THE LANGUAGE POLICY OF FEDERAL ETHIOPIA: A CASE FOR REFORM

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Abstract

The 1995 Constitution of Ethiopia accords equal state recognition to all Ethiopian languages, designates Amharic as the working language of the federal government and allows members of the federation to determine by law their respective working languages. Following the federal Constitution, regional states have designated their own working languages in their respective constitutions. In some regional states such as the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples regional state, several sub-regional self-governing nationalities are given the power to determine their own working languages. In 1994, the education and training policy of the country set forth broad language in education regulations that have since been generally followed. The federal government and all regional states (except Harari) have constitutionally opted for a monolithic working language. This article, by taking stock of the language policies in some multi-linguistic federal systems, argues that the constitutional monolingualism installed in Ethiopia needs to change. Ethiopia's government service and education language policy must reflect its multi-linguistic societal composition. In order to do this, the article suggests, Ethiopia must adopt a comprehensive language policy, followed by appropriate legal framework.

Key-terms: Ethiopian languages, language policy, multi-ethnic societies, language in education policy

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Introduction

The Ethiopian Constitution declares in its Preamble that the diverse peoples of Ethiopia are committed to building a political community founded on the rule of law and capable of ensuring a lasting peace, guaranteeing a democratic order, and advancing their economic and social development. It also acknowledges that the peoples of Ethiopia have built up common interests and common outlooks and are desirous of living in one economic community to promote their common interests.

The Constitution puts in place a federal state structure that gives political salience to ethnic identity by making it the loci of sovereign power (Article 8). It gives to the ethno-linguistic communities of the country it calls "nations, nationalities and peoples" (NNPs), an unconditional right to self-determination (including secession). In terms of the language policy, the Constitution contains key provisions. Article 5 of the Constitution declares "All Ethiopian languages shall enjoy equal state recognition". It also designates Amharic as the working language of the federal government and empowers members of the federation to determine their respective working languages by law. The Constitution further stipulates language rights of NNPs under Article 39(2).

It has been rightly claimed that a language policy must endeavor to deliver political goods such as effective communication with public and private institutions around oneself and enable one to get sufficient information for her to fully participate in and make informed choice about all things that matter to her; ensuring the autonomy of the individual by facilitating her participation on a wide variety of choices in society; and accord recognition to the citizens that express themselves in particular languages, thereby enhancing the psychosocial satisfaction of the community of speakers.[1] The realization of these political goods as well as the commitment and understanding put forth in the preambular declaration of the Ethiopian Constitution noted earlier needs to be helped by a language policy that

[1] Lara Smith, *The Politics of Contemporary Language Policy in Ethiopia*, 24(2) JOURNAL OF DEVELOPING SOCIETIES 207, 213-14 (2008).

respects individual groups' cultures and languages, but at the same time provides for common linguistic platform(s) for overall interaction and communications. Studies have shown that the development of a common national identity depends greatly on the ability of citizens to be able to speak to each other through the creation of a 'community of communication'.[2] This article tries to investigate whether or not the language policy of the Ethiopian government is well designed to realize the above-noted political goods and the declarations made in the 1995 Constitution. It will also examine the language policy of the federal and regional governments from the standpoint of ensuring linguistic rights of the linguistic communities and ensuring an uninhibited communication among the peoples of the country.

The article employs a descriptive and analytical synthesis of primary and secondary source materials. Primary sources include governmental policy documents, research and sociolinguistic surveys, census data and websites of relevant organizations. The secondary sources used include a wide range of academic writings such as journal articles, books, monographs, and edited volumes on language policy, language planning and linguistic rights in multi-ethnic societies. I have also made use of my own observations of the language issues in Ethiopia and insights I have gleaned from informal conversations with Ethiopian academics and practitioners with similar concerns.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 1 provides an overview of the theoretical and comparative literature on language policy and planning in order to supply some conceptual clarity to the subject of the article and for ideation purpose. Section 2 deals with the language policy of the past Ethiopian governments where both the overall policy dispensations and language policy in education are descriptively analyzed. Section 3 discusses the language policy of the current Ethiopian government. Section 4 takes a discursive approach and attempts to outline the considerations that should

[2] JON ORMAN, LANGUAGE POLICY AND NATION-BUILDING IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA 121 (Springer, 2008).

guide Ethiopia's language policy. The article closes with a brief conclusion and some suggestions for policy and legal reform in the area.

1. Language Policy: Theoretical and Comparative Overview

In order to fully grasp the trajectories of Ethiopian language policy and planning, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of these notions and create a common understanding around them. This section shall be devoted to creating this conceptual clarification and describing language policy issues in some multi-ethnic jurisdictions.

The term 'language policy' could be understood at different levels of narrowness and broadness. "Employed in its narrowest sense, it usually refers to the formulation of laws, regulations and official positions regarding language usage and the allocation of linguistic resources by some government or other political organization".[3] The broader understanding considers the range of linguistic variables of a language community. Spolsky is widely quoted as having identified three different components that determine the character of a language community's language policy. The first is its language practices, i.e., the habitual pattern of selecting among the varieties that make up its linguistic repertoire. The second component is the community's language beliefs and ideology: its belief about language and language use; and finally, any kind of language intervention, planning or management at play in the community.[4] Language policy exists even where it has not been made explicit or established by authority. Many countries and institutions do not have formal or written language policies and the nature of the language policy must be derived from a study of their language practice or beliefs.[5]

In most instances, language policies are the result of language planning. In this process, officials determine the linguistic needs, wants, and desires of a community and then seek to establish policies that will fulfill those goals. Such

[3] *Id.*, at 39.

[4] *Id.*, at 39-41.

[5] B. SPOLSKY, LANGUAGE POLICY: KEY TOPICS IN SOCIOLINGUISTICS 8 (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

goals might include cultivating language skills needed to meet national priorities; establishing the rights of individuals or groups to learn, use, and maintain languages; promoting the growth of a national lingua franca; and promoting or discouraging multilingualism.[6] Cooper suggests that there are three foci of language planning: (a) status planning (the allocation of a community's language to various functions or uses), (b) corpus planning (graphization or reduction of a language to writing, standardization and codification (writing rules) and modernization where a language is permitted to fulfil new communicative functions by expanding its vocabulary, developing new styles, genres, and registers through the processes of elaboration and cultivation; and (c) acquisition management/planning (planning how to promote and facilitate acquisition of new language(s)).[7]

Language planning in all its three dimensions outlined by Cooper involves deliberate future oriented language change that is aimed at problem solving, among other things.[8] Administrators and politicians primarily undertake status planning, while corpus planning generally involves planners with greater linguistic expertise.[9] In the case of language acquisition management (also known as language education or language-in-education policy[10]), although it is the responsibility of all sectors of society, the educational sector is most often charged with its development, management and implementation.[11] Language acquisition management may be a passive process as well as a matter of active policy planning. An active language acquisition management is often ideologically driven, non-consultative and a

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[6] See J. E. Petrovic, *Language policy*, in THE PRAEGER HANDBOOK OF LATINO EDUCATION IN THE U.S. 239 (L. D. Soto (ed.), Greenwood, 2007).

[7] Joyce B. G. Sukumane, *Issues in Language Policy and Planning: The Case of Namibia*, 30(2) STUDIES IN THE LINGUISTIC SCIENCES 206-07 (2000).

[8] J. RUBIN AND B. H. JERNUDD, CAN LANGUAGE BE PLANNED? SOCIOLINGUISTIC THEORY AND PRACTICE FOR DEVELOPING NATIONS xvi (University Press of Hawaii, 1971)..

[9] GIBSON FERGUSON, LANGUAGE PLANNING & EDUCATION 21 (Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

[10] R. B. Baldauf, Jr., M. Li, and S. Zhao, *Language acquisition management inside and outside the school*, in THE HANDBOOK OF EDUCATIONAL LINGUISTICS 234 (B. Spolsky and F. M. Hult (eds), Wiley- Blackwell, 2010).

[11] *Id.*, at 234

top-down affair.[12] This is the case in many countries around the world especially those that aspire to have a homogenizing national language. An active language acquisition management policy involves a great deal of corpus planning, which includes standardization, codification and modernization of the language to develop its lexical base for purposes such as science and technology.[13] It also involves corpus planning which was noted earlier, that often is undertaken through legislation to ensure the language had predominant roles in the key domains of education and administration with the purpose of moving the entire community in a certain desirable direction.[14] Thus, in terms of their effects or purposes as Cooper states, language policies are often intended "to influence the behavior of others with respect to the acquisition, structure, or functional allocation of their language codes".[15]

From a different perspective, Annamalalai notes that the language policies of governments (in multilingual settings) may broadly be classified into three kinds in terms of the goals of the policy, implicit or explicit: policy of elimination of multilingualism, tolerance of multilingualism, and maintenance of multilingualism. Elimination is sought to be achieved primarily by prohibiting and penalizing the use of minority languages even in private domains. Tolerance is being indifferent to minority languages and their exclusion in the policy formulation about language use in public domains. Maintenance and promotion could be fine-grained into allowing non-governmental efforts and funds for the use of minority languages in public domains, such as education, disallowing discrimination by language, and institutionalizing the use of minority languages in public domains most critical of which are public administration, law enforcement and justice dispensation, and education.[16]

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[12] *Id.*, at 235

[13] SARAN KAUR GILL, LANGUAGE POLICY CHALLENGES IN MULTI-ETHNIC MALAYSIA 11 (Springer, 2014).

[14] *Id.*, at 11.

[15] ROBERT L. COOPER, LANGUAGE PLANNING & SOCIAL CHANGE 45 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[16] E. Annamalai, *Reflections on a Language Policy for Multilingualism*, 2 LANGUAGE POLICY, 113, 119, 122 (2003) (citing Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988).

The fact that the policy of elimination, and of even mere tolerance of multilingualism has been unproductive is a well-documented fact, and our own country's history provides sufficient attestation, making it unnecessary to belabour the point.[17] Thus, language planners need to understand that in multilingual societies like Ethiopia, the approach that works best is embracing multilingualism and putting in place a rational policy for status, corpus and acquisition planning of the languages alongside disseminating the advantages of such a policy to the various linguistic communities subsumed within the polity.

Unlike the 1950s and 60s, there seems at the present time to be much more understanding that linguistic pluralism is not a problem in and of itself. The cohesive social and political dispensations in multilingual societies like Switzerland, India and South Africa demonstrate that what is needed is a rational language policy and planning to harmoniously integrate various linguistic communities of a given polity. In fact, the history of states like India tells us that the right balance is struck after a lengthy search of options on the constitutional platform or at sub-constitutional levels. For example, in the case of India, its 1950 Constitution states that the official language of the Union is Hindi in Devanagari script and that English would be replaced 15 years after the Constitution took effect.[18] But, this policy of the framers was greeted with much uproar in the non-Hindi speaking India leading to the passage of the Official Language Act in the 1960s (further refined in the 1970s) that effectively made English the second official language of the Union.[19]

The Indian Constitution also makes provision for having more than one official language at the state level, which "may be for a specific region or for

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[17] See, for example, *United Nation's Human Development Report 2004: Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World*, available at http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/265/hdr_2004_complete.pdf; IAN SHAPIRO AND WILL KYMLICKA (EDS), ETHNICITY AND GROUP RIGHTS (New york University Press, 1997); WILL KYMLICKA, POLITICS IN THE VERNACULAR (Oxford University Press, 2001).

[18] *Indian Constitution* (1950), art 343.

[19] Braj B. Kachru, *The Indianization of English – the English Language in India*, 25 (1) WORLD ENGLISHES 167 (1983).

specific purposes".[20] In practice as well, many Indian states have therefore recognized more than one language for official purposes. The language policy in education in India is that children learn in their mother tongue from grades 1-4 or 5. In most states, the medium of instruction is the official language of the state or the child's mother tongue from grades 1-4. For children whose mother tongue is different from the official language of the state, the latter is made the subject of study from grade 3 onwards. With regard to English, students could opt for it as the medium of instruction from standard v onwards.[21] Overall, both for public administration and for education, India has now a policy of 3±1. This means that English and Hindi are languages of business of the Union government, which have to be learnt at the primary education level. The third language is the language of business of the state within which one abodes. In a state where either of the two Union languages is also its working language, one needs to learn just those two Union languages; hence, 3-1. Those whose mother tongue is neither Hindi, English or the state's working language must equip themselves with four languages (3+1): the two Union languages, the state's working language and their own mother tongue.

Switzerland is another country that has a successful multilingual policy. Switzerland made a deliberate policy of turning the multilingual composition of its society into an advantage while the whole early 20th century Europe looked at it as an oddity midst monolingual, unitary state-nation building aspirations of the other European states.[22] It consciously worked on developing a national outlook that embraces the diversity of its society. Referring to the success of its quadrilingual national official policy, Grin states: "What could be perceived as a fatal rift had to be asserted (and was actually proclaimed) as the essence of the Swiss nation: a *Willensnation* ("nation of the will") defined precisely by its linguistic diversity, gaining its

[20] *Indian Constitution* (1950), art 345.

[21] See B. Mallikarjun, *Language policy for education in Indian states: Karnataka*, (2(9) LANGUAGE IN INDIA (2002), available at: http://www.languageinindia.com/dec2002/karnatakaeducationpolicy.html

[22] François Grin, *Language Policy in Multilingual Switzerland: Overview and Recent Developments* (conference paper, Barcelona, 4 December 1998), 2.

sense of national self and expressing its very soul through diversity, not in spite of it".[23]

Switzerland works constantly on language acquisition issues at both levels of government. For example, in 2004 the Cantonal Ministers of Education adopted a national strategy of language teaching with objectives including the reinforcement of language of schooling, the compulsory study of two foreign languages (meaning languages other than the Canton's official language) at primary school level and other (national) language as an option from the ninth school year. The strategy also declares the need to develop the pupils' skills in their first language (if different from the language of schooling in the Canton).[24] In 2009, an agreement on the harmonization of compulsory education between the Cantons came into effect. This agreement asked for new multilingual educational policy documents covering the 2004 national strategy for language teaching and a federal act passed in 2007.

In 2010, the Swiss Constitution was amended to include the following provisions:

1. The official languages of the Confederation are German, French, and Italian. Romansh is also an official language of the Confederation when communicating with persons who speak Romansh.
2. The Cantons shall decide on their official languages. In order to preserve harmony between linguistic communities, the Cantons shall respect the traditional territorial distribution of languages and take into account the indigenous linguistic minorities.
3. The Confederation and the Cantons shall encourage understanding and exchange between the linguistic communities.
4. The Confederation shall support the plurilingual Cantons in the fulfillment of their special duties.

[23] *Id.*

[24] Adrian Lundberg, *Multilingual educational language policies in Switzerland and Sweden A meta-analysis*, available at: https://doi.org/10.1075/lplp.00005.lun|, 52-53.

5. The Confederation shall support measures by the Cantons of Graubünden and Ticino to preserve and promote the Romansh and Italian languages.

As can be seen from the Swiss constitutional amendment, reproduced above, the framers made sure that framework legal principles governing and applying the national, regional (cantonal), and sub-regional governments are provided in the constitution. While ordaining the official languages of the Swiss (con)federation, the amendment allows the cantons to decide their official languages. The amendment contains other important matters. I mention three of them here. The first one is the requirement on both the confederation and the cantons to encourage understanding and exchange between the linguistic communities. Secondly, the amendment requires the cantons to preserve harmony between linguistic communities and to take into account the linguistic minorities. Finally, the amendment reiterates that the confederation shall support the plurilingual cantons to fulfil their special duties.

Plurilingual South Africa has also dealt with its linguistic diversity in an upright manner. It could be a good model for Ethiopia to make its language policy more complete and fairer. The most important document in this regard is the 1996 Constitution. Section 6 of the Constitution is reproduced extensively below in order to show the complete framework of the language policy.

The official languages of the Republic are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu.

1. Recognizing the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of South Africa, the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages.
2. The national government and provincial governments may use any particular official languages for the purposes of government, taking into account usage, practicality, expense, regional circumstances and

the balance of the needs and preferences of the population as a whole or in the province concerned.

3. The national government and each provincial government must use at least two official languages.
4. Municipalities must take into account the language usage and preferences of their residents.
5. The national government and provincial governments, by legislative and other measures, must regulate and monitor their use of official languages. To this effect, while the state is required to take positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages, all official languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably.
6. A Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB) established by national legislation shall promote, and create conditions for, the development and use of all official languages; the Khoi, Nama and San languages; and sign language; and promote and ensure respect for all languages commonly used by communities in South Africa, including German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Telegu and Urdu; and Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit and other languages used for religious purposes in South Africa.

PANSALB was established in 1995; mandated to provide language facilitation services to those who need it. [25] Contrary to most of the African countries that made the languages of their colonizers sole official languages, South Africa opted for a different course, promoting indigenous languages of its peoples. But, there obviously could be a lot of practical challenges, including of resources and national and sub-national political dynamics that need to be attended to. [26]

[25] Neville Alexander, *Language Policy and Planning in the New South Africa*, 1(1) AFRICAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW 82, 87 (1997).

[26] See, for example, that Jon Orman argues that enough attention has not been given to Afrikaans which has more speakers than English and therefore serves as a lingua franca more widely than English. See Orman, *supra* note 2.

In Singapore, English is a compulsory medium of instruction in all schools but at the same time it is compulsory for students to learn their mother tongue as a subject.[27] Three other languages of Singapore: Malay, Mandarin and Tamil are official languages of the country.[28]

I would like to end this comparative excursion by mentioning the decision of the European Union in regards to the Union's language policy. During the 2002 European Council meeting in Barcelona, the Heads of State or Government of the EU called for at least two foreign languages to be taught from a very early age. This eventually resulted in the policy objective of "Mother tongue plus two other languages," already described in the European Commission's action plan being implemented beginning of 2004.[29]

2. Language Policy of Past Ethiopian Governments

Ethiopia is one of the most diverse countries in Africa, both culturally and linguistically. Two of the four language phyla in Africa, Afro-Asiatic and Nilo-Saharan, are found in Ethiopia.[30] Out of the six branches of Afro-Asiatic languages, three of them, namely, Cushitic, Omotic and Semitic are spoken in Ethiopia.[31]

Ethiopia's language policy does not have a long pedigree. Anything that could go by that name in a formal sense may, extend as far back as the 1930s, associated with Emperor Haile Selassie.[32] Of course, there had always been a

[27] Gill, *supra* note 13, at 5.

[28] It is noted that Singapore chose to adopt English as a school language for economic advantages and global competitiveness; *Id.*, at 5, 7.

[29] Lundberg, *supra* note 24, at 48.

[30] Zelealem Leyew, *The Ethiopian Language Policy: A Historical and Typological Overview*, 12(2) ETHIOPIAN JOURNAL OF LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE 2 (2012) (citing Heine and Nurse, 2000).

[31] *Id.*.

[32] It might be worth mentioning that the Fetha Negast ('law of the Kings') believed to be imported from Egypt, (Alexandria) during the 14th century and used both as religious and secular law of the country till 1930, had something to say about considerations that needed

court language through which official communication took place. But, as far as the people were concerned there was not any documented language choice or planning to which they were subjected. During the Axumite kingdom, Ge'ez was the language of official communication of the kings, the language of education of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church, and a lingua franca among the various cultural communities inhabiting the Empire. It was gradually succeeded by Amharic as a language of communication of the kings with the coming to power of the Zagwe dynasty from mid 12th century onwards.[33]

In terms of the early origins of Amharic, some literature posits it at the 3rd or 4th century.[34] After the decline of the Axumite Kingdom from the beginning of the 12th century and during the lead up to the reign of the Zagwe kings (1150-1272), Amharic was used as an additional language in the court alongside the mother tongue of the kings. Some evidence suggests that Amharic became a written language from the 14th century onwards by 'inheriting and modifying the writing system from Ge'ez.[35] Emperor Tewodros II (r. 1855-1868) was also credited for keenly overseeing attempts in the standardization of written Amharic.[36] This was continued by his successor, Emperor Yohannes IV, who maintained Amharic as the language of the court and the major lingua franca. Menelik II's time witnessed further spread of Amharic as a language of communications among most of the linguistic communities of present-day Ethiopia with the expansion of central state's power and institutions.

As it is well known, Emperor Haile Selassie clung to the policy of 'one language one nation' especially after the restoration of his government following the defeat of invading Italy in 1941. This policy was given a constitutional status in the 1955 Revised Constitution, which designated

to be made of versetility in languages of judges to be assigned to serve in linguistic communities.

33 Zelalem, *supra* note 30, at 2 (citing Bahiru Zewde, 1991).

34 *Id.*, at 5 (citing Bender, 1983).

35 *Id.*

36 *Id.*, (citing Pankhurst, 1969).

Amharic as the "official language" of the country. This seems to have been hastened in reaction to some of the divisive measures taken by fascist Italy aimed solely at creating discord between the various linguistic and cultural communities of Ethiopia. Of course his language policy was in tune with his drive of centralization of political power forging "one nation" out of the diverse people of Ethiopia, which started from the beginning of his reign. His reference to the Ethiopian people as "አንድ ቤተሰብ" (one family) in his speech on the occasion of his granting of the 1931 Constitution is a testimony to his aspirations. In fact, his views of a "nation" are typically modeled on the Western ideas of nationalism. In the 1950s and 60s, the predominant thinking in the West was that monolingualism and Western-style cultural homogeneity were necessary requirements for social and economic progress, modernization, and national unity.[37] As Kymlicka notes, Western states have historically been 'nation-building' states. [38] They have encouraged and sometimes forced all the citizens on the territory of the state to integrate into common public institutions operating in a common language. They have used various strategies to achieve this goal of linguistic and institutional integration such as citizenship and naturalization laws, education laws, and language laws.[39] There is a striking similarity between the Western states' attempts at nation building and Emperor Haile Selassie's efforts towards the same goal.

Likewise, the desire of forging a nation-state with a common national language characterized the new states of Africa that emerged out of colonialism in the 1960s. In fact, as Basil Davidson observes this had started early in the 1950s during the anti-colonial struggle. The leaders of the struggle considered "Africa's wealth of ethnic cultures both distracting and hard to absorb into their schemes. They regarded it as tribalism".[40] Davidson further stated that the educated elites of Africa, when they took over from the

[37] THOMAS RICENTO (ED), AN INTRODUCTION TO LANGUAGE POLICY: THEORY AND METHOD 15 (Blackwell, 2006).

[38] W. Kymlicka, *supra* note 17, at 2.

[39] *Id.*

[40] BASIL DAVIDSON, THE BLACK MAN'S BURDEN: AFRICA AND THE CURSE OF THE NATION-STATE 99 (Times Books, 1992).

colonialists, "they demanded a complete flattening of the ethnic landscape"[41] thereby wishing it away and longing for a monocultural society communicating in one official/national language. This engendered the adoption of the languages of former colonial powers as their official languages.

During the Derg, ostensibly more attention was given to local languages other than Amharic. For example, Derg's "National Democratic Revolution Program of Socialist Ethiopia" (1976) provided that the history, culture, language and religion of each nationality were accorded equal recognition and that each nationality had regional autonomy to decide on matters concerning its internal affairs, including the right to determine the contents of its political, economic and social life, and use its own language.[42]

The Derg did not have an ideological opposition to multilingualism and cultural pluralism (and in fact seemed to embrace it). But the practical steps it took to promote linguistic and cultural pluralism were limited. The Academy of Ethiopian Languages, which was first established in 1968 and ceased to operate during 1974-75, was reopened in 1976.[43] The Academy was mandated to, among others, study all Ethiopian languages, create alphabets for those which did not have writing systems, encourage the speakers to read and write in their own languages, study the phonological and morphological systems of all Ethiopian languages and prepare dictionaries and grammar books for all of them in the long run.[44] Interesting to note that the Academy was tasked with the study of the relationship between the different languages so as to find common elements that would aid in developing a national language, drawing on common words from many languages.[45] Through the 1980s, the Academy undertook works such as a contrastive analysis of Amharic and Gedeo phonology, transcribing of nearly 30,000 words in Omotic languages,

41 *Id.*

42 Cited in M. Lionel Bender, *Ethiopian Language Policy 1974-1981*, 27(3) ANTHROPOLOGICAL LINGUISTICS 273, 273 (1985).

43 *Id.*, at 273.

44 *Id.*, at 274.

45 *Id.*, at 274.

compilation of a bibliography relevant to preparation of writing systems for Afar, Amharic, Gedeo, Hadiya, Kembata, Oromo, Silti, Somali, Tigrignaa, Welaita, and some level of study of a number of languages by engaging experts from the Institute of Language Studies of Addis Ababa University.[46]

Derg also established the Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities by law in 1983. The Institute was mandated, inter alia, to undertake studies on the nationalities of the country, their territorial locations, and thus document their cultures and languages. Some of the policy decisions in the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE) Constitution and those that followed it, such as, the establishment of autonomous and administrative regions were said to be informed by it.[47] Article 2(5) of the PDRE Constitution stated that "PDRE shall ensure the equality, development and respectability of the languages of the nationalities" and Article 116 provided: "Without prejudice to Article 2(5) of this Constitution, in the PDRE, the working language of the state shall be Amharic".

The above noted activities of the military government show that some attention was paid to vernacular languages other than Amharic, and the latter was referred to merely as a "working" language and not as an official national language, which was the case under Haile Selassie's language policy. However, when it comes to formal language policy measures and changes, little was done by the Derg. Amharic remained the only language of official business and the medium of primary education, with English as a semi-official second language of limited scope and the medium of secondary and higher education.[48]

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[46] *Id.*, 376. The Academy was transferred from the Ministry of Culture and Sports to the Addis Ababa University in 1997. Currently it exists as the "Academy of Ethiopian Languages and Cultures" as part of the same University; see http://www.aau.edu.et/aelc/.

[47] The fine works of the Institute have also been made use of by the EPRDF following its assumption of power in the 1990s, including for the establishment of ethnic-territorial self-governments.

[48] T. Bloor and Wondwosen Tamrat, *Issues in Ethiopian Language Policy and Education*, 17(5) JOURNAL OF MULTILINGUAL AND MULTICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT321, 327 (1996).

The lack of attention towards and the sidelining of the development of languages of the various Ethiopian NNPs was one of the rallying cries of the ethnic liberation movements that sprouted in many parts of the country in the 1970s and 80s. These movements demanded the official recognition, use and development of their communities' languages.[49] And as is discussed in section 3 of this article, the ethnic liberation movements led by Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF)/ Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) got the upper hand and assumed state power, thereby changing the state language policy to one that denationalizes Amharic and embraces more working languages at the sub-national levels.

Language Policy-in-Education

Formal education started in Ethiopia in the early 20th century. The earliest effort at formal education by way of literacy campaign was undertaken by Emperor Menelik II around 1898 where Amharic was used for the adult literacy programs.[50] Before the coming to prominence of formal education, however, religiously dominated education was given both by the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church and Islamic establishments in different parts of the country. Church schools were known to be up and running in the 10th century or even earlier where education ranging from reading and writing to church music, poetry, theology, church history and philosophy were given.[51]

The medium of instruction in the few schools that were opened at the time when formal education started was French, English, Arabic or Italian with Amharic and Ge'ez as subjects of study in primary education. French was

[49] Gedion Cohen, *The Development of Regional and Local Languages in Ethiopia's Federal System*, in ETHNIC FEDERALISM: THE ETHIOPIAN EXPERIENCE IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE 165, 169 (David Turton (ed), , James Currey, 2006).

[50] See Richard Pankhurst, *The Foundation of Education, Printing, Newspaper, Book Production, Libraries and Literacy in Ethiopia*, 6(3) ETHIOPIAN OBSERVER 241-290 (1963).

[51] See *Id.*

mandatory while the rest were optional.[52] Amharic and Ge'ez started to be offered in 1919 in the two state-run schools at the time. The nascent education system of Ethiopia experienced a fundamental retrogressive change during the Italian occupation (1936-41).

Soon after its occupation of Ethiopia, Italy quickly moved to define its overall educational policy in terms of the race of the students, content of the curriculum, and the language(s) of instruction.[53] While by a law it issued in 1936 it legalized the existence of two separate school systems: "Italian type schools" and schools for "colonial subjects", its implicit policy for the native schools was for them to serve as a "political instrument for the peaceful penetration and moral conquest of the native population".[54] The colonial government decided to replace Amharic with Italian as an official language and to adopt a multiple language policy as far as the indigenous languages were concerned. This latter principle was laid down in the Administrative Ordinance for Italian East Africa of June 1, 1936. Article 32 of the Ordinance stated that the teaching of colonial subjects should be in the main local languages of the six administrative divisions of Italian East Africa, as well as in Arabic in the Muslim areas.[55] Instruction in Eritrea was thus to be in Tigrigna; in Amhara in Amharic; in Addis Ababa in Amharic and Oromifa; in Harar in Harari and Oromifa; in Oromo-Sidama in Oromifa and Kafficho; in Somalia (comprising of the whole Somali population in East Africa) in Somali; and in other additional languages the Governor-General might wish to introduce.[56]

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[52] Ronny Meyer, *Amharic as lingua franca in Ethiopia*, 20 (1/2) LISSAN: JOURNAL OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES & LINGUISTICS, at 120 (2006); Bloor and Tamrat, *supra* note 48, at 321.

[53] Richard Pankhurst, *Education in Ethiopia during the Italian Fascist Occupation (1936-1941)*, 5(3) INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF AFRICAN HISTORICAL STUDIES 361, 365 (1972).

[54] *Id.*, at 366.

[55] *Id.*, at 369.

[56] Pankhurst reports that though the use of these languages was thus officially prescribed, the regulation was not strictly followed as could be seen from the "Four Power Commission report on Eritrea" which observed that instruction was in fact "given almost entirely in Italian in the State-operated schools". *Id.*, at 369.

Within the frame of the two types of schools earlier mentioned, educational changes in Addis Ababa were quickly brought about upon the capture of the city: the old Tafari Makonnen School was converted into two "Italian type" schools, the Liceo-Ginnasio Vittorio Emanuele III and the Istituto Tecnico Benito Mussolini, both reserved for European children, while the prewar Empress Menen School for girls was converted into the Regina Elena military hospital. Secondary education for Ethiopians came to an abrupt end, since the prewar schools in Addis Ababa and other parts of the country were largely appropriated for the education of Italian (other European) children or for entirely non-educational purposes.[57] In addition to restricting the education of what it calls 'natives', to primary level where they would be taught mainly in the Italian language and fascist culture and be made suitable for the modest and largely menial role required of them in the Italian colonial empire, and to prepare them for military service in the Italian army.[58]

Undergirded by the "no proper education for the 'natives'" policy of fascist Italy, education of Ethiopians (and Eritreans) during the occupation period was devoid of any proper content but was used as a platform for the indoctrination of the young girls and boys with fascist propaganda. This can be shown clearly by the observation of a British officer, Gandar Dower, who arrived in East Africa soon after the collapse of Mussolini's rule:

> Under the Italians, 'native' education served a political purpose… the text books, expensively produced, were written in Italian, and glorified the Duce on almost every page. Military service was lauded. Boys were encouraged to become 'little soldiers of the Duce'; the Fascist salute was compulsory, and at the morning hoisting of the flag Italian songs were sung.[59]

Thus, by the end of the Italian occupation in 1941, the education system in Ethiopia was practically non-existent. After the restoration of Haile Selassie's

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[57] *Id.*, at 373.

[58] The open anti-educational stance for Ethiopians of the fascist invaders was not only restricted to doing away with proper education of the local people but was also adamant to exterminate (kill, exile and imprison) all the young educated citizens of the country. *Id.*

[59] Quoted in Pankhurst, *supra* note 53, at 395.

government in the same year, attempts to mend the educational system were made. More explicit measures were taken, for example, in regards to the language of education, perhaps as a reaction to the medium of instruction policy that colonial Italy sought to implement. Meyer reports that in 1944 Emperor Haile Selassie decreed Amharic to be the only language used in education, which forced missionary schools to use only Amharic as the medium of instruction instead of other vernaculars. But other literature depicts that the Emperor's 1944 decree on medium of instruction was targeted particularly to the missionary schools in the various parts of the country and was not a decision about the entire medium of instruction.[60]

French remained the medium of instruction until 1947 when it was replaced by English. From 1947-1958 English was made the medium of instruction in all schools while Amharic was offered as a subject of study. In 1958, decision was again taken by the imperial government to make Amharic the medium for primary education throughout the country and that English be taught as a subject of study from as early in the curriculum as possible.[61] Bloor and Wondwossen note that since 1941 English remained the medium of instruction in secondary school with Amharic as a subject of study and also with moral education which was offered in Amharic.[62]

The elementary school curriculum made public in 1963 stated that elementary schools be comprised of six years of study and taught wholly in Amharic with English as a subject as early in the program as possible with a possible delay for non-native speakers of Amharic, extra attention being paid to Amharic.[63] During Haile Selassie's time no Ethiopian language other than Amharic was taught in the school program at any level.

As noted earlier, the military government, which ruled the country from 1974-1991, followed Marxist-Leninist ideology with regards to the languages of nationalities in Ethiopia—which is declaring the equality of all languages—

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60 See, eg., Hirut Woldemariam, *Language Planning Challenged by Identity in a Multilingual Setting: The Case of Gamo*, 8(1) OSLO STUDIES IN LANGUAGE295, 296 (2016).

61 *Id.*, at 296; Bloor and Wondwossen, *supra* note 48, at 327.

62 *Id.*

63 *Id.*, citing Tesfaye Shewaye (1976).

and other matters. Without doubt, there was a clear departure from its predecessor, albeit mostly rhetorically. One noteworthy departure was the introduction of the famous "National Literacy Campaign" which started in 1975. Fourteen local languages other than Amharic were used as medium of instruction in the Literacy Campaign.[64] The literacy programs continued through the 1980s being offered in Amharic, Oromifa, Somali, Tigrigna, and Welaitigna and some other languages as well. But, as noted earlier, formal education continued in Amharic and English throughout the country.

3. Language Policy of the EPRDF Government

In terms of the articulation of language policy, the government of EPRDF that has been in power[65] since May 1991 shows a clear departure from the previous governments of this country. This is not surprising of course, given its political (ideological) position with regard to the rights of NNPs. Following its assumption of power, the EPRDF led-government enacted a transitional period Charter which declared among others that every NNP has the right to use and develop its language.[66] This was followed by a law[67] that established the national/regional self-governments, which established 13 regions (Addis

[64] The languages were Afaan Oromo, Tigrinya, Tigre, Wolaitta, Sidaama, Haddiya, Kambaata, Afar, Saho, Gedeo, Somali, Kafinono, Silte' and Kunama; Zelalem Leyew, *supra* note 30, at 24 (citing Tilahun, 1997; Hailu, 1993).

[65] EPRDF, which was a front of four parties, led and dominated by the Tigriyan Liberation Front (TPLF) underwent a fundamental change between 2019-20 under the reformist Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, who came to power on EPRDF's platform but from the Oromo People's Democratic Organization, one of the four parties in the EPRDF. In 2020, EPRDF was transformed into Prosperity party (PP) which embraced the regional ruling parties of the eight (now 10) regions as oppsoed to EPRDF that was a front of only four parties governing in four regions: Amhara, Oromia, Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples, and Tigray. Interesting to note that the TPLF rejected the offer to join PP and retreated to Mekelle the capital city of Tigray region, starting from the end of 2019. Since then the relationship between the federal governmnet and TPLF deteriorated and fighting broke out between the two on November 4, 2020 at the instigation of the TPLF that opened a surprise attack on the northern command of the Ethiopian national defense force that was stationed in Tigray.

[66] *Transitional Period Charter of Ethiopia* (1991), art 2.

[67] *Proclamation to Establish National/Regional Self-Governments No. 7/1992.*

Ababa being the 14th region) in which 64 identified nationalities were given self-government status at regional and sub-regional levels.

EPRDF gave its preferred language policy a constitutional status by enshrining it in the 1995 Constitution of Ethiopia. Thus, Article 5 of the Constitution deals with the status of languages in the country. It provides that all Ethiopian languages have equal state recognition while declaring that Amharic is the working language of the federal government and that states (members of the federation) may determine by law their respective working languages. The Constitution also enshrines linguistic rights of nationalities as part of its Bill of Rights provisions (Article 39(2)) by virtue of which "every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to speak, to write and to develop its own language".

The Constitution also establishes language as one of the main considerations in the delimitation of the states of the federation. Further, as part of individual rights protected by the Constitution, Article 19(1-2) stipulates that persons arrested have the right to be informed promptly, in a language they understand, that they have the right to remain silent; to know the reasons for their arrest and any charge against them; and that any statement they make may be used as evidence against them in court. Article 20(7) likewise provides that accused persons have the right to request the assistance of an interpreter at state expense where the court proceedings are conducted in a language they do not understand. Articles 25 and 38 of the Constitution stipulates that language is one of the prohibited grounds for discrimination among persons in providing equal and effective protection of the law and in the exercise of the right to participate in the conduct of public affairs, including the right to elect and be elected.

The above two paragraphs summarize the language policy and language rights in the Ethiopian Constitution. Compared, for example, to the South African Constitution discussed earlier, it says very little and displays several loopholes. Article 5(3) of the Constittuion provides that "members of the Federation may by law determine their respective working languages". This left the decision on regional language choice entirely to the states without giving any policy guidance on how, at least the most diverse ones, should go about this

decision. This seems to have sent a message that like the federal government, states and local governments also need to designate only one language as their working language. This idea of designating one language per government level resulted in either the imposition of the language of the dominant group on smaller groups living within the state or sub-state administration or attempts at harmonization of the languages that are believed to be closely related. The attempts in the Southern NNPs state at forging one language out of Gamo, Gofa and Dawro languages into GaGoDa first, and then Wolaita, Gamo, Gofa and Dawro languages into WoGaGoDa later, both of which ended disastrously, are good examples.[68]

3.1. Policy on Language-in-Education

Soon after the change of government in 1991, some of the newly created regional governments[69] embarked upon the adoption of the languages of the dominant groups as a medium of primary education and government affairs. This followed the adoption by the then Transitional Government of Ethiopia (1991-1995) of its "Education and Training Policy" in July 1991 (officiated in April 1994). The policy dubbed grades 1-8 as 'primary' and grades 9-12 as 'secondary' education.[70] The first two years of secondary education were designed for general secondary education where students would identify their interests for "further education, for specific training and for the world of work" while the second cycle of secondary education (grades 11-12) would "enable students to choose subjects or areas of training which [would] prepare them adequately for higher education and for the world of work".[71] In regards to the medium of instruction, the Policy states the following:

[68] See, eg., Woldemariam, *supra* note 60.

[69] The regional (transitional) governments were formally established by Proclamation No. 7/1992 which was issued in January 1992 but had existed de facto since July 1991.

[70] Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, *Education and Training Policy* (Addis Ababa, 1994), 14.

[71] *Id.*, at 15.

Recognizing the pedagogical advantage of the child in learning in the mother tongue and the rights of nationalities to promote the use of their languages, primary education will be given in nationality languages.

1) Making the necessary preparation, nations and nationalities can either learn in their own language or can choose from among those selected on the basis of national and countrywide distribution.
2) The language of teacher training for kindergarten and primary education will be the nationality language used in the area.
3) Amharic shall be taught as a language of countrywide communication.
4) English will be the medium of instruction for secondary and higher education.
5) Students can choose and learn at least one nationality language and one foreign language for cultural and international relations.
6) English will be taught as a subject starting from grade one.
7) The necessary steps will be taken to strengthen language teaching at all levels.[72]

Although the Policy reiterated that "Amharic shall be taught as a language of countrywide communication", it did not specify the grade from which it should start to be offered in regions in which primary education is offered in regional/nationality languages. This was so unlike English, which was explicitly stated in the policy that its instruction as a subject starts at grade one. This resulted in a diverse approach to the teaching of Amharic as a subject of study in the regions where in regions like Oromia, Amharic is offered from grade 5 onwards [73] while in others it starts much earlier. Furthermore, the policy is silent about the level where it ceases to be offered as a subject of study.

[72] *Id.*, at 23-24.

[73] Bloor and Wondwossen, *supra* note 48, at 328.

As can be seen from the terms of the policy, education in the mother tongue is not compulsory. In terms of the practice as well, not all regions opted for mother tongue primary education. Regions such as Afar, Beneshangul-Gumuz, Gambella and most nationalities in the SNNPS retained Amharic as the medium of primary education along of course with the Amhara region, and Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa cities. Over the last few years some of these regions have switched to or partially started a mother tongue primary education.

The Education and Training Policy was silent about the graphization of nationality languages for education and indeed for all other purposes. This enabled all the regions to go their separate ways. With the exception of Tigray and Amhara regions and some self-administering zones in the Southern NNP state, all other regions have chosen Latin alphabets for the graphization of their languages. It is to be noted that prior to 1991, regional languages such as Oromifa, Somali and Wolaitigna were written in the Geez (also known as Ethiopic) alphabet, in those limited instances where they were officially used in literacy campaigns and as a print medium in newspapers and magazines.

A recent study by the Ministry of Education found that 85% of children around the country use mother tongue in pre-school education.[74] This, coupled with the stated 94.3% net enrollment in primary education, plays a fundamental role in the realization of the policy of mother tongue primary education and access to education in general. However, the Study depicts that there is a great disparity in access to education between the regions with regions like Afar (59.2%), Somali (81.1%), Benshangul-Gumuz (89.3%) and Dire Dewa (56.9%) lagging behind the others.[75]

[74] Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap 2018-30) (draft for discussion, 2018), available at: https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/planipolis/files/ressources/ethiopia_education_development_roadmap_2018-2030.pdf, 14.

[75] *Id.*, at 15.

3.2. The 2020 Draft Language Policy of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

In February 2020, a langauge policy that was prepared under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism was adopted by the Council of Ministers. The Policy, which is not yet endorsed by the House of Peoples' Representatives (HoPR)[76], attempts to address all aspects of official and public use of langauges such in government services, media and education. As underscored in the policy document, one of the rationales of the Policy is to create a framework that:

> enables the granting of a higher status, role and function at federal government level to those languages that are spoken by a majority of the Ethiopian population that, are being used widely for governmental functions, that promote multilingualism, foster bonds among the people, consolidate multi-nationalism, engender the building of a nation-state, and by virtue of their trans-boundary presence, promote closer ties with neighbouring peoples and regions.[77]

Establishing institutions, structures and operational modalities for realizing the language rights recognized by the Ethiopian Constitution; enhancing the functions of the languages that have significance "for promoting multi-lingualism, strengthening ties between people, and nurturing a socio-politically unified nation" and advancing Ethiopia's relations and cooperation with neighbouring countries; and developing a nation-wide system for language use, language planning, and langauge development are stated as the main objectives of the langauge policy.[78] The Policy covers many specific areas of language policy to be addressed along with strategies to do that. In relation to language rights, the Policy states that any language community in the country regardless of its population size has the right to choose or create new

[76] The Ethiopian Constitution (1995), art 55(10). As provided under this article, general policies and strategies of economic, social and development arenas are approved by the HoPR while the Council of Ministers is mandated to formulate and implement these policies; see also *id.*, art 77(6).

[77] *Ethiopian Language Policy* (as adopted by the Council of Ministers) (February 2020), 15.

[78] *Id.*, at 8-9.

writing system for its language and, at the place of its residence, the right to have public service delivered to it through its mother tongue or through a language of its choice, and the right to have its children receive education in its mother tongue or the langauge of wider communication chosen by it, at least from kindergarten to end of primary school.[79] If a linguistic community chooses a langauge other than its mother tongue as a medium of instruction, it has the right to demand that its mother-tongue be offered to its children as a subject of study. One significant bold statement in the langauge policy is the recognition of the right to education in their mother tongue and other rights noted above to members of linguistic communities that live interpersed in different regions, zones, woredas or among other multilingual communities.

The second critical area that is addressed by the langauge policy is that of working langauges. The Policy designates Amharic, Oromiffa, Tigrigna, Somaligna and Afarigna as the working languages of the federal government and states further that other Ethiopian langauges may in the future be designated as working langauges of the federal governmnet based on available capacity and study of critical factors.[80] Regarding the regional and local governmnets, the Policy does not determine which language or languages should be adopted but provides that the states shall determine their working langauges for the state level and sub-state levels.

The other major area covered by the language policy is langauge in education. It states that curricula that gradually implements multilingualism shall be implemented so that students can learn one federal language in addition to their mother tongue. The Policy also declares that federal working languages will be offered as subjects of study based on the language use practice of the concerned region or locality, among other things.[81] The Policy also asserts that international languages that are beneficial to the strategic interests of the country will be selected and incorporated into the curriculum of education. While the Policy underscores the need to strengthen the teaching of the English language, it also states that English as a medium of instrcution in

[79] *Id.*, at 11-12.
[80] *Id.*, at 14.
[81] *Id.*, at 19-20.

secondary and post-secondary will be replaced by Ethiopian national languages in strategically planned manner.

The langauge policy covers other matters of importance such as the graphaization of langauges that do not have writing systems as yet. It also pays attention to other langauges and communication ways for people with different kinds of disability. It also attempts to give guidance regarding language use of the media, translation services, private organizations, and the use of language for public signs and nomenclatures.

Yet another positive aspect of the Policy is its part dealing with the implementation mechanisms or modalities. Accordingly, the policy declares that the federal governmnet shall establish institutions that will be charged with the responsibility of planning and development of federal working languages while the regional states will do the same in regard to the languages spoken within their jurisdictions in line with the frame work put in place at the federal level. The Policy provides that laws, regulations and directives necessary for implementing the Policy shall be enacted and that a national program of action and policy implementation schedule shall be prepared. The establishment of three institutions—a language affairs council, a national language research institution, and a national translation institution—is also planned for the implementation of the Policy.

In the following section, this langauge policy proposal by the Council of Ministers will be assessed to point out some outstanding gaps and problems and forward suggestions to make it one that resonates well with reality.

4. Looking Ahead: the Appropriate Language Policy for Multilingual Ethiopia

Language policy in Ethiopia cannot be extricated from the whole issue of identity politics. As the comparative examples considered in this article show, this has also been the case in multilinguistic states in Africa and elsewhere in the world although the saliency of ethnic politics is not as pronounced as it is in Ethiopia. Language policy and planning endeavors in Ethiopia needs to be

informed by two fundamental considerations, both of which I believe have their niches in the 1995 Constitution. The first consideration should be the language rights of both individuals and speech communities. The second has to do with the nexus between language and group identity. I shall attempt to explain each in the following paragraphs and, while doing so, will point out some shortfalls of the 2020 language policy adopted by the Council of Ministers.

As rightly characterized by Mazrui and Mazrui, language right refers both to the right of language(s) and the right to language. The notion of the right of language refers to the right of every language in a multilingual society to existence and equality of opportunity for it to develop legal and other technological capabilities and to flourish. The right to language on the other hand refers to the right to use the language one is most proficient in, as well as the right of access to the language(s) of empowerment and socio-economic advancement.[82] In both meanings, therefore, language rights call for a holistic policy and plan to cater for all languages and their users in Ethiopia, including those not coded and sign languages of persons with special needs, to realize the existence and development of the languages and for their users to have access to the political goods referred to earlier in this article. In this regard, as summarized in the preceding section, although it lacks details, the 2020 language policy has attempted to cover broad areas of language rights catering for collective as well as individual rights and needs.

Language rights advocates argue that individuals have to have access not only to their mother tongue but also to the dominant language(s) of school and government business in their countries. This means that linguistic communities, whose languages are not used in schools and government businesses, have the right to protection against forced assimilation, discrimination or segregation. At the same time, such linguistic communities should be enabled to have a high command of the language(s) of work in order to get access to the material and social benefits of the languages. Likewise, members of the dominant groups need protection from forced monolingual

[82] ALI A. MAZRUI AND ALAMIN M. MAZRUI, THE POWER OF BABEL; LANGUAGE AND GOVERNANCE IN THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE 115 (James Currey, 1998).

reductionism.[83] The language repertoire of the majority linguistic community is that it tends to live with one language while a minority community often uses more than one.[84] This is for the obvious reason that members of the minority community could access economic benefits that often require communicative capability in the language(s) of the majority. On the contrary, the majority would normally be the dominant group and its language often is the language of government business. Language policy must aim at increasing inter-community communications whereby members of both the majority and the minority speech communities are proficient in as many languages as possible. Language policy in education is the main vehicle to do this. As noted earlier, the 2020 language policy of Ethiopia, although it has enunciated something about studying Ethiopian languages as subjects at school, it is extremely lacking on the necessary detail. It does not put in place the minimum number of Ethiopian languages that should be studied as subjects especially at regional and sub-regional levels. It is critically important to be definitive on these issues by clearly stating the minimum number of national languages that need to be learnt in addition to the mother-tongue.

Closely related to the issue of language right is the desirability of promoting multilingualism, as opposed to monolingualism. First, in a society made up of several language communities, embracing multilingualism is a simple and necessary act of democracy. As Recinto avers, in a society that accepts multilingualism, the constituent groups of the state are better positioned to participate as equals since their cultures and languages are respected and afforded legitimacy through institutional recognition and support.[85] Thus, a multilingual language policy has undoubtedly democratic and nation-building importance. As Kymlicka and Patten note "language policy can build identification with, loyalty to, and membership in a particular national political community or it can significantly undermine any efforts in this

[83] See generally MIKLÓS KONTRA ET AL. (EDS), LANGUAGE, A RIGHT AND A RESOURCE: APPROACHING LINGUISTIC HUMAN RIGHTS (Central European University Press, 1999).

[84] Annamalai, *supra* note 16, at 118.

[85] Thomas Ricento, *Theoretical Perspectives in Language Policy: An Overview*, in AN INTRODUCTION TO LANGUAGE POLICY: THEORY AND METHOD 16 (Thomas Ricento (ed), Blackwell, 2006).

direction".[86] Multilingual language policy ensures a cohesive national political community by taking care of the needs of individuals, linguistic communities and the country as a whole. Privileging only certain language communities by making their language a language of government business undermines any effort at nation building because those excluded and disadvantaged will resent the state of affair and may not cherish their membership in such a political community.

Thus, the bottom line is that factually multilingual polities like Ethiopia cannot but embrace multilingualism and work towards harmoniously integrating its diverse languages and cultures. In this case, Ethiopia has come a long way. But there are more critical policy, legal and institutional measures that it needs to take into account in order to create a cohesive multilingual society. South African language policy could serve as a very good model for Ethiopia to take the necessary further steps. As South Africa (and in fact others like Switzerland and India) has done, Ethiopia needs more federal working languages that take into account its major languages. Likewise, the members of the federation and, where diversity warrants, the local governments should adopt more working languages, not just one language, because we know for sure that the states and local governments in reality are mostly linguistically diverse. Municipalities have to be multilingual as well, taking into account the language patterns of their residents.

As documented in the 2007 Population and Housing Census, there are 83 indigenous languages spoken in Ethiopia. As it can also be gleaned from the Census, Oromo, Amhara, Somali, Tigre, Sidama, Wolaita, Gurage, Afar, Haddiya, Gamo and Gedeo have each a population of more than a million. This means that a sizable population of the country speaks one of these 11 languages. Together, they are spoken by close to 90% of the country's population. It seems compelling to think therefore that these languages are considered working languages of the federal government. In the same way the regional states and the urban and rural local governments would elevate major

[86] WILL KYMLICKA AND ALEN PATTEN (EDS), LANGUAGE RIGHTS AND POLITICAL THEORY 11 (Oxford University Press, 2003).

languages in their jurisdictions to the status of working languages. Importantly, accompanying these measures (which are of language status nature), there should be well thought about corpus and acquisition planning for these languages, not only for intra-speech community's purposes but also for inter-speech community communications.

When we look at the 2020 language policy, commendable step has been taken in recognizing four more languages as working languages of the federation. But my view is that more languages, not just five, should be made working languages of the federal government. A participatory decision making on selecting the languages should be adopted. In any case, as per my suggestion above, if we go by the number of minimum speakers of the various Ethiopian languages, at least those that are spoken by 1 million people should be embraced as working languages of the federal government. Openness to as many languages as widely spoken in the regions should also be recognized as working languages and regional and sub-regional levels as well. As to how the languages made the working languages at both federal and regional levels could actually be deployed in reality, detailed policy decision and guidelines and of course a binding law have to be put in place. The language policy under consideration lacks on these matters.

Coming to the question of international languages, as noted in the previous parts of this article, although English was not a colonial language for Ethiopia, Emperor Haile Selassie's government made a policy decision in 1944 where English became the medium of instruction for all levels of school till 1958. And, also from 1958, Amharic was adopted as a medium of instruction for primary education across the country (with English being offered as a subject at that level) while English became a medium of instruction from grade 7 to tertiary education.[87] This state of affairs had been generally maintained under the Derg with a few practical steps taken towards enhancing the positions of other languages of the country.

[87] English is also the language for Ethiopia's international communications and a second language of publication of federal laws and some regional laws.

The position of English as a medium of instruction in Ethiopia remains as controversial as ever. In fact, similar debates on the appropriateness of the official use of the English language in former British colonies in Africa is going on. Alexander argues that in the African countries, despite all the efforts in making the European languages available to their citizens, they have been resounding failures. In countries such as Zambia there are now fewer people able to communicate effectively in English than before that country's independence despite an English-only policy in schools.[88] Consequently, English has succeeded neither as a language to facilitate national unity nor as a language of empowerment for the public at large. It empowers only a shrinking minority. This squarely applies to the situation of English in Ethiopian schooling. There is a unanimous view that the overall English proficiency in all public schools in Ethiopia is at a disastrous stage.

The National Education Roadmap designed by the Ministry of Education based on the study by experts has made some suggestions about language in education. Accordingly, it is recommended that mother tongue, as a medium of instruction has to be offered from grade 1; the teaching of English as a subject should start at grade 1 with a focus on developing the speaking and listening skills of the pupils until grade 3. The study also recommended that Amharic, the working language of the federal government, should be offered as a subject of study from grade 1.

The debate of whether English should continue to be the medium of instruction at secondary and tertiary levels in Ethiopia is not worth having at the moment because English is going to continue as such for an unknown time period.[89] As earlier noted, the 2020 langauge policy speaks about a scheduled phasing out of English as a medium of instruction and its replacement with

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88 Alexander, *supra* note 25, at 86.

89 It is widely accepted that a full-fledged economic and social development of a country is not possible if the great majority of the people are compelled to communicate in a second or third language; *id.*, at 87. All the economically developed nations of the world use their own language for education. Therefore, it seems to me that Ethiopia has to also eventually use its national languages for higher education and scientific research. But preparations for that have to be made in terms of corpus planning of the languages to make them suitable for these purposes and that transition be made smoothly and phase by phase.

national languages without specifying any time frame. But, what is unmistakable at present is that unless the acquisition planning for the English language is given serious attention to raise the level of proficiency in it, the whole educational system is being pushed to the brink of collapse. There needs to be a paradigm shift in the teaching of the English language at the primary level, which is the most defining level for acquiring language proficiency.

The National Education Roadmap (noted earlier) has suggested among others that Ethiopia revisit its language education approach with a view to strengthening it at its teacher education colleges. The Roadmap also advises that Ethiopia has to introduce proficiency strategy for language education to be implemented through development of resource materials, promotion of communication skills, introduction of language labs and other inputs. Particular attention needs also to be given to the training of language education teachers. These suggestions of the Roadmap are worthy of implementation. By investing in the education of primary level teachers and ensuring their high proficiency, it is possible to turn around the current regrettable level of English language proficiency at schools and universities in Ethiopia. This should be one of the priorities of language policy in education for the Ethiopian authorities as immediately as possible. It is consoling to see that the 2020 language policy avers that attention will be given to the teaching of the English language by designing effective methodology.

Since 1953 when the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization first clearly advocated for children's education in their mother tongue at least during the early years of school, there is no disagreement on the propriety of this idea. Furthermore, many scientific and professional studies suggest that young learners learn more effectively if taught in their mother tongue.[90] But, its practical implementation has not been so easy. In

[90] See, for example, Demelash Zenebe Woldu, *The Issue of Mother Tongue Education in Ethiopia* 16(2) IER FLAMBEAU 1 (2009); Gamuchirai Tsitsi Ndamba et al., *Competing Purposes: Mother Tongue Education Benefits Versus Economic Interests in Rural Zimbabwe*, 8(1) INTERNATIONAL INDIGENOUS POLICY JOURNAL 1 (2017); Angelina N Kioko et al., *Mother tongue and education in Africa: Publicising the reality*, 4 MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION 18 (2014).

Ethiopia too, since the now defunct EPRDF came to power in 1991, it has resoundingly endorsed this idea but due to several challenges including that most of the languages of the speech communities do not have literary forms, it has not been fully realized. But a noteworthy additional problem is that there does not seem to be any public body or institution (at federal or regional level) that is charged with the responsibility to resolve the issue of graphization of the languages that do not have writing systems and oversee the preparation of human and material resources required for the purpose. It is also necessary to call to our attention that no concerted efforts are visible in regards to languages that are inching towards extinction with a view to save them.

An equally important issue of language in education policy is that of providing access to the knowledge of dominant languages necessary for higher education and the world of work. In countries where there are some dominant languages and several minority languages, it is pivotal that mother tongue medium of instruction (MoI) is paired with high quality instruction in the languages widely used in the country or the region: as working languages of governments and MoI of higher education and maybe secondary education as well. Lack of access to such instruction is an important source of economic, social, and political inequality in many settings. Thus, in such settings, the right to high quality instruction in second and third (and even more) languages should be treated as the right of the pupils. Ethiopia's education policy seems to have paid attention to this when referring to English to be taught from grade 1; Amharic to be studied as a subject at primary level and pupils should learn one additional local language. But, this has not been well planned and articulated and the implementation of the policy so far has been haphazard. The 2020 langauge policy has also restated these important matters. But it has to be followed through with actions.

In this connection, it is necessary to underscore the constitutional mandate of the federal government vis-à-vis the states in regards to language policy in education. As noted earlier in this article, Article 5 of the Constitution empowers the states to determine by law their respective working languages. The Constitution does not contain any clear statement on the power of the

states pertaining to language in education. On the other hand, Article 51 stipulates in respect to the federal government's power that, "It shall establish and implement national standards and basic policy criteria for public health, education, science and technology as well as for the protection and preservation of cultural and historical legacies". Thus, this means that establishment and implementation of national standards and policy matters on education and training including language policy in education falls within the federal competence. Although this seems to be the understanding with which the 1994 Education and Training Policy of Ethiopia was enacted with country-wide application, there is also a widely shared understanding that primary education is within the constitutional competence of the states. This understanding, in my view is engendered by the provisions of Article 5(3) of the Constitution and one may argue that it is a valid position.

However, my contention is to the contrary. Article 51 of the Constitution specifically bestows the power to establish and implement standards and policies on education to the federal government. This includes policies and standards, including language policy in education, for primary education. If this reading of the Constitution is correct, the federal government has to therefore step up its efforts towards the standardization of acquisition of both mother tongue primary education and high quality instruction in English and other languages of the country, which should be determined based on practical considerations and preferences of the speech communities. This is particularly important in the selection of additional local languages that should be acquired at school.[91] In this regard, the 2020 language policy seems to also endorse the interpretation of the Constitution I proffer and cites, as its authority for adopting the Policy at federal level, article 51(2) of the Ethiopian Constitution, amomg others. But, the Policy does not go to the extent one

[91] Researches indicate that there was a limited discussion and debate on the 1994 Language and Training Policy of Ethiopia before it was enacted, and that after its implementations there were both negative and positive reactions to it. See, e.g., G. Cohen, *Identity and Opportunity: The Implications of Using Local Languages in the Primary Education of SNNPR, Ethiopia* (PhD thesis, University of London, SOAS, 2000).

would expect it in providing detailed policy guidance on the matters I alluded to earlier in this article.

Turning to my second consideration in crafting a language policy in Ethiopia, i.e., the nexus between language and group identity, the first obvious thing is that Ethiopia's current constitutional-political dispensation has paid a great deal of attention to group language rights. As noted earlier in this article, the Constitution uses language as one of the main criteria for state boundary delineation (which remains a bone of contention of course) and enshrines bold linguistic rights of NNPs. It has allowed states to adopt their own working languages. Mother tongue primary education has been endorsed in principle. It is clearly enunciated in the 2020 langauge policy that one of the main objectives of the langauge policy is to protect the language rights recognized by the Constitution.[92]

Thus, one can see that the intimate relationship between language and ethnic identity[93] is in principle accepted and cherished in Ethiopia. There is robust understanding that an attempt to undermine a language of an ethnic community in a language policy creates a deep discord among the society. A desire to create a coherent society is possible only through a language policy that treats the languages of its society fairly and equitably. Indeed, it has been shown that the development of a common national identity depends greatly on the ability of citizens to speak to each other through the creation of a 'community of communication'.[94] As Wierzbicka rightly observes, "languages are the best mirror of human mind and cultures, and it is through the vocabulary of human languages that we can discover and identify the culture specific conceptual organizations characteristic of different people of the world." He advises that there should not be an unrealistic expectation of assimilation but instead there should be active measures taken towards

[92] *Ethiopian Language Policy, supra* note 77, 8-12.

[93] Orman, *supra* note 2, at 39.

[94] See S. Wright, *Community and communication: The role of language in nation-state building and European integration*, MULTILINGUAL MATTERS (2000).

establishing integration, with the incorporation of the different ethnic groups as equals into the larger society.[95]

Creating a community of communication and thereby a common national identity is possible by consciously and deliberately working on increasing the repertoire of languages of members of the various cultural-linguistic communities. As Das Gupta notes, language, as the most immediate and salient expression of culture, transcends the ethnic and religious differences, and establishes the bonds across ethnic lines that will provide a means for a sense of national identity. This, he says, is because it is language that enables a person to be culturally ethnically rooted and yet reach out communicatively to a national level—it provides the bridge between the "segmental attachment" and the "civil ties of the nation".[96] Mastery of a repertoire of languages is a human capital benefit for the citizen, viewed as assets.[97]

Thus, from the point of view of both language rights and the recognition of language as a marker of ethnic identity, it is compelling to believe that Ethiopia needs to step up and craft a language policy. A policy, that expands on the constitutional gains and corrects the existing not well thought through dispensations and in the end provide not only that which endorses multilingualism at national and sub-national levels but also takes concrete planning steps to implement the policy. The best instrument for this as earlier noted is the language in education policy to enable pupils to acquire high quality proficiency not only in their mother tongue but in as many Ethiopian languages as possible and in the English language as well. As repeatedly referenced, the 2020 langauge policy of Ethiopia is in the right direction on this but some important details that it lacks is a matter of concern.

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95 M WIERZBICKA, SEMANTICS, CULTURE AND COGNITION 22 (Oxford University Press, 1992).

96 J. Das Gupta, *Language diversity and national development* in LANGUAGE PROBLEMS OF DEVELOPING NATIONS 19 (J. A. Fishman, C. A. Ferguson, & J. Das Gupta (eds.), John Willey and Sons, 1968).

97 Grin 1999, cited in Gill, *supra* note 13, at 21.

Conclusion and Suggestions

With the backdrop of theoretical and comparative literature on language policy and planning, this article has attempted to analyze the past language policy and practices of Ethiopia and those currently in operation. It has shown that Emperor Haile Selassie's regime worked actively to build the national identity of the country with the Amharic language while the Derg, although it in principle dissociated itself from the policy of monolingualism, did very little in terms of transforming the country into a genuine multilingual landscape. The language policy of the EPRDF government (till April 2018) took more concrete steps towards enhancing the status of many Ethiopian languages. The new Prosperity Party which controls state power both at the federal and regional levels has not only continued the previous commitment but has shown the tendency to expand on the steps previously taken.

Under section 4 the article argued that in order to build a cohesive and well-integrated political community, Ethiopia has to revise and enhance its multilingual language policy. To this effect, it has to further revise its current position on the status of the major languages at federal, regional and sub-regional levels. It should undertake corpus planning for the languages equitably for all languages but particularly for the major ones. Concomitantly, there should be a paradigm shift in regards to language acquisition approach, especially at the primary education level so that the pupils acquire high level proficiency in both the local languages and in English. The need for the language communities to be versed in as many Ethiopian languages as possible cannot be overemphasized. The beauty and empowering capability of code switching by citizens wherever they go can easily be seen. But, over and above the benefits to the individuals, the trust and level of cultural understanding and synergy this generates serves as glue to the political community that is Ethiopia.

We should be able to say for Ethiopia what the Secretary General of the Federal Assembly of the Swiss Confederation, Mr. P. Schwab, said about Switzerland in 2014, that "plurilingualism is an integral part of Switzerland's

identity and is a key element of the national culture".[98] To refer to another momentous event in Canada, when the Canadian Official Languages Act was presented to the House of Commons for adoption in 1969, a Minister who expressed the view of the Canadian government said: "The measure is extremely important.... because it touches the very foundation of Canadian unity ... this bill is a gesture of faith in the future of Canada"[99]. It is my claim that a language policy in Ethiopia must be regarded with that sense of importance: as a policy direction that is essential for strengthening the foundation of Ethiopian unity.

Along the line of the arguments I made in this article, I suggest the following measures in order to help the endeavor towards making Ethiopia an ever more cohesive and well-integrated multilingual political society.

1. In Ethiopia the current situation is devoid of multilingualism in some sense although it does adopt a policy of multilingualism in another sense. As discussed, a typical multilingual policy is sourced from Article 5 of the Constitution, which declares the equality of all Ethiopian languages and grants the states the power to choose their own working languages. But Article 5 of the Constitution also decides that Amharic is the working language of the federal government thereby adopting a monolingual language policy for the public domain. The states have followed suit. This needs to change. The overall language policy and the language in education policy of Ethiopia should be revised in order to elevate the major languages of the country to the status of working languages at federal, regional and sub-regional levels. In this regard, four additional langauges are designated as working langauges in addition to Amharic by the 2020 language policy of Ethiopia. This is a great step. But, it is my contention that this number be raised to include other major national langauges of Ethiopia, and that multilingualism is also required at state and sub-state levels. And the decision on the status of the languages must be dovetailed with language

[98] Quoted in Lundberg, *supra* note 24, at 52.

[99] Donald G. Cartwright and Colin H. Williams, *Bilingual Districts as an Instrument in Canadian Language Policy*, 7(4) TRANSACTIONS OF THE INSTITUTE OF BRITISH GEOGRAPHERS 474, 475 (1982).

acquisition planning that ensures citizens acquire high-level proficiency in the mother tongue and as many Ethiopian languages as possible and as preferred. Along with this, members of the society must also be widely educated about the advantages of being multi-lingual, both for strengthening national cohesion and for personal economic and social benefits.

2. Related to the above point is the need to ensure access to the federal, state and sub-state working languages of the linguistic communities whose languages are not the medium of government business and education. It is rightly claimed by linguistic rights advocates that minorities need to be ensured access to their mother tongue and the official/working languages of the various levels of their governments. Therefore, language policy in Ethiopia needs to be informed by these concerns and work towards ensuring that minority linguistic communities are not left behind.

3. As noted ealier in this article, the 2020 language policy endorses the establishment of three bodies: a langauge affairs council, a national language institution, and a national translation services institution. These are welcome ideas. However, in my view, a statutory body that goes by the name "Ethiopian languages commission" may be better suited than a "council". A council with stakeholders membership may not be an effective body. But a government body in the traditional agency format as a commission may be more effective. The Commission should be established with mandates to oversee the development and implementation of language policy and planning of the country, and work with the Ministry of Education and other relevant organs to design best practices for the acquisition of languages at schools. It can also serve as a body to oversee the equitable treatment of the languages of the country.

4. As noted in this article, the study conducted as an input to the Ministry of Education's National Education Roadmap has confirmed that the lack of competence of English langauge teachers is actually a very crucial problem for the education of students in English. There should be a national plan to work on bringing to acceptable levels the English language proficiency of Ethiopian English teachers, particularly those at the primary education

level. One way of doing this can be to prepare in collaboration with donors to bring English language teachers and experts from the UK, US, Australia, New Zealand, and/or Canada to give intensive training to a robust number of Ethiopian English language teachers who will then cascade the training to other teachers.

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