. It is doubtful whether French has equal footing by de facto with English in Canada, Flemish with French in Belgium or Romansch and Italian with German and French in Switzerland. Though both Unions respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity; English, French and German in the EU and English and French in AU are the de facto widely used languages. The major difference between the two Unions is, whereas in the EU, the working languages are all the languages of the member nations, in the AU, all the vibrant working languages except Arabic, are the ex-colonial languages. Language choice especially where there are many competing languages is therefore a contentious task to tackle. If we consider the equality of all the languages by de facto and de jure, the application of the symmetrical policy seems to be unattainable. According to Ricento (2006:7), “The relation between language and social mobility is less clear cut, and pluralists argue that the achievement of equal opportunity should take into account the country’s fundamental ethnolinguistic diversity”. Equal status and hence

a kind of symmetrical LPO by de jure but non-equal in the actual fact on the ground (de facto) and hence a kind of asymmetrical LPO is what is going on in our country today. Stable diglossia in which languages enjoy serving different functions should be taken normal. Exceptionally, ethnolinguistic groups have become sensitive about their respective languages and hence any decision on language issues needs to be implemented after winning the hearts and minds of speakers of the respective languages. Language planning and policy, in one way or another, are strongly connected with the overriding political, social and economic nerves of a multilingual country. The need for a language or languages for facilitating interaction across ethnolinguistic and administrative boundaries is crucial. This should, however, be given a good ground at lower level of schooling.

As in the case with the Irish and Gaelic languages in Great Britain; the Basque in France and Spain; Frisian in Holland; Sami in Sweden and Norway; Breton in France; there are several moribund languages in Ethiopia and in other African countries. The fact that all Ethiopian languages gain equal state recognition makes no big difference regarding endangered languages. The crisis of has even gone so far to the extent that some of the languages are on the verge of extinction and this seems to be irreversible. These languages need immediate attention for description and documentation. Though no successful attempts have been recorded in Africa, it appears that the revitalization of moribund languages is possible as in the case of Hebrew in Israel, Maori in New Zealand, Navajo in the US and Welsh in Great Britain (Spolsky, 1996). Ge'ez, a language struggling with a bottom-to-top death, is one instance in Ethiopia. As mentioned in section (3), it is an ecclesiastical language still widely serving as a medium and subject in church education. The high profile K'ine, Zema and Commentary are conducted in it in churches, monasteries and other centers of excellence. It is the language of church services in several thousands of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido churches as well as in the Ethiopian Catholic churches. Ge'ez is given as a subject in few departments of higher education institutions. There is a special radio program aired and a column in a magazine published for teaching Ge'ez. It is well-known that the language has long and deep literary tradition anchored especially in Ethiopian traditional scholarship. There are a number of grammar books and dictionaries being published. All these and several other factors have brought about the ever-increasing positive attitude and

determination by the Society of Ge'ez to see it being used out of church compounds. The Ethiopian LPO must take into serious consideration the emerging "black skin white mask"¹³ children who hate using indigenous languages and even want to be "new native speakers of English" especially in towns and cities. As it is the case in several other multilingual countries, the diversity of languages which potentially makes sociolinguistic facts complicated, has contributed a great deal for the linguistic traumas in Ethiopia too. Once we introduce an overt LPO, it is axiomatic to have such a LPO explicitly stating all language details (see also Dereje 2010). Otherwise, the very brief policy statements in national constitutions are vulnerable to varied and sometimes even contradictory interpretations. Promotion of respect for linguistic diversity should take root candidly. The script turmoil seems to be over years back having left its traces that need to be tackled through diligently. Now, it is time to sit down and raise solicitous issues revolving script choice pertaining to the development and wider use of the sole African script. Whether or not all these critical issues surrounding Ethiopian languages will be given due attention aiming at solving the multifarious language-related problems in Ethiopia remains to be seen in the years to come.

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¹³ It is Fanon's term mentioned in Kembo-Sure & Ogachi (2009).

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