Leipzig, 28.08.2012

Dear Prof. Abdelraham Mugaddam

Your paper titled

„Language Policy in the Sudan: From Independence to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement“

has been accepted for the following publication:

Africa: Challenges of Multilingualism
Afrika: Herausforderungen der Mehrsprachigkeit
Les défis du plurilinguisme en Afrique
Ca. 234 pp. (Ed. by Claus Altmayer & H. Ekkehard Wolff)

Kind regards,

Eva Hamann
Language policy in the Sudan: From independence to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA)

Abdelrahim Hamid Mugaddam

Abstract

Sudan is home to approximately 120 different languages. The areas of greatest linguistic diversity are: the South, the Nuba Mountains and the Blue Nile. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) recognized the right of the people in the areas to continue speaking their indigenous languages and established a framework for the recording and documentation of Sudan’s endangered languages. It was hoped that these provisions for the protection of endangered languages would serve as a tangible means of demonstrating to Sudan’s marginalized communities that CPA could result in a more equitable division of political and economic power. However, the provisions for the protection of languages have not been implemented, with the NCP (National Congress Party) and SPLM (Sudan People Liberation Movement) instead focusing on power and wealth sharing arrangements. This paper argues that the recent marginalization of minority languages in Sudan is indicative of wider historical trends within Sudanese society, where some communities have abandoned their indigenous languages in favour of Arabic and English - the languages of the elite. This paper traces the evolution of language policy in Sudan from the colonial period to the present day.

Introduction

Sudan, in terms of linguistic diversity, is one of the most heterogeneous countries in Africa, with approximately 120 living languages and eight extinct ones (James 2008).\(^1\) In northern Sudan, although the majority are Arabic-speaking Muslims, there are many groups who still adhere to non-Arab cultures and languages – particularly in Darfur and Kordofan. South Sudan, with an estimated population of eight million, is even more diverse, with approximately 100 different languages. Nevertheless, in spite of this linguistic diversity, Arabic is the most widely spoken language (Sharkey 2008). In the North, Arabic is the official language and even in the South, where the official language is English, ‘Southern Arabic’ has a long history as an informal lingua franca – particularly in towns such as Juba and Wau (James 2008: 73). There are multiple varieties of Arabic spoken within Sudan including: (a) Standard Arabic, which is used as a language of government transactions, education, and broadcasting; (b) Khartoum Arabic (i.e., Sudanese colloquial Arabic), a variety spoken by around

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\(^1\) Following the secession of the South Sudan in 2011, the former Sudan is now two countries. The present article takes a viewpoint which reflects the situation prior and leading to, the secession.
15,000,000 persons (Ethnologue 2009), and other distinct varieties in upper Northern Sudan, Darfur and Kordofan.

Fig. 1: Geographical Location of Former Sudan (GeographyIQ 2010)²

Historically, the term Sudan has never enjoyed a stable referent. Since 1820 what has constituted the Sudan has varied considerably between Muslim traders, the Egyptians, the French, and the British, with each group using the term ‘Sudan’ to refer to different geographical areas on the current map of Africa (Hasan 1967; Deng 1995; Sharkey 2003). Originally the adjective Sudanese (sudani in Arabic) is derived from the term Bilad al-Sudani meaning ‘Lands of the Blacks’ which “Arab geographers […] used to describe the region of Africa stretching from what is now Senegal to Ethiopia” (Hasan 1967: 32). This region’s long-association with the slave trade bestowed ‘servile connotations’ on the term Sudanese – as Sharkey (2008: 29) explains: “being Sudanese meant being black […] and being black, in turn, meant having low social status”. For the Egyptians and the British, Sudan referred to the geographical area which is now northern Sudan whereas the southern Sudan was viewed as part of Uganda. For the

French, Sudan referred to French West Africa which consisted of present-day Senegal and Mali.

As shown in Figure 1, Sudan shares its borders with nine other African countries: Egypt, Libya, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic, Kenya, Uganda, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. The different languages found in these different countries are also found in the Sudan suggesting that Sudan, like most other African countries, is a complex multilingual country. Sudan is rich with its ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity, which is part of the total heritage, to be welcomed as contributing, each in its particular way, to the pattern of national life. Similarly Mazrui (1979) notes that the fascination about Sudan is that it signifies a borderline case between English speaking Africa and Arabics speaking Africa, a rarer phenomenon than the Franco-Arabic duality evident in Arabic speaking North Africa.

**Sociolinguistic Situation**

Although variation in language is a default socio-linguistic reality, some Arab linguists in the Sudan argue that Sudanese Arabic is the purest and the closest variety to Classical Arabic. As mentioned above, the cultural factor has played a very important role in shaping the social and political identity of present-day Sudan. The Arabic language has played an important role in shaping Sudan's national identity as it was the medium of communication between the early Arab immigrants and Sudan's indigenous people. This interaction is clearly shown in the demographic distribution of Arabs in different parts of the country - especially Northern Sudan and the Jazeera region, where large numbers of Arab immigrants settled owing to their preferences as farmers or herdsmen.

Despite the spread of Arabic, local languages remained dominant among groups where contact with speakers outside the group membership is minimal. That is, non-Arab tribes, such as the Nubians, Beja, Mahas, Zaghawa and Fur in the Nuba Mountains, eastern Sudan, northern and western Sudan, respectively, use their languages in all aspects of communication. In recent decades the situation has become more complicated as young generations have shifted from their native languages to Arabic, or have created increasing bilingualism involving Arabic and local languages. The primary reason for this shift or turn towards bilingualism, is that Arabic has a higher social and economic status compared to local languages. Also, it is the only lingua franca to be used among speakers from different language groups, and its domain of use widens consistently even towards replacing local languages in their traditional domains. So when speakers of a local language emigrate from their homeland and settle in an urban area,
they will often have no choice but to adopt Arabic as a second language and gradually abandon their first language. Such cases of language shift have been reported in a number of case studies (Miller/ Abu Manga 1992; Mugaddam 2006a; Mugaddam 2006b).

Lastly, a monolingual situation of Arabic only is evident in areas where the predominance of Arabic language is related primarily to the fact that Arab tribes in particular, and Arabic speaking people in general, reside permanently in the areas concerned. A closer look at the linguistic map of Sudan indicates that Arabic is spoken as a mother tongue in the area extending from north Atbara along the River Nile up to the southern borders of the Gezira as well as in vast areas in northern Kordofan and Darfur. Bearing in mind that the specified areas represent attractive economic and cultural centers for people from different parts of Sudan belonging to different ethnicities and language groups, it is plausible to assume that large numbers of people are attracted to these areas as permanent residents for economic reasons. Such groups become minority language groups in the new environment and lack the necessary political and economic power to resist assimilation by the dominant group, and therefore tend to shift towards Arabic. Whatever languages these ethnic groups spoke, these will be no longer used. In individual cases this may lead to language death. One such language group is Berti who totally assimilated to Arabic; the language is now considered to be extinct.

Language Planning During the Colonial Period

It is often argued that language has contributed to the creation of two conflicting identities in the Sudan, Africans in the South and the Nuba Mountains and Arabs/Arabicised groups in the North. According to Abdelhay (2008: 67) the colonial authorities used language as an effective tool in the construction of the two identities:

Employing their European conceptual apparatuses, the British colonial rule invented ‘indigenous languages’ out of the existing linguistic resources, created artificial tribal boundaries, established ‘imperial families’ in the north, and constructed different racial hierarchical classifications of the populations.

The process of the colonial manipulation of the linguistic differences in Sudan presented Arabic and Islam as congruent markers of northern Sudan. English, indigenous languages, and Christianity, on the other hand, were designated as signs of southern Sudan’s identity. Postcolonial politicians have strategically reinforced the link between Arabic and Islam as a semiotic aspect of the Sudanese national identity – such as the policy of Arabicisation of education from the time
of Abboud who abandoned the missionaries imposing Arabic as the medium of instruction in Southern schools to the present regime. If the imposition of an artificial linguistic division upon Sudan was a colonial product, it follows that the correspondence between languages and ethnic identities can be viewed as ideologically motivated. This practice, which amounts to cultural and linguistic determinism, was at the very heart of the struggle over wealth and power in the Sudan.

The process of creating the two conflicting identities between the North and the South has been materialized following a number of procedures and strategies. First, a conference on languages known as Al-Raja'af Conference was held in 1928 to achieve specific objectives summarized in the following points:

- To look into the possibility of developing a group of languages to be used in education, i.e. which of these languages should be selected for the various areas;
- To discuss the adoption of a unified system of orthography for indigenous languages in the South;

The conference came up with a number of recommendations among which was the selection of six languages for use in education (Dinka, Bari, Nuer, Lotuko, Shilluk, Zande). The conference also recommended the adoption of the Latin script for writing the chosen languages. The second procedure was to create what is known as 'the no-man's land' which was meant to prevent the penetration of Arabic language and culture into the South and the Nuba Mountains. Thirdly, English was considered as an alternative to Arabic but not to local languages.

**The Post-Colonial Period**

When Sudan gained its independence in 1956, the problem of language had occupied a wide area of discussion among politicians and educational authorities. The debates focused on the issue of the national language and the Arabisation of the language of education all over the country. Some scholars believe that in this period local languages and cultures were completely ignored and that some students and pupils were following different syllabi from those used in the mainstream educational system, which negatively affected their academic performance (Abu Manga, cited in Jahalla 2001). This policy resulted in anti-Arabic
language and culture campaigns which evolved among vernacular speaking communities in the South.

This state of affairs continued until 1969 when the government convened a ‘National Conference for Education’ in which the Arabicisation of school education was recommended (Abu Bakr 1995).

Another important step towards adopting local languages was made on 9 June 1969, in accordance with the declaration on the regional autonomy of the South. The government assigned a prominent Sudanese linguist, Yousif Alkhalifa Abu Bakr, to consider the possibility of promoting one of the southern languages to function as the national language for the South (Abu Bakr 1975). According to Abu Bakr, it was very difficult to determine which language could assume the role of the national language in the South as it required clear answers to some difficult questions, such as which language to select and why? Would speakers of the other languages accept it? What would be the social, economic and educational consequences of such a decision? The problem became acute when speakers of almost all of the languages in the South demanded that their mother tongues were to be chosen as a national language.

The 1972 Addis Ababa agreement, i.e. the peace agreement which brought an end to the first civil war (ca. 1963-1972), and the 1973 constitution stipulated that Arabic was to be the official language of the country as a whole and English was to be the principal language of the South. However, Southern intellectuals continued to call for a national language for the South. Sir Anai Keludjiang, for example, argued that whereas the Addis Ababa agreement solved the political problem of the South, it did not offer a solution to the cultural problem: the question of Sudan’s national language (Mahmud 1984). Sir Anai Keludjiang argued that the southern people were purely African with their own African cultural heritage and therefore, should be represented by an African language. The most appropriate language in this regard, according to Keludjiang, was the Swahili language because it was a widely spoken African language in East and Central Africa, for instance, in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania.

It is obvious from Keludjiang’s attitude that Southern intellectuals regarded Arabic as a threat to their local languages and cultures. For them, Arabic is associated with a history of slave trade and civil war. Such views ignore the fact that Arabic is the lingua franca of the southern people and its speakers outnumber the speakers of any other language in the south, including English which is spoken only by the intellectuals (Mahmud 1984). This means that Arabic must be the main medium of communication between the educated people and the illiterate ones and automatically between the government officials and the public.

By the year 1974, Southern intellectuals became even more interested in the problem of the language of education. This time local languages were excluded
from the discussion and the debated issue was whether to adopt English or Arabic as the medium of instruction in southern schools. The call for English appeared during the Regional Popular Council’s proceedings when Joseph Oduho, a member of the council, proposed the reintroduction of English as a medium of instruction in all southern schools starting from the school year 1974/1975. This would help to implement one of the very important resolutions of the Addis Ababa agreement that “English is the principal language of the South” (Addis Ababa Agreement 1972). Since education is an official domain, adopting English as a medium of instruction was seen as a practical step towards implementing the agreement. In addition, a better level of education could be guaranteed through English, as it was the language of modern science and technology (Hurriez 1968).

Disputes over Sudan’s national language continued until 1989 when the ‘National Dialogue Conference for Peace’ was held in Khartoum. Although the conference’s primary objective was to find a peaceful solution to the ongoing conflict in the South, it did not ignore the language problem in the Sudan in general and Southern Sudan in particular. Significant consideration was given to local languages. This is evident in article 27 of the recommendations which can be summed up in the following points:

1. Whereas the Federal Government is responsible for the education policy, the cultural diversity of the country should strictly be considered when dealing with such questions.
2. The historical role of Arabic as a lingua franca for a considerable number of people and as an official language for the country as a whole should be observed.
3. The role of English as a language of a very special status should also be emphasized.
4. Local languages can be used as media of instruction in the first year of primary education (Abu Bakr 1995: 149-152).

The government approved the ordinance of the National Council for language planning at level of the Cabinet of Ministers and the National Assembly in 1997. The main objective of the council is to find effective ways to protect the linguistic diversity of the Sudan with a particular focus on the situation of local languages. This indicates that policy makers had begun to understand the problem of language and the crucial role that languages play in enriching the country’s linguistic and cultural diversity.
Arabicization of Education in Sudan

It is conventional that most governments in multilingual countries seek to achieve national integrity within their territories. Education can be used as an effective means of achieving national integration. This necessitates the existence of a well-formed educational policy capable of consolidating a country’s social and political structure. Unfortunately, there is no clear policy designed to organize the use of languages in different domains including education in Sudan. As noted above, Arabic and English have been used as media of instruction in schools and universities in the North and South respectively. Since independence in 1956, both languages were used as the media of instruction in schools in the South. This situation continued for a long time in spite of the fact that the Arabic language was recognized explicitly as the official language of the Sudan by Sudan’s permanent constitution of 1973 and the Addis Ababa agreement.

The first call for Arabicizing the language of education was made in 1955 when “the International Committee for Secondary Education” recommended the use of the Arabic language as a medium of instruction at secondary schools. The committee’s prime concern was to find a way in which the decline of students’ academic performance could be stopped. After long discussions the committee made a recommendation that secondary education should be Arabicized. The committees argued that students would learn much better when taught in their mother tongue. This recommendation did not find its way to implementation until 1965 when the first “Conference of Secondary Schools Teachers” was held in Khartoum. The conference recommended the use of Arabic as a medium of instruction at secondary schools starting from 1965. The participants went further threatening to boycott the “Sudan Secondary School Certificate Examinations” if Arabization was not implemented. Complying with this situation, the minister of education endorsed the conference recommendations as they were (Abu Bakr 1995: 146). Arabicization was implemented without considering the problems such teacher training and textbooks.

Shortly after the implementation of Arabicization at secondary schools, people started talking about adopting the same policy for university education as an essential step towards enhancing national identity. The first call in this regard was expressed in an essay written by Dr. Mansour Khalid who urged the Ministry of Education to think about Arabicizing university education and the importance of planning it as quickly as possible. The call was reinforced by the Vice Chancellor of the University of Khartoum, Prof. Al-Nazier Dafa Allah, in the opening sessions of “the English Teachers Conference” in 1966. The Vice Chancellor focused his speech on Arabicization and the expected problems upon
implementing it, such as lack of qualified lecturers who could use Arabic as a medium of instruction, and the availability of Arabic references and textbooks.

In 1970, a conference was organized by the University of Khartoum in which the problem of Arabization was discussed comprehensively. The conference concluded that there was no reason to continue using English as a language of instruction at the university. This recommendation to arabicize education, however, was not implemented. Nevertheless, the debates on Arabization continued and committees were formed to find out the best ways for adopting Arabic as the language of instruction at the university. Among these committees was the one formed by the Faculty of Arts in 1976. Besides studying the possibility of Arabicizing the language of instruction, the committee was asked to prepare a detailed report on the departments that could be Arabized, the effects of Arabization on students’ academic standard, and to review similar experiences attempted in the Arab world. In addition to these efforts, a ministerial decision was made in 1980 concerning the formation of a national committee for Arabization. But again, no tangible results came out regarding the actual Arabization of Higher Education. Things went on this way for a long time when, finally, a presidential decree was made in 1990 stating that Arabic language should be adopted as the language of instruction in all universities and higher institutions starting from the academic year 1990/1991. The decision was implemented as scheduled without any concern for Arabic references and textbooks. Later on, the “High Committee of Arabization” was formed with one major objective, namely to provide the Sudanese universities and high institutions with Arabic references and textbooks covering all fields of science, but what has been done until now falls short of what is actually needed. The few Arabic sources available in the different university libraries are not free of problems relating to terminology, quality translation, and updating.

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement

The implementation of Arabization increased hostile attitudes towards the Arabic language and culture among speakers of other Sudanese languages especially in Southern Sudan. Arabic is viewed as a colonial language and thus it is opposed by all means. Some southerners believe that Arabic is used as a tool for destroying their own languages and cultures. This attitude was reflected in the strong rejection of the Arabization policy applied at school level in the 1970s and at university level in the 1990s. The problem of language was also strongly present in the armed conflict in Southern Sudan and the Nuba Mountains which came to an end after signing the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in
2005. The CPA recognizes the role of indigenous languages as symbols of the ethnicity affiliations of their speakers.

The CPA (2005-January 2011) led to the secession of the Southern Sudan through a referendum held on 9 January 2011. The CPA is composed of six agreements and protocols. The Naivasha language policy provided a national linguistic framework, which granted regions in both Southern and Northern Sudan the right to construct their own local language policies at a non-tertiary level. Five main statements constitute the features of the new language policy at the national level:

1. All the indigenous languages are national languages which shall be respected, developed and promoted.
2. The Arabic language is the most widely spoken national language in the Sudan.
3. Arabic, as a major language at the national level, and English shall be the official working languages of the National Government business and languages of instruction for higher education.
4. In addition to Arabic and English, the legislature of any sub-national level of government may adopt any other national language(s) as additional official working language(s) at its level.
5. The use of either language at any level of government or education shall not be discriminated against (CPA 2005: 26-27).

Prior to the signing of the CPA, the Nuba people from the Nuba Mountains supported the SPLA/M (Sudan Peoples’ Liberation Army/Movement) during the civil war against successive central governments, including the incumbent government led by the NCP (National Congress Party). Since the Nuba peoples fought with the SPLA/M, the CPA assigned a separate protocol to address the causes of the conflict in the states of Southern Kordofan (including the Nuba Mountains) and Southern Blue Nile. In spite of the political alliance between a significant number of people in the Nuba Mountains and the SPLM (Sudan Peoples’ Liberation Movement), the Nuba Mountains were geographically identified as belonging to the North. The protocol emphasized the statement that

the conclusion of the comprehensive peace settlement that the Sudanese people are longing for requires solving the problems in Southern Kordofan/Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile States as a model for solving problems throughout the country (CPA 2005: 73).

It reaffirms that “citizenship shall be the basis for equal rights and duties for all Sudanese citizens regardless of their ethnicity or religion” (CPA 2005: 73). Most importantly, the protocol states that developing and protecting indigenous lan-
guages constitutes a significant part of the resolution of the conflict in the Southern/Nuba Mountains and the Blue Nile. Popular consultation has been adopted as a mechanism for ending the conflict in the Blue Nile and the Nuba Mountains (the two areas are known in the Sudan as the ‘New South’).

Vernacular Literacy Development

The CPA pronounces Arabic and English as the official languages as well as media of instruction at university level. This statement presupposes that other Sudanese languages are at least represented in the educational system. This representation is indicated by the statement number four, which gives ethnic groups the right to use their languages in whatever domains they choose. Again, nothing practical has been stated showing how this right could be practiced.

A vernacular literacy project was attempted by a number of Language Committees in the Nuba Mountains including Moro, Dilling, and Tima. The Tima are one of the social groups in the Nuba Mountains in western central Sudan. The Tima Language Committee has shown a strong motivation to use their language as a medium of instruction in their basic schools. This position is strongly supported by the Tima speech community as an effective strategy for maintaining the language as a symbol of their identity. The Language Committee is primarily concerned with developing a writing system for the Tima language. In other words, it is focused on vernacular literacy which deals with the development of a written version of a language that acquires its social value in specific interactional domains of everyday life.

The Tima Language Committee has produced two books in the Tima language using the Roman script. Membership of the committee involves people who are residents in Khartoum but who still maintain strong social ties with the Nuba Mountains. Researchers at the international scale are also involved in the development of linguistic and educational curriculum in Tima.

Conclusion

Present-day Sudan and South Sudan are among the most linguistically diverse countries in Africa, but the Arabic language continues to spread as a lingua franca – particularly in Darfur, among Southern migrants in Khartoum, in towns in the South, and along the North-South border. The ongoing spread of the Arabic language is indicative of wider historical trends within Sudan. The influx of Arab nomads in the 14th century, the legacy of the slave trade, and the consolidation of Arabic in the North under British colonial rule, i.e. the centre of political
and economic power in Sudan, all ensured that Arabic became both the language of the elite and a lingua franca. In post-colonial Sudan successive Sudanese governments, viewing the spread of Arabic as an inevitable historical process and a means of achieving national integration, have pursued a policy of Arabization predominantly through education. However, the pursuit of this policy in the context of the civil war has only served to alienate Sudan’s non-Arabic speaking communities who have perceived the policy as an attempt to impose Khartoum’s vision of Sudan upon the rest of the country. Consequently, while some communities have opted to abandon their indigenous languages in favour of Arabic, others, particularly Southern intellectuals, have resisted all attempts to impose Arabic upon Sudan’s marginalised peoples.

The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement aimed to resolve some of these differences. The CPA recognized the right of Sudan’s marginalized peoples to continue speaking their indigenous languages and established a framework for the recording and documentation of Sudan’s endangered languages. It was envisaged that these provisions would form part of a broader initiative to deliver a more equitable division of political and economic power in Sudan. However, the provisions for the protection of languages were not implemented, with the NCP and SPLM instead focusing on power and wealth sharing arrangements. With the South now having seceded from the North, it remains to be seen what will become of Sudan’s endangered languages. In the North, if the continuing spread of Arabic is not accompanied with a greater redistribution of economic and political power, this could provoke further resistance – particularly in Darfur and along the North-South border. In South Sudan, a region with multiple indigenous languages, Arabic remains the informal lingua franca – although English is the official language. Therefore, as the South seeks to build a cohesive national identity, the implementation of educational and language policies, which account for both the region’s diversity and the everyday practicalities of commerce and politics, will be of paramount importance.

References


