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Re-conceptualizing Language Policy in Multilingual Societies

For this year's Richter Program we are exploring language policy in multilingual societies with an emphasis on Nigeria, India, and UNESCO. Over the last three weeks we have been introduced to the general history of multilingualism in these countries. We have identified the current language policies in education and three major problems. We have also begun to look at sources for solutions that many experts in the area of study offer.

Contrary to popular belief, multilingualism has been present in India and Nigeria since before both countries came under European (mainly British) colonial control since the 16th century. Other waves of migration like the Arabs and Persians in India, had already extended their language hegemony over most of the country and contact between the different language groups of Nigeria also took place prior to the British Colonialism. However, multilingualism became highly problematic since these countries achieved independence. One of the reasons for this is that India and Nigeria like many colonial countries did not exist as a country prior to the British, but were a collection of small kingdoms and multiple ethnic groups. Therefore in India when the North tried to impose its Hindi hegemony on the South the people responded with riots and asked for English, a European language, rather than Hindi as their lingua franca. The problem partly stems from the fact that people believe that languages represent power and that there are languages for the powerful and languages for the weak. People tend to believe that the dominant language is better than their own, mainly because these languages are the ones used in education, politics and business. The language issue has also a historical political cause; at the time of independence people thought that a lingua franca was needed in order to create national unity. The Political elite of the day, most of whom were educated in Europe, saw in their mastery of the colonial language (English) as the key to maintaining power.

Colonialism also shaped multilingualism because the English language developed into a language of power. The social and economic benefits of speaking English during the time of colonization led to the emergence of a language hierarchy that glorified Western ideas. After independence the English speaking elite emerged as the social and political leaders of Nigeria and India. Despite the fact that Nigeria has over 500 different languages and India over 400,

English has been established as an official language in both nations. In India, English shares that official status with Hindi; and in Nigeria, with French. However, English is the de facto language of official and public functions. The issues of multilingualism have become visible as these nations attempt the draft policies that encourage national unity without compromising the unique cultural identities of the people.

The current policy in India is known as the Three Language Formula. This policy requires primary students to learn their regional language as well as Hindi and English. In Nigeria, the policy stipulates that students will learn in the mother tongue for the first three years of primary school, after which they will transition to learning in one of the three major Nigerian languages (Igbo, Hausa, or Yoruba) followed by a shift to an English medium. Both of these policies attempt to utilize the native languages but eventually intend to promote education in standardized languages across the country, such as English or Hindi. Neither policy adequately addresses the complex nature of multilingualism which has led to the emergence of several complex issues.

One of the problems that have surfaced in multilingual language policy is the relationship between the design of the policy and its intended beneficiaries. In both Nigeria and India the language policy is vague and ambiguous with loose guidelines and poor implementation. Our research has indicated that language is a politically explosive issue and as a result the government in these two nations has largely chosen to ignore it. The interesting paradox with this is that it appears to be the State's responsibility to solve the issue of multilingualism, but the government is the force that is identifying and shaping language as a problem. The most promising source of solution for combating the development of politically fragile and unenlightened language policy seems to be both the academic community and the people. As one of the Nigerian scholars working closely with this topic said "everybody's language is major to them." Many of the sources we explored indicated that grassroots level action is the best source for change, but community advocacy needs to be balanced by the well thought out and informed opinions of scholars.

Instrumental multilingualism has also arisen as a problem in both Nigerian and Indian education policy. The language policy revolves around the idea which says in order to sufficiently master a foreign language, a student must pass primary and secondary schooling in their native language. From then on, the students will study in the foreign tongue. This policy of

schooling creates a hierarchy of language. It promotes the idea that the indigenous language is only instrumental in learning a foreign language. As a result, there is decreasing confidence in the indigenous language and culture as it is perceived to be less advantageous in the global realm. This policy also creates the notion that higher education and intellectual conversation cannot take on the medium of the mother tongue. An assumption is made that the mother tongue does not have the capacity to speak on complex (scientific) theories or philosophies. Such negative assumptions cause the native languages as well as the cultures which carry them to be marginalized and overlooked. A solution to such a problem must come from the speakers themselves. Grassroots movements will provide a stage for the communities and a genuine voice for their demands.

Over the last three weeks we have been exposed to the expert opinions of several individuals working in the field of language and language policy. This shaped vibrant discussions during our meetings and productive investigations as individuals. The information presented here is intended to enlighten readers to a very complex and dynamic set of issues; however our work has only just scratched the surface. We would simply like to caution readers that the scope of this conversation is not limited to what we have presented in this paper. That being said, we would also like to mention that we intend to continue with this research and hope to present a far more developed exploration of this subject in the future.