

THE LINGUISTIC REVOLUTION

By PETER N. RABOROKO

“IN every form of society” writes Mr. M. Lewis, “because language is so closely related to the thoughts, feelings and actions of men, we cannot change the extent, nature, functions of language without setting in motion, further, perhaps unintended, changes.”

As a result of a number of advances of great significance to social growth there have been changes in the extent, nature and functions of language. The advances, which constitute historical landmarks are: the development of language itself, the advent of writing, the invention of printing and the instantaneous transmission of speech and writing. The cumulative effects of these changes have been so great that they have initiated a new era: the era of Linguistic Revolution. Humanity in general, and Africa in particular, is on the threshold of this Revolution.

The spread of literacy, stimulated by, and in turn stimulating, newspapers, cheap books and libraries, the telegraph and the cheap postage rate: all these things have meant that people read and write more. Today the written word, a commonplace commodity, spans the world with the speed of thought.

The invention of the telephone, the radio and other communication machines has led to a renaissance of the spoken word, with tremendous implications for human development.

The significance of these developments lies in the fact that they transform human conduct, which process must affect thought, feelings and impulses, as well as overt behaviour since language is fundamental and pervasive to man as an individual and in his social life.

It is against a background such as the one we have delineated that we shall examine the linguistic problems facing us.

Dr. Nhlapo and the Language Question

In the previous issue of “Liberation,” Dr. J. M. Nhlapo deals with the language question. Dr. Nhlapo’s approach to the question, his formulation and treatment of it show a failure on his part to grasp the essentials of the situation. This failure emanates from his inability to appreciate the fundamental fact that the language problem is, on both the national and international level, a part of the social question which is the central problem of our day, and as such cannot be dealt with in isolation.

In his approach to the problem Dr. Nhlapo quotes Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch as saying: "The want of some common 'world language' is, I assume, being felt by educated Europeans ever since Latin faded out as the common language."

We know that "educated Europeans", in their racial arrogance regard a common European language, like Latin, as a "common world language". As a spokesman of the imperialist nations of Europe Sir Arthur obviously conceives of the 'world' as the part inhabited by the imperialist nations of Europe. Thus in his basic conception of a 'world' language Dr. Nhlapo is clearly in the bonds of Herrenvolk philosophy, according to whom 'international' refers to relations between European or 'civilised' nations—a euphemism for 'exploiting and oppressing nations.'

In his approach Dr. Nhlapo further states that "Linguistic barriers do not only constitute an international but an intertribal problem." Here again the learned doctor fails to distinguish the significant from the trivial, the important from the unimportant, the main current of the stream from its eddies and backwashes. To state

the approach to the problem in tribalistic terms is to fail to grasp the import of the working of social forces in our midst. Tribalism as such is a decaying and disintegrating force, and even among the indigenous peoples of Africa it has in many parts ceased to be a force at all. The tribes and tribalism are still with us but they have ceased to be of social force. Thus whilst inter-tribal problems do exist they are not significant. To speak of linguistic barriers as constituting an "intertribal problem" is to mistake the apparent problem for the real one, to mistake the eddies and backwashes for the main current of the stream.

Thus, in these circumstances, we cannot but reject Dr. Nhlapo's approach to the problem, as well as his formulation of it. Since his treatment was based upon his formulation of the problem we need not here concern ourselves with it. Having dug out the foundation of his case, which was in any case embedded in the bed-rock of shifting sand, we need hardly bother about the walls, which were bound to crumble and tumble to Mother Earth. Our task is to seek a bed-rock of concrete in which to embed the foundations of our problem.

A National Language for Africa

The idea of a common language for all humanity is an ideal which cannot receive practical application for many years to come. An international language, to be functionally effective, must aim at making the various nations of the world, and not only their leaders, effective members of one world. However, within the foreseeable future, national languages will be used for satisfying the immediate needs of the members of various nations.

The urgent problem which we shall soon have to face practically is that of a common language for Africa.

We have already indicated that tribalism is a dying social force in Africa. African nationalism, an emergent and growing factor, is

the new, significant social force in Africa. The existence of a nationalism presupposes the existence of a nation. A nation is an historically evolved stable community of people, arising on the basis of a community of language, of a compact territory, of economic life, of social institutions and of behaviour patterns.

Before the advent of colonialism Africa, like India and Indonesia, was, despite the fact of its physical compactness, a mere geographical expression. From the seventeenth century the rising commercial capital of Europe set in motion forces that affected the internal economy and the social life of the indigenous people of Africa. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century the new industrial capital of Europe

once again set in motion forces that radically affected the internal economy as well as the social life of the African people. It is worth while noting that this new industrial capital was largely built

through the African people, who, during the rise of European commercial capital in the earlier period, had been forcibly removed from Africa and exploited in the slave trade and as a labour force.

Evolution of the Nation

Contrary to popular notions on the subject it is not essential that a nation should evolve out of a community of tribal or even racial affiliations. Both the British and the American nations which have evolved out of the combination and amalgamation of different tribes and different races, are a living negation of this popular fallacy. The African nation is thus founded on the broad basis of people deriving their origin from different tribes and different races. Thus the conception, 'birth and growth of a nation' presupposes the disintegration of tribes and races and their neutralization as a social force. The theory of "the blood" as the basis of such a nation is incompatible with the facts. Such a theory falsely implies that this nation is inherently capable of accommodating people of other national or racial origins.

Through factors of imperialism, which have stunted the national growth of this nation, the creation of common social institutions consonant with the being and social development of this nation has been

prevented. Already, however, there is in existence a movement historically destined to create the appropriate social institutions. Thus at a higher stage of development the existence of such institutions is bound to become a reality.

The question of a national language, the outward and visible sign of mature nationhood, is being resolved by forces mightier than ourselves. In this regard we already see in the social forces at work the "first faint stirring of future promise."

The community of behaviour patterns which we have alluded to as one of the ingredients of nationhood is in part the product of historical evolution and in part that of a conscious social philosophy. Through the medium of a common language the process of integrating the feelings, attitudes, thoughts, impulses and actions of a people will be functionally extended and accelerated.

It is in the light of this approach that Africa's linguistic problem must be viewed and examined.

How Other Languages Grew

Before examining in detail the question of a national language for Africa let us examine the experience of some other nations.

In Great Britain, the Midland dialect of England, mainly on account of its geographical situation, became the accepted standard English and consequently the national language of Great Britain. Here we must not forget that both Ireland and Wales, on account of their previous repression by the English, ultimately rejected English as their mother tongue.

In 1944 the British Government

decided to promote the use of Basic English as an international auxiliary language within the Commonwealth as well as beyond.

In India, where English had acquired a special function of intercommunication during the British occupation, Hindi has by statute been adopted as the national language and is expected within fifteen years to become the first language of India.

In the United States, English was the language of the pioneers. Within the U.S.A. there are large communities speaking, reading and

writing the languages of their original homes in Europe. As a result of this there is a great deal of functional illiteracy in English. In the words of Mr. M. Lewis "it is only in the presence of a common language functionally effective in thought, feeling and action that it is possible for the U.S.A. to be an integrated society in the face of military, economic, political and social needs."

At the Revolution, when the inception of the Soviet Union took place, an attempt was made to establish Russian as the one language for the constituent republics. When the various peoples showed the usual resistance, this policy was changed. Although Russian was rejected as a first language it was readily accepted as a second language and serves the purpose of a common means of intercommunication. All the Republics in which Russian was not already the vernacular decided in 1920 to make it a compulsory second language in their secondary schools.

A Single Common Language

In all the national polities we studied, the problem has been one of a single common language which every member of the society can speak, read and write.

The immediate approach to the solution of this problem has been the adoption of bilingualism which allows the adult the use of his own mother tongue for the satisfaction of his immediate needs and desires and of a second language for his effective membership of the larger society.

The problem of encouraging literacy has also led to the simplification of both the spoken and the written language. The movement

An Auxiliary Language

With the problem thus stated it becomes clear that such a language must first be regarded as an auxiliary language to serve the intercommunication needs of the people of Africa who at present speak

The serious linguistic problem facing the Soviet Union is how to achieve adult functional literacy in this one common language. When, in another generation or two, the vast majority of Soviet citizens begin to use Russian for their immediate needs it will automatically become their mother tongue.

There has for centuries been a common written language throughout China but no common spoken language. On this question S. S. Karlgren remarks "an edict issued in Peking can be read and understood everywhere in this vast country, but the Cantonese read it aloud in a way that sounds utter nonsense to the Pekingese." In an attempt to correct this defect the Chinese government officially adopted a common script in 1918 and embodied this in a common national dictionary. As the traditional written language of China was too scholarly, a kind of Basic Chinese has been evolved to encourage the growth of literacy.

in each case is towards the achievement of functional efficacy in speech and writing in the common language and the consequent facilitation of the integration of feelings, thoughts and actions.

Having seen how the problem of a common language presents itself to various national polities we may now ask in what form the problem presents itself to Africa. For Africa, the problem is the adoption of a common language that will make the people of Africa functionally effective members of the African Nation and that will at a later stage satisfy their immediate needs and desires.

languages that are unintelligible to one another. It means also that at a later stage when such a language is used by various people for the satisfaction of their immediate needs and desires it will have

become their Mother tongue. When such a language acquires functional efficacy in speech and literacy for the adult members of the African community it will then be firmly entrenched as a national language.

Which language should be chosen as an auxiliary? It might be tempting to advance the claims of one's own sectional or regional dialect. Or it might sound plausibly "objective" to advance the claims of French or English, Portuguese or even Afrikaans, as being widely understood in different parts. Such approaches, however, are basically invalid, because they ignore the real social forces at work in Africa. It would repay us better to study and analyse the social forces at work in our continent.

Unlike India, which enjoyed the doubtful honour of being under one oppressor power, Africa enjoys the unenviable honour of having five or six oppressor powers. Although the essential nature of the oppression is strikingly the same, the methods and approaches to the achievement of the task of oppression sometimes differ radically and even fundamentally.

Under the Portuguese policy of "assimilation" the educational curricula have no reference to the child's own mother-tongue. In this

way a happy few Africans are "assimilated" into the oppressor class and are, through neglect of their mother-tongue, successfully estranged from the mass of their people.

Under the South African policy of segregation the educational curriculum gives the African a smattering of his mother-tongue, and then burdens him with the task of learning two of his masters' languages on the explicit understanding that he becomes a more efficient tool.

Under the Belgian policy of "integration" the African child is now permitted the luxury of the vernacular for purposes of intercommunication with his "black brethren," and Swahili has been picked for the purpose. Those who became successfully "integrated" into the ruling caste may not only help in exploiting their black brethren but may also get into white hotels and travel in white trains without their less fortunate black mothers, black fathers or black sweethearts.

Under the British policy of "partnership" the problem of intertribal communication has imposed the necessity of using Swahili for Mother-tongue instruction in Zanzibar, Tanganyika, Kenya and Uganda.

The Spread of Swahili

The logic of circumstances has already forced different oppressor powers to foster the teaching of the same vernacular in different zones. The same factor has forced one oppressor, Great Britain, to foster the spread and teaching of this same vernacular.

The spread of Swahili is extending northwards and southwards beyond the confines of the areas mentioned. A number of leading Universities of the world, like the University of Leningrad, have provided a professorial chair for the teaching of Swahili. It has been classed by language scholars as the ninth important language of the world.

In Europe there are no Europeans.

There are only Frenchmen and Germans and Swedes. In Africa there are no Nigerians, Ugandans and South Africans—there are only Africans. This emerging fact is a pointer to the significant difference between the nationalism of Europe and the nationalism of Africa. It is this fact that will facilitate the spread of a "lingua franca" in Africa. On account of its geographical situation Swahili is the most significant language in Africa today.

We have in Swahili the nucleus of a common African language. It is this common language that is destined to provide a basis for a common language for Africa.

Swahili belongs to the Bantu lan-

guage family which includes more than two hundred languages and dialects spoken from the Cape to the Cameroons. Although it has, unlike our local Fanakalo, retained its essentially Africanic grammatical structure, its vocabulary has bor-

rowed much from Arabic, Galla, Somali, Portuguese and other languages. It was set down in writing before the coming of the white missionary and of the white trader. It has many dialects conditioned by local differences.

The Basis for a National Language

Writing on constructed or semi-constructed languages, F. Bodmer observes: "It is beyond human ingenuity to construct a live skylark but the aeroplane has advantages which no flying animal possesses. Apple trees and gooseberry bushes are also products of growth . . . but geneticists have produced new varieties of fruits by combining inherited merits of different strains or allied species. The work accomplished by pioneers of the science of language shows that it is possible to produce new language varieties by combining the inherent merits of different forms of natural speech."

The foregoing analysis does not imply any obligation to accept Swahili *holus-bolus*, without regard to its structural defects or to the inadequacy of its present vocabulary to the task of expressing the scien-

tific or philosophical concepts of our age. It may be that the solution to the problem lies in the synthesis between its present form and substance and new elements derived from an intelligent approach to the our society. Understood in this context, Swahili offers the necessary question of language-planning in basis for "Basic Africanic," an urgent necessity to enable the people of Africa to become effective members of one society.

The proposal for the use of "Basic Africanic" as the auxiliary language of every child in Africa, irrespective of his colour or creed, assumes that regional languages will be retained. The use of any language as an auxiliary presupposes the use of the child's own mother-tongue for the satisfaction of his own immediate needs.

An Aspect of Emancipation

It would be an illusion to discuss the language question in Africa in isolation from our major social and political problems. An all-African medium of communication is, from our viewpoint, reasonable, convenient and progressive. From the viewpoint of our various rulers, however, it may seem subversive and dangerous. They would prefer to perpetuate tribal linguistic and other divisions, and instruct us in European languages only to the extent that would enable us to receive our orders and report on their execution. Therefore the language question in Africa can only be seen properly as one aspect of our struggle for emancipation from white imperialism.

At the same time, that national

struggle itself will be the poorer if it overlooks the importance and the dynamic character of the language question. It is a primary requirement for us to grasp the leading principles of the language question. We must free our minds from the assumption that the imperialist powers, and the sheltered position of their languages, have some to stay permanently in Africa. We must study and discuss linguistic problems; popularise the idea of a common language; examine different points of view, the language problems of different countries, the idea of an international language.

The language question must be taken up as part of the national liberation movement.