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Language and African Development

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Abstract

Any African Studies discourse that overlooks the role and place of language would be incomplete because language occupies an important position in any meaningful dialogue on African development and on Africas engagement with herself and with the wider international community. The premise of this article is that African Studies is about local and Diaspora African identities, and that language is pivotal to our understanding of conceptions of economics, politics, democracy and human rights in Africa. The paper, therefore, argues for the need to improve the visibility of Africas multilingual heritage in the teaching and research activities of African Studies institutions around the world.

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Language and African Development: Theoretical Reflections on the Place of Languages in African Studies

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ABSTRACT

Any African Studies discourse that overlooks the role and place of language would be incomplete because language occupies an important position in any meaningful dialogue on African development and on Africa's engagement with herself and with the wider international community. The premise of this article is that African Studies is about local and Diaspora African identities, and that language is pivotal to our understanding of conceptions of economics, politics, democracy and human rights in Africa. The paper, therefore, argues for the need to improve the visibility of Africa's multilingual heritage in the teaching and research activities of African Studies institutions around the world.

Keywords: *African languages, African identities, language and democracy, language and human rights*

1. INTRODUCTION

As the sub-title of the article suggests, this is a position paper that reflects on and discusses conceptual issues around language and African development. The ensuing argument is informed by well known historical and demographic facts about the language ecology of Africa. With approximately 2500 languages (or 30 per cent of the world's living languages), Africa is one of the most linguistically diverse continents (Adegbija, 1994; Grimes, 2000; Batibo, 2005). However, Africa's language resources and their place in African development are unrecognized and little documented or researched in the context of African Studies. Language study currently exists on the periphery of mainstream African Studies teaching and research activities. A web search of the research focus of African Studies institutions world wide shows the discipline of linguistics (including applied language studies and sociolinguistics) is invisible in discourses on African development. Most of the existing African Studies Programs are mainly underpinned by approaches drawn from such disciplines as history, economics, sociology and anthropology.

Two diametrically opposed perspectives have emerged in relation to the presence of many languages in Africa. The first perspective is one that views the existence of many languages in negative light, associating them with all sorts of

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problems including ethnic conflicts, political tensions, poverty and underdevelopment. For this school of thought "the multiplicity of African languages is often seen as a bane of African unity, whether at the national, regional or continental level" (Zeleza, 2006: 20). Multilingualism is thus seen as a liability and a burden, particularly when considered in the context of the amount of resources needed to promote the use of multiple languages in the domains of education, media, law and administration, business and commerce and international communication.

The presence of many languages is also equated with economic backwardness while the existence of one language for the whole nation is associated with economic prosperity and political stability. Suffice to note that it is very hard to appreciate the rationality of an argument against multilingualism in the name of economic prosperity because there is no direct connection between economic success and unilingualism. The argument on 'multilingualism equals economic backwardness' has also been attacked by other scholars, including Herman Batibo (2005: 58) who says that:

> One may dismiss this as a mere coincidence, and we wish to assert that plurilingualism in itself is not a cause of underdevelopment, but that it all depends on what people do with it. They may use it as a divisive means so that attention is focused on conflict rather than development. Or they may use plurilingualism to disadvantage minority language speakers so that their mental capabilities are inadequately developed and they are left behind in developmental efforts.

This leads us to the second perspective on language diversity, which is based on the arguments of post-modernist human rights discourses. According to this second school of thought the multiplicity of languages should be seen within the context of democracy and human rights whereby the right to language(s) of choice is considered an integral part of fundamental human rights. Rather than being a costly obstacle to development, nation building, national unity, political integration and social cohesion, multilingualism is considered to be an asset. The premise here is that every language in a multilingual society has the right to exist and to be given equal opportunity to develop legal and other technological limbs to flourish (Mazrui and Mazrui, 1998: 114)

For this second school of thought, the concept of language rights as human rights has two sides to it, namely the *right of language* and the *right to language*. The former is a collective right whose violation automatically affects entire speaking communities. This means language policies that deliberately seek to suppress some languages would be in violation of the *right of language*. The *right to language* is explained as being more of an individual's right to use one or more languages of choice. The concept of *right to language* refers to "the right to use the language one is most proficient in, as well as the right of access to the languages of empowerment and socio-economic advancement" (Mazrui and Mazrui, 1998: 115). Therefore, if, for political, economic or other reasons, a person is denied access to a language that is crucial to ensuring his/her upward

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social mobility, then that person's individual *right to language* will have been violated and this constitutes a form of marginalization.

Proponents of the human rights-inspired framework further state that "all the languages of Africa invoke ontological and epistemological arguments, duly buttressed with the rhetoric and rage of cultural nationalism, that language is the carrier of a people's culture, it embodies their system of ethics and aesthetics, and it is a medium for producing and consuming knowledge, a granary of their memories and imaginations" (Zeleza, 2006: 20). Therefore, unlike the first school of thought that discourages the use of and respect for multiple languages, the second view is inspired by the desire to recognize and accommodate all languages and language groups, regardless of size and socio-political status.

The subsequent sections of this paper flesh out the significance of language diversity and why the discipline of linguistics should be taken seriously in the teaching and research agenda of African Studies.

2. On Definitions of Africa and African Identities

Because the relationship between language and identity is a fundamental one (Smith, 1991; Barbour, 2000; Czarniawska, 2000; and Ndhlovu, 2009), it is worthwhile to have a brief look at popular definitions of Africa and Africanness. Africa and African identities are often defined on the basis of numerous taxonomies including religious, ecological, ethnic, biological, linguistic, geographical and historical terms. In a seminal work on **'The Inventions of African Identities and Languages: The Discursive and Developmental Implications'**, Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (2006) highlights some difficulties associated with explicating what an African identity is. Zeleza's point of departure is quoted here at length:

> Africa is exceedingly difficult to define, which makes many academic and popular discourses on African identities and languages quite problematic. The idea of "Africa" is a complex one with multiple genealogies and meanings, so that extrapolations of "African" culture, identity or nationality, in the singular or plural, any extrapolations of what makes "Africa" "African", are often quite slippery as these notions tend to swing unsteadily between the poles of essentialism and contingency. Describing and defining "Africa" and all tropes prefixed by its problematic commandments entails engaging discourses about "Africa", the paradigms and politics through which the idea of "Africa" has been constructed and consumed, and sometimes celebrated and condemned. I argue that Africa is as much a reality as it is a construct whose boundaries – geographical, historical, cultural and representational – have shifted according to the prevailing conceptions and configurations of global racial identities and power, and African nationalism, including Pan-Africanism. At the beginning of the 21st century, the maps and

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> meanings of "Africa" and "Africanness" are being reconfigured by both processes of contemporary globalization and the projects of African integration. (Zeleza, 2006: 14)

Zeleza's conceptual reasoning on the interrogation of Africa and African identities resonates with Marco Jacqemet's (2005) notion of transidiomatic identities, which "describes the communicative practices of transnational groups that interact using different languages and communicative codes simultaneously present in a range of channels, both local and distant" (Jacqemet, 2005: 5). The ideological premise of transidiomatic practices is a useful framework in the sense that it recognizes tolerant, accommodative and recombinant identities based on multipresence, multilingual, deterritorialized and de-centred socio-political relations (ibid, p.6). As opposed to popular definitions that underwrite essentialized linguistic identities emphasizing cultural insularity, the transidiomatic perspective is akin to Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) notion of constitutive hybridity.

The construction of stable national identities in most postcolonial African countries is often a problematic task because of the presence of multiple language varieties and ethnic groups. Consequently, quests for uniform national and cultural identities are often based on socio-politically powerful standard languages. This means language is undoubtedly an essential part in the making of Africa and African identities. In an article on the politics of linguistic homogenization in Ethiopia, Mekuria Bulcha (1997) shows how successive regimes in Ethiopia, spanning from the colonial through to the postcolonial periods, constructed an Ethiopian national identity based on Amharic linguistic and cultural norms. This enterprise of creating a homogenous Ethiopian national identity resulted in the suppression of other ethnic and linguistic identities such as the Afaan Oromo. As Bulcha (1997: 325) further observes,

> Perceived as salient markers of ethnic identities and as obstacles to the cultivation of the feeling of belonging and loyalty to the state by policy makers, minority languages become the objects of suppression and replacement by the languages of the dominant groups. However, the attempt to homogenize such states, has, in many cases, faced both overt and covert resistance from the targeted groups. Ethnic opposition to linguistic homogenization is triggered by objective as well as subjective existential concerns.

The appropriation of language to projects of identity formation is an international phenomenon that is well documented in the literature. Benedict Anderson (1991), Ayo Bambgbose (1991), Anthony D. Smith (1991), Stephen Barbour (2000), Lars Vikør (2000), Stephen May (2001) and John E. Joseph (2004) have given detailed accounts of how languages have come to be used as identity markers in the context of modern nation state formation.

In light of the foregoing discussion, it is essential that any serious African Studies program should incorporate teaching and research activities on African

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languages and literatures to better inform our understanding of Africa and African development.

3. AFRICAN LANGUAGES AND AFRICANS IN THE DIASPORA

African Studies is or should not only be about Africa in a geographical sense because the presence of global Africa is an indisputable reality. There are several living populations of African communities all over the world and language is one aspect of their identity that has endured geographical space from homeland Africa. Despite all the odds against them such as monolingual ideologies of language policies and the drive for a homogenous global culture, African languages continue to survive in Diasporan communities. In spite of the realities of global migration and cross-border movements of human populations, African linguistic identities never get lost. Unlike citizenship which can be traded with relative ease, African linguistic identities continue to be reformed and recreated by Africans in the Diaspora. In other words, African communities in the Diaspora constitute an integral part of how Africa continues to evolve and register its presence beyond the traditional confines of geographical boundaries.

The advent of advanced information communication technologies is another important aspect that ensures African languages continue to find their place beyond the geographical frontiers of continental Africa. As Alexander (2005: 15) has rightly pointed out:

> It is more than obvious that the availability of the Internet as a tool enables smaller linguistic communities to take their virtual places alongside all the peoples of the world and to preserve their languages as expressions of modernity. There is also no doubt that the world wide web is beginning to serve as a kind of linguistic archives for endangered and even extinct languages and that this capacity is of the utmost significance for the preservation of the cultural heritage of all of humanity.

With respect to African languages in the Diaspora, it is paramount for us to explore how the cyberspace can best be utilized in order to prepare these languages for wider institutional and functional statuses in the ‘new world’. With the aid of information communication technologies, the existing theories and methodologies of computational linguistics, lexicography and natural language processing can be easily applied to terminology development and standardization for bio-medical sciences, mathematics, environmental studies, natural sciences, agriculture, law, commerce and other specialist fields. In short, the movement of African languages throughout the world makes them amenable to processes of modernization through processes of term creation and the Internet becomes the perfect point of entry for the global dissemination of information about Africa in African languages.

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4. LANGUAGE(S) AND AFRICAN REGIONAL INTEGRATION AND INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Regional political integration and economic co-operation has recently become a big issue in Africa, which continues to gather momentum. This is evident from the establishment of continental institutions such as the African Parliament and the African Union as well as the strengthening of regional bodies including Southern African Development Community (SADC), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and Common Market for East and Southern Africa (COMESA). Effective co-operation at this level entails that language issues have to play a big role. We are talking about common markets and a common currency and if Africa is going to integrate politically and loosen boundaries, we will begin to get a blurring of boundaries and obviously the question of cross border languages will become an issue. Therefore, certain practical considerations of African economic, political and cultural co-operation show that a linguistics perspective on African Studies and African development is imperative. There has to be a clearly spelt out continent-wide policy that provides channels for effective intercultural communication among citizens of an integrated Africa. The foregoing argument is consistent with the pronouncements of the ***Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literatures*** **(2000)**. Following the deliberations of African scholars at a conference titled *Against all Odds: African Languages and Literatures* held in Asmara, Eritrea from 11–17 January 2000, the ***Asmara Declaration*** states that:

- African languages must take on the duty, the responsibility and the challenge of speaking for the continent.
- The vitality and equality of African languages must be recognized as a basis for the future empowerment of the African peoples.
- The diversity of African languages reflects the rich cultural heritage of Africa and must be used as an instrument of African unity.
- Dialogue among African people is essential: the instrument of translation must be used to advance communication among all people, including the disabled.
- Promoting research on African languages is vital for their development, while the advancement of African research and documentation will be best served by the use of African languages.
- The effective and rapid development of science and technology in Africa depends on the use of African languages and modern technology must be used for the development of African languages.
- Democracy is essential for the equal development of African languages and African languages are vital for the development of democracy based on equality and social justice.
- African languages are essential for the decolonization of African minds and for the African Renaissance.

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The relationship between African languages and African development should be seen as a dialectical one in which the language factor ceases being merely a medium of communication and becomes an active component that informs the whole process. Highlighting the salience of language (particularly the use of multiple languages) in promoting socio-economic and political development, Humphrey Tonkin (2003: 6) observes:

> The diversity of language is an asset: it helps build cohesion in small communities and sustains unique cultures, thereby bestowing distinctive identities on individuals and reducing alienation and homogenization. The rich variety of linguistic idioms carries with it an equally rich variety of cultural forms and ways of thought, and maintains for humankind a diversity of devices for coping with the uncertain challenges of human existence. And who knows what cultural and intellectual tools we will need in tomorrow's world? In this sense, linguistic diversity resembles biodiversity.

It is the submission of this study that when one looks at language, one would see hundreds, perhaps, thousands of years of experience; a people experiencing life on earth where they interacted among themselves, with outsiders and with the environment. These forms of interactive engagements among themselves and with nature allow people to develop an array of wisdoms, ways of coping with the environment and strategies of survival, all of which are preserved and transmitted through the medium of language. Therefore, when languages are marginalized and remain invisible in the development matrix, it is the accumulated wisdoms that die – wisdoms about politics, about philosophy, about ideology, about living on the planet earth and successfully doing so. Every ethnolinguistic polity is unique and has a different history from any other. How they interacted with the environment makes each African community a unique people with a unique language, a unique wisdom, a unique ideas and unique knowledge systems, which have the capacity to transform the socio-economic fortunes of the world for the better.

Stephen Wurm (2001: 13) has also reiterated the above arguments on the benefits of linguistic diversity:

> Each language reflects a unique world-view and culture complex, mirroring the manner in which a speech community has resolved its problems in dealing with the world, and has formulated its thinking, its system of philosophy and understanding of the world around it. In this, each language is the means of expression of the intangible cultural heritage of peoples, and it remains a reflection of this culture for some time even after the culture which underlies it decays and crumbles, often under the impact of an intrusive, powerful, usually metropolitan, different culture. However, with the death and disappearance of such a language, an irreplaceable unit in our knowledge and understanding of human thought and world-view is lost forever.

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The arguments summed up in the above quotation are consistent with Article 1 of UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, which cautions against linguistic homogenization on the grounds that "cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature, … and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations" (UNESCO, 2001, Article 1). If African Studies could project African languages, cultures and literatures as worthy of promotion and propagation both at the continental and global levels it would present such a unique opportunity for the cultivation of an Africa-centered development paradigm.

Among the key objectives of most African Studies programs is the desire to explore the competitiveness of Africa both as a market and a producer of commodities at a global level. The other important focus of mainstream African Studies research is on establishing the benefits of African regional and inter-regional trading blocs. These two objectives of African Studies are not achievable if issues to do with language of trade and intercultural communication are excluded. However, African languages are currently marginalized or totally ignored in the activities of national, regional, sub-regional and continental economic programmes such as South Africa's Reconstruction and Development Programme, the New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), the African Renaissance and the Native Club of South Africa. Apart from the usually vague rhetoric on the need to protect and promote the indigenous languages, cultures and traditions, there is no explicit political commitment to the use of African official languages. In the African Renaissance, former South African President Thabo Mbeki's brainchild, the language issue and the role of African mother tongues in education, in the economy and development in general, is inadequately represented (Wolff, 2003). The latest socio-economic and political think-tank, the Native Club of South Africa launched in May 2006 is equally bereft of any meaningful attempt to mainstream African languages in its discourses. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2007: 58) has summed up the broad aim of the Native Club in the following terms:

> The Native Club is a public initiative whose main objective is to mobilise and consolidate South African black intelligentsia into a vibrant social force able to shape national discourse and influence government policy direction, particularly the transformation agenda. The idea of the Native Club is aligned to the spirit of African nationalism and the continuation of the crusade to achieve decolonisation.

Although the main agenda of the Native Club is conceived as that of influencing and transforming policy agenda in the postcolonial context, the following questions still remain unanswered: What is the role of the nine African official languages in the Native Club intellectual discourse? What is the language of 'native clubbing'? If the Native Club of South Africa uses English language as its sole medium of communication does it not run into the risk of reinscribing

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the ideals of linguistic imperialism, thereby further marginalizing the African languages?

This brings us to the question on the place of English and other former colonial languages (such as Portuguese and French) in Africa. The role of these ex-colonial languages as languages of African political liberation and quests for economic emancipation under the banner of the 19th – 20th century pan-Africanist and nationalist movements is well documented in the relevant literature (see for example, Mazrui and Mazrui,1998; Schmied, 1991; Bamgbose, 1991 and Bailey, 1997). Far from being simplistically conceived as associated with domination and political control during the colonial period, the history of these languages in Africa shows they played an important role in political processes of integration at national, regional and interregional levels. English was the language of mobilization in the fight against colonial rule in Anglophone African countries. So was French and Portuguese in Francophone and Lusophone Africa respectively. Today, these languages still have a place in the postcolonial discourses on African economic liberation and political integration. They are used as vehicles of intercultural dialogue at different levels of economic, political and diplomatic relations among African nations.

These ex-colonial languages are generally considered to be uniform standard languages with no regional varieties. This view is evident from the current language policy of the African Union (AU) where Article 25 of the Constitutive Act lists English, French and Portuguese (in singular form) as some of the official languages of the AU. This erroneous assumption is out of sync with the fact that in Africa these languages have been indigenized making them products of different experiences of the diverse African cultures, which means there are distinct regional varieties that can be termed 'African Englishes', 'African Frenches' and 'African Portuguese' languages.

Therefore, given that the African Union is a meeting place of different African cultures, the position of different ex-colonial languages raises a number of questions with wider implications for language diversity and nation building. For instance, if English is the language of intercultural communication at the AU level, whose variety is the standard? Is the level of mutual intelligibility among the varieties of English in Africa so high to the extent that it eclipses regional diversities? If regional varieties are closely related, of what use then is 'standard English' at AU level? If not, what are the implications of language standardization for effective intercultural communication among Anglophone AU member states? What are the implied power imbalances underwritten by the use of 'standard' English in African regional and inter-regional blocs? These and related questions about the use of English at the AU level are also applicable to the interrogation of language diversity and political processes of integration among Francophone and Lusophone African countries. It is in this context that this position paper advocates the inclusion of theoretical and methodological insights of linguistics in the broad field of African Studies to help us understand some of the trajectories of African development from an interdisciplinary perspective.

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5. Languages, Human Rights and Constitutional Democracy in Africa

In a constitutional democracy, parliamentary proceedings must be carried out and recorded in an open way, which everybody can understand. This also applies to electoral processes in which a fully informed electorate means a literate electorate, addressed in the language(s) they understand. However, in most African countries, voter education campaigns and electoral processes are conducted mainly in former colonial and selected standardized African languages. This means political elites use standardized linguistic varieties to exclude ordinary men and women from having a fair go in choosing their preferred leadership. While the functions of legislatures, of which Parliament is part, include representation; deliberation/debating; legislation; authorizing expenditure; and making or scrutinizing governments (Marten, 2006: 201), the majority of African people have no meaningful input to these processes because of the language barrier. At the present moment, parliamentary democracy is underpinned by injustices that perpetuate the marginalization of speakers of languages other than those selected for specific official and/or national functions.

Since Parliaments are the most dominant political institutions in any democratic society, they have the capacity to provide a chance for marginalized groups to find their niche in national discourses. To this effect, I suggest language-based proportional Parliamentary representation as an alternative to the prevailing legislative arrangements. The distinct advantage of a proportional system of representation is that it is cognizant of the diversities and pluralities characterising multilingual societies. This proposal is consistent with what has been done elsewhere (for example, in Norway and Scotland). In an article focusing on the empowerment of linguistic minorities through proportional representation in legislative assemblies, Heike F. Marten (2006) gives a detailed analysis of how the Gaelic and Sàmi minority languages found their way into Scottish and Norwegian Parliaments, respectively. Emphasizing decentralization of Parliamentary power as a key component in ensuring the presence of minority issues in the policy making machinery, Marten (2006: 203) observes:

> Decentralization [or] the devolution of power in a state to elected local authorities is in practice, closely linked to democratic principles. This delegation of power to subordinate bodies implies that decision-making is distributed more widely and brought closer to the point of service or action. Applied to linguistic minorities, it is obvious how decentralization is for their benefit: the likelihood that minority members are part of a Parliament increases as the political entity and its population decreases in size.

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With specific reference to the Gaelic language, Marten further points out that it is much more likely that Gaelic speakers would be represented in the Scottish Parliament, which stands for about 5 million people as opposed to the Westminster Parliament in which over 50 million people are represented. It is notable, therefore, that such devolution of power serves as a channel for empowering marginalized language speakers in the sense that they are given an opportunity to participate in decision-making, especially in the formulation of legislation and the distribution of resources. The Scottish and Norwegian examples discussed by Marten show that the political entity of Parliament will have positive value only when the population feels genuinely represented through an unequivocal recognition of their linguistic identities in the policy making machinery (Marten, 2006). It is my considered submission that if African parliaments are to speak on behalf of various stakeholders; if parliaments are to display the structure of the entire population in terms of all of its relevant attributes, then the issue of linguistic minorities should be at the forefront.

For three reasons, the current notion of Parliamentary representation in Africa, which is often celebrated so much as a model for democracy, is not making the plight of the speakers of African minority languages any better. First, is the process of carving political constituencies, which results in big communities of minority language speakers being represented by only one Member of Parliament (MP). This form of under-representation constitutes a pervasive mode of marginalization. The second point is that the highest level of decision making, which includes the legislature and other arms of government, is loaded with a high degree of intolerance and insensitivity to the interests of people from minority communities. Such developments have instilled an admixture of fear, apathy and anxiety among minority groups who are not sure if their concerns could ever be seriously considered. Thirdly, there is the issue of decision making in Parliament. Usually, motions in Parliament are passed on the basis of a vote, whereby the majority rule always applies. Therefore, since MPs representing marginalized language communities often constitute a minority in terms of numbers, all motions concerning their constituencies always fail when brought to a vote. This means the principle of majority rule has to be scrutinized because in essence, it serves to marginalize, silence and ignore the concerns of those who are numerically fewer. In other words, majority rule implies that minorities do not have rights and their interests might as well be ignored because after all they are a minority. However, it is important to observe that issues are not always irrelevant or trivial just because they seek to advance the interests of those who are numerically fewer. Similarly, it does not necessarily mean that if a motion passes by virtue of attracting more votes, then it is the best because the majority might abuse their numerical supremacy in pursuit of selfish interests.

The foregoing critique of decision making procedures in Parliament does not conclude that the concept of a Parliament has to be done away with. Rather, the arguments proffered in the preceding paragraphs intimate the need for a rethink

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and a review of how business is done in Parliament so that legitimate issues such as the need to improve the social and economic well being of linguistic minorities may also be given their due weight by getting passed into law. This would be a form of empowerment with the potential of countervailing the current wave of language-based marginalization, which threatens to degenerate into total disenfranchisement of people from minority speech communities.

There is also the question of freedom of expression and freedom of association, which is one of the key issues in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Previous research on Africa has sought to explore the extent to which these individual and collective freedoms are upheld or recognized among different African nation states. In other words, the focus has been in evaluating whether different groups of African peoples are allowed to freely express themselves and to associate with one another for whatever reason. My argument is that when people are not prohibited from freely expressing their opinions and associating without any hindrance it does not automatically mean they have freedoms of association and speech. The issue is: in which or whose language are they associating? In which or whose language are they expressing themselves? Do all ethnolinguistic polities existing in specific African language ecologies have equal access to languages of association and wider communication? If not, what are the implications for the exercise of these freedoms by different groups of African citizens? These tensions and contradictions around issues of language choice and use in the African context constitute a compelling case for intensive action-based research on African languages within the ambit of African Studies.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has raised a number of conceptual issues seeking to carve a niche for systematic language study within the broad field of African Studies. The paper has argued that the study of Africa in the 21st century is a vast international enterprise, which requires a conceptual framework that far transcends traditional perceptions about being African and/or about Africa itself. The diversity of African identities reflected in the continent's multilingual dispensation and the existence of several living populations of African communities worldwide should be considered an asset and not a burden. Language offers a window of opportunity to our understanding of the dynamics of African development and African worldviews and philosophies of life. Rather than limiting them to the role of media in dialoguing about African politics, economics, democracy, and human rights, African languages should be seen as an integral part of these issues. Therefore, rather than being seen as a burden to the economy and a hindrance to political processes of social cohesion and nation building, Africa's vibrant multilingual heritage constitutes an untapped potential for the continent's development. In the final analysis, this paper argues that in order for

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us to have a more nuanced understanding of African issues, the discipline of linguistics (including sociolinguistics, applied linguistics) has to be seen as an equal partner with sister disciplines in the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences as well.

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