

# Federal Language Practice, Linguistic Resistance, and Policy Options in Ethiopia

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## Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to examine language policy and linguistic resistance over the use of Amharic as a single federal language in Ethiopia. To this end, a qualitative approach was used to collect data through interviews with 28 key informants. Qualitative data were categorized into themes and analysed thematically. The study revealed that the government's language policy and practice have brought about inequalities at the federal level. The use of Amharic as a sole federal language has become the cause for linguistic, cultural and social inequalities. As a result, speakers of competent languages have resisted the use of Amharic as the sole working language of the federal government and pressed for the use of their languages at the federal level, sometimes through revolt that has involved looting and burning down properties. Therefore, it is concluded that tough resistance against the use of Amharic as a sole federal language is likely to force the government to make language policy changes. Two viable policy options that contribute to language policy change and mitigate linguistic resistances, social discrimination, and linguistic inequalities are identified: Neutral language use and the use of major indigenous languages.*

Keywords: Ethiopia, federal language practice, linguistic resistance, options

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## **1. Introduction**

Language policy refers to decisions, laws, rules, regulations, and guidelines about the status, use, domains, and territories of language and the rights of speakers under question, or a policy document that specifies these language behaviours (Shohamy, 2006). It deals with what government does officially by means of legislation, court decisions, executive action or other means to determine how languages are used in the public context, cultivate the language skills needed for national priorities, or establish the rights of individuals or groups to learn, use and maintain languages (Crawford, 2000). Language policy decisions are sensitive political matters because language has several crucial roles to play as groups realize its value for manipulation and gaining power. The decisions of a policy about the acceptable language for people who carry out the political, linguistic, and social affairs of a country are the guidelines for language use in the public domain (Heath, 1985). In other words, governments and dominant linguistic groups use language policy as a tool in the battle for political and economic control and representation. Governments propagate ideologies of cohesion and unity through a common language to disguise such practices. Likewise, the dominant linguistic group in the society use language to maintain the status of their language and construct their own individual or collective identities in the form of visibility, recognition, imposition and power, and in the form of manipulation, domination, and control over the state's employment opportunities (Shohamy, 2006).

In most multilingual countries, speakers of the dominant language have the advantage of accessing and benefiting from state services, such as

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education, administration, and participation in civic duties (Shohamy, 2006). Such practices have led to resistance over the status of governments' federal or official languages. In Nigeria, the federal language problem has caused heated debate and has continued to be a volatile issue (Attah, 1987). In India, when the government launched its campaign to replace English by Hindi in the 1960s, Tamilians resisted the use of Hindi as an official language and argued in favor of English, which turned into a riot that involved violence (Forrester, 1966). Likewise, in Ethiopia, speakers of competent languages have resisted the use of Amharic as a sole federal language. Such debates and tensions, as Shohamy (2006) argues, are marked in the representation and use of languages that fall amid the battles of those seeking to maintain the “order” of the “national” language, versus those trying to change it towards regional and global languages. In many circumstances, violent resistance takes place between groups and central authorities because of demands for recognition and the acknowledgement of differences and special linguistic rights. Most current language resistances are the result of the differing social status and preferential treatment of the dominant language on the part of the government. In such cases, there are economic and social or psychological fears and frustrations in the dominated group that may be responsible for the language resistance (Nelde, 1998).

In Ethiopia, the choice and use of Amharic as a sole federal language has created inequalities and social discrimination (Yonattan, 2019). It provides its mother-tongue speakers with various opportunities in terms of cultural and linguistic

development and employment, while those whose languages are not chosen suffer from marginalisation. This language practice has led to frustration and linguistic resistances. This phenomenon is a serious political issue that requires government decisions on language policy change. The aim of this study is, therefore, to examine federal language policy and linguistic resistance and thereby establish language policy options that can help to shape the language policy arguments and eradicate linguistic and cultural inequalities. In doing so, this study makes a substantial contribution to the field and extends the borders of language policy debate. It also creates exposure for scholars who have limited knowledge about language policy and linguistic resistance in Ethiopia, and serves as a springboard for further studies.

## **2. Methods and Materials**

In this study, a qualitative research approach involving two stages of data collection was carried out. In the first stage, data were taken from a larger PhD dissertation that investigated multilingual language policy and practice in Ethiopia (Yonattan, 2014). These data were gathered from key informants occupying high academic ranks in their respective institutions in Addis Ababa, Mekelle, Hawassa, Bahir Dar, Mojo, and Kulito, in 2012 and 2013. In this phase, data were gathered from 20 purposefully selected key informants, who have deep knowledge about policy and politics, through in-depth interviews. In the second phase, data were obtained through in-depth interviews with key informants occupying high academic ranks in the departments of Foreign Languages and Literature and Tigrinya Language and Literature at Addis Ababa

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University and Mekelle University, in 2017. Eight purposefully selected key informants (four from each of the universities) took part.

Qualitative data were collected by interviewing key informants in Tigrinya and Amharic, just after the key informants were informed about the purpose of the study. Also, key informants who wanted to remain unidentified were informed that their views and names will be kept confidential. All interviews were audio recorded by the author of this article, and the audio-recorded data were transcribed verbatim in Tigrinya and Amharic. Moreover, the transcribed text data were translated from Tigrinya and Amharic into English by the author. The transcribed data were coded and analysed through thematic analysis. In conducting the analysis, data were categorized thematically under emerged general themes, namely federal language policy and practice, linguistic resistance, neutral language, and major indigenous languages. These themes were used as topics in analysing and discussing the qualitative data.

### **3. Conceptual Framework**

Recent language policy works have emphasized how a nation can use language policy to perpetuate systems of inequality (Tollefson, 2002). According to Tollefson (1991), language policy is viewed as a mechanism by which the interests of the dominant social, cultural, economic, political, and linguistic group are maintained, and the seeds of transformation are developed. Thus, critical language policy research has helped illuminate ideologies enmeshed in language policies and provided a rich picture of language policy development as one aspect among

many socio-political processes that may reinvigorate social inequality (Tollefson, 2002). In critical language policy research, power – which refers to the ability to control events to achieve one’s aims – is considered implicit in all social relationships. Thus, to examine inequalities, the dynamic relationship between social structure, and individual agency – particularly in institutions, which constrain and provide meaning to individual actions (Pederson, as quoted in Tollefson, 2006) – the processes of language use and its subsequent inequalities and exclusions should be scrutinized.

The Ethiopian government uses Amharic as the only medium of federal offices and restricts other languages to their respective regions and zones. Also, it introduced Amharic as a school subject throughout the country (Yonattan, 2014). In the current political environment, where states are becoming multilingual, multinational and at the same time more global, students are asked to learn a chosen national or international language that reflects and affects the interests of different groups in many ways (Shohamy, 2006). Those “whose languages are not official spend years learning others’ languages and may still communicate with difficulty, compete unequally for employment and participation and suffer from minority or peripheral status” (Pool, 1991, p. 495). Hence, to avoid such abnormalities, the causes of linguistic and social inequalities and linguistic resistances should be identified; language policies need to be analysed, and solutions should be provided. Analysing language policy requires that researchers identify and attempt to characterize ideological strains, alternative policies, and the links between social inequality and language policies, thereby contributing to

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the development of informed citizenry (Donahue, 2002; Tollefson, 2006). Language policy research is inescapably political, and researchers should emphasize the role of socioeconomic class in shaping language policy alternatives, and explicitly acknowledge their own role in shaping the arguments of language policy (Tollefson, 2006).

### **4. Findings and Discussions**

#### **4.1 Federal Language Practice**

Ethiopia is a multinational and multicultural country where more than 80 indigenous languages are spoken by about 100 million people of different ethnic groups. Of the linguistic groups, only 11 consist of approximately two million persons of same language speakers, while each of the other groups comprises less than half a million speakers. The 11 linguistic groups include Oromo, Amhara, Somali, Tigray, Sidama, Agew, Gurage, Wolaitta, Hadiya, Afar, and Gamo. The speakers of these languages account for more than 90 percent of the total population. Among these linguistic groups, five groups (Amharas, Oromos, Somalis, Tigrayans, and Sidamas) constitute approximately 80 percent of the total population of the country (National Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia, 2008). Eleven languages that are spoken by these linguistic groups were recommended by many of the key informants of this study to be used as federal languages (for details see section 4.3.2).

Following the downfall of the military regime in 1991, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Party (EPRDF) introduced a multilingual language policy. It uses multiple mother-tongues as

mediums of instruction, mass communications, administration, and business at regional and local levels, but only Amharic at the federal level. As one of the key informants articulated, “many languages are used as mediums of instruction and administration in their respective regions, whereas Amharic is used a medium in other regions such as the Sothern Nations and Nationalities and Peoples region” (Anonymous9, 2017). Six languages, namely Afar, Amharic, Harari, Oromo, Somali, and Tigrinya are official regional languages. Apart from Afar, these are also languages of instruction at the elementary level in their respective regions. Other languages, such as Sidama, Hadiya, and Wolaitta are also used as the mediums of instruction in their respective areas. Unlike other languages, Amharic is used as a medium of instruction in regions and zones where the language is spoken as a second language. Amharic is also the only indigenous language used as a federal language. However, the use of Amharic as a sole federal language is not without resistance. As one key informant said:

Amharic is used as a federal language at the expense of other languages speakers. It is a source of linguistic inequalities and resentment across other speakers. It is a source of burden for those who learn it in schools besides their own mother tongues and English. Therefore, the government should not continue using it as the only federal language. (Anonymous12, 2017)

As can be understood from the above text, the use of Amharic as a sole federal language is a source of cultural and linguistic inequalities. It excludes other ethnic groups from high cultural and social elevation. It is also a source of burden for students who learn Amharic as a second



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language because they are forced to learn many languages, including their mother tongue and English, along with taking science and other courses. Thus, although language policy has a considerable role in mitigating linguistic inequalities at regional and local levels, its role in alleviating linguistic inequalities and resistance at the federal level is too faint. At the federal level, despite the constitutional decree that all languages are equal, the government's use of Amharic as the medium of commerce, mass communications, justice, administration, and recruitment, results in linguistic, cultural, and social inequalities. Those who cannot access public services or take part in the conduct of public business owing to their linguistic capabilities are vulnerable to having their rights and interests overlooked (Patten, 2001).

The federal-level language policy of the Ethiopian government is presented in the country's 1995 constitution as follows: "Amharic shall be the working language of the Federal Government" (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995, p. 78). It can thus be argued that Amharic dominance and sociocultural inequalities at the federal level are promoted deliberately. The government has given more space to Amharic to preserve its dominance, which "undermines the equity and recognition potential of the use of" other languages (Smith, 2008, p. 235). In other words, the present linguistic practice is giving way to the previous two political regimes' language use phenomena that were by far favoring the Amharic as mother-tongue speakers. Hence, if the present inequitable language practice, (as people are witnessing in all federal institutions) remains unsolved, it will worsen the existing linguistic and

cultural inequalities and linguistic frictions since language use is an unstable problem.

Moreover, English is a language that has gained a significant place in the social, political, and economic activities of the country. Despite its prominent role, it is hard to find studies on English in Ethiopia (Schmied, 2006), but it is possible to mention several points about its role based on the country's language practice that one can easily notice. English is used as a language of education, business, mass media, and international relations. It is taught as a subject, starting from grade one through grade 12. In Addis Ababa and Amhara regional state, English is a medium of instruction starting from grade seven onwards, and in the Oromia and Tigray regional states starting from grade nine onwards. It is also a medium of research in various government and non-government higher institutions. Because of the significant role it plays and its neutrality, a considerable number of the key informants of this study suggested the use of English as a federal language (for details see section 4.3.1).

#### **4.2 Linguistic Resistance**

Resistances over the use of Amharic as a sole federal language have been in place for the last three decades. Many people have revolted and tried to change the status quo, but they could never create any noticeable change. As one key informant said, “the use of Amharic as a federal language is facing resistances from many Ethiopians and politicians because it benefits the Amhara linguistic group and promotes their identity and culture at the expense of other nations and nationalities that

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“speak different languages” (Anonymous15, 2017). This implies that people are resisting the use of Amharic as the only federal language owing to the presence of other major languages that compete with Amharic, as well as the resultant linguistic, cultural and social inequities. Many linguistic groups, politicians, and political parties resist the use of Amharic as a sole federal language for various reasons, including the need to elevate the status of other languages and promote different cultures.

Linguistic groups insist on the use of their languages in federal institutions to mitigate the existing linguistic and cultural inequalities. Such a phenomenon is not distinctive to Ethiopia. In multilingual countries, the question of whether there should be one or more official, federal or working languages is pertinent. A question has always arisen as linguistic groups press for the recognition of their languages as official or federal languages due to anxieties that the groups would otherwise be handicapped in taking part in government affairs (Watts, 1970). Such conflicting points of view have frequently clashed, and because language can affect access to jobs and power, the issue has invariably been an explosive one.

In Ethiopia, the challenge with the federal language question has become a critical political issue, especially over the past three years. Those who resist the Amharic language use have now started taking violent actions. This was highlighted by one key informant who said:

Federal language question is getting more chaotic from time to time. Public unrest in the Oromia region, in the last two years, was

a very good instance where people were killed, and factories and other properties were looted and burned down by protesters. One of the causes of the revolt was the question to use Oromo as a federal language. The protesters were saying “Oromo should be a federal language; our number is greater than the Amharic speakers; the government should use Oromo as a federal language and avoid discrimination.” ... They have been asking this question to share the benefits that the Amharas have achieved because of the status of their language. (Anonymous15, 2017)

Similarly, another key informant articulated that “the use of Amharic as a federal language has become the basis for cultural and linguistic inequalities which has, in turn, become the source of linguistic resistances of Tigraians, Oromos, and Somalis” (Anonymous13, 2017). From this and the earlier mentioned views, it can be understood that the resistance against the use of Amharic as a federal language is becoming more intense than ever. Nations that speak other major languages, such as Oromo, Somali, and Tigrinya as mother tongues, have been resisting the use of Amharic as a single federal language because they are disadvantaged in the linguistic, social, cultural, political, and economic activities of the country. Owing to this and other related reasons mentioned so far, it can be argued that there are firm linguistic resistances over the status of Amharic as a single federal language mainly because using Amharic as a federal language is preferred by its mother-tongue speakers. Indeed, language use resistances are not as simple as people think of them to be; they can result in unexpected incidents.

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Social discrimination and linguistic inequalities have resulted in Oromo students' opposition against learning and speaking the Amharic language. They perceive the use of Amharic as a sole federal language as a policy that perpetuates the Amharic dominance of the previous regimes. Languages and the status attached to them are the outcomes of wider social, historical, and political forces or constructs (May, 2006, quoted in Dereje, 2010). For this reason, though their movement is not yet productive, Oromos have resisted the government's decision to maintain the status of Amharic as the language of the federal government. In describing this phenomenon, one of the executives of *Medrek* ("the Forum") (a coalition of six political parties) contended that the federal language question might be seen as a simple issue, notwithstanding the presence of a significant language use problem. His party has observed the challenge as a serious issue that requires political decision (Merera, 2012). He further argued:

If the Oromos, Oromo students, or children refuse to learn Amharic and Amharic speakers say, "Learning other languages, especially like Oromo that has plenty of speakers could disintegrate the country, and thus we do not want to learn them," what do you think would happen? In the near future, there will appear Ethiopians who could not communicate with each other. ... There are Oromos who say, "We do not want to learn the neftegna's ("rifleman's") language." There are also situations where the educated Oromos, who know Amharic, refuse to communicate using the language. For instance, in America, an Oromo would not talk to you in Amharic. Thus, knowing Amharic does not benefit us. Rather, it

keeps the people more apart. ... The Oromos say, “Why should we learn the nefteгна’s language if they do not learn ours?”

Opposition political parties such as Medrek and linguistic groups thus resist the ruling party’s federal language policy. They mainly base their views on social, political, and ideological affairs of language use, for various reasons. For instance, Oromo students’ resistance over the use of Amharic only as a federal language is caused by the government’s refusal to use Oromo as a federal language and the Amharas’ unwillingness to learn Oromo, just like the Oromos who learn Amharic as a school subject. Thus, the Oromos’ linguistic resistance is a demand for the recognition of language equality. Such linguistic resistance or the demand for the designation of other major languages as federal languages might lead to severe language-use controversies unless they are solved timely. The designation of a certain group’s language as official language may become “a source of constant controversy since it may upset the political balance between various population groups, especially in cases where each group constitutes a significant percentage of the total population or is concentrated in specific areas” (Capotorti, 1991, p. 39).

In sum, the use of Amharic as the single working language of the federal government has become a source of social discrimination and inequality. It provides the Amhara linguistic group with asymmetrical benefits in the economic, political, social, linguistic, and cultural domains. This results in competent linguistic groups demand for the designation of their languages as federal languages. For instance, Oromos want to see their language “developed to a higher level in order that past linguistic

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inequalities could be redressed” (Dereje, 2010, p. 201). To this end, Oromos have been involved in violent linguistic resistance, which shows that the language issue in Ethiopia has become the centre of disputes. In its different forms, language “continues to play a major role at the center of the debates and at the center of the arena of the battles for power, control, manipulation and domination” where resistance and violent disputes take place between groups and with central authorities “due to demands for recognition and the acknowledgment of difference and special linguistic rights” (Shohamy, 2006, p. 39). Hence, it is crucial for the federal government to provide a solution to the federal language questions of nations and nationalities, especially those who speak rival languages such as Oromo, Somali, and Tigrinya. The government should change the federal language policy to pacify the “language war”.

### **4.3 Federal Language Policy Options**

Under the previous political regimes, the use of Amharic as a single government language was overtly advocated for and practiced throughout the country. Presently, despite language being a source of cultural and linguistic inequalities and asymmetrical employment opportunities, the government is promoting Amharic in subtle ways. One of the key informants said that “as the government has started to promote diversity at regional and local levels and uniformity at the federal level, the use of Amharic as a sole federal language commenced to be disguised though its impacts have started to pay off” (Anonymous8, 2017). Hence, it can be inferred that the government disguises its use of a single federal language through ideological and political appropriateness that propagates the essentiality of employing Amharic

only at the federal level, which indirectly discourages the use of other languages. Such practices have, in turn, created linguistic and cultural inequalities and social discrimination. As a result, politicians and other individuals who are conscious of the disparities have started to resist the promotion of Amharic only. What should be done then to prevent linguistic and cultural inequalities and social discrimination, and solve linguistic resistance? In the sections that follow, two viable federal language policy models that could help mitigate, if not eradicate, language-related problems are suggested: Neutral language use and the use of major indigenous languages.

#### **4.3.1 Model 1: Neutral Language**

English, which is a neutral language, was suggested by the key informants as a federal language, either alone or together with the major indigenous languages (Afar, Agew, Amharic, Gamo, Gurage, Hadiya, Oromo, Tigrinya, Sidama, Somali, and Wolaitta). Using English as a government language would solve linguistic resistance and prevent linguistic and social inequalities because it, unlike Amharic, is a socially and politically neutral language to all linguistic groups. English also provides all nations and nationalities with an equal chance of linguistic and cultural manifestations and fair employment opportunities. It is for this reason English has been chosen as an official language in India and Nigeria, where different languages are spoken. Hence, it can serve as a language of compromise if English is employed as a federal language in Ethiopia.



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However, it is not an easy task to use English as a federal language because people, especially “unionists”, may regard it as modern colonisation. However, since Ethiopia was never colonized, no mode of colonisation should be associated with English. Yet unionists, whose political objective is “unity at all cost”, want to promote only Amharic (Asfaw & Seyoum, 1997) in all formal social domains, such as education and federal offices. Of course, in contrast to the unionists’ views, many Ethiopians regard Amharic as indistinguishable from English. For example, one of the key informants articulated:

No no no, for the Oromo people, for the Tigray people, or for any other language speakers, since a language other than their own is an imposition, it is all the same. It is unquestionable, whatever it is, either it is English or Amharic; it does not make any difference. ... Whether we like it or not, English is a countrywide medium of instruction at higher institutions and other institutions. Therefore, to avoid the tensions among nations and nationalities and to treat them equally, for sure English would be a possible option owing to its international role. English is also the language of commerce and international communication. (Anonymous6, 2012)

The above point of view implies that Amharic is an imposition for other linguistic groups, just as English is. Still, English, unlike Amharic, is a neutral language that does not belong to any linguistic groups in Ethiopia. Accordingly, the use of English in the common domains, such as business, education, communication, and politics that bring various linguistic groups into contact, is perceived as a tool to treat people

equally and mitigate linguistic resistance and unnecessary competition among various linguistic groups. It would also help to create smooth international relations and global transactions.

Besides, people who have concerns over the use of a federal language raise the issue of fairness and neutrality of language. They suggest the use of English as a federal language to attain these criteria. For instance, one of the key informants argued:

Federal countries use different language policies. If we take South Africa as an example, [11] languages are [official] languages. ... Other countries use what we call neutral language by taking a foreign language ...; for instance, Nigeria uses [English] as an [official] language. In Ethiopia, using one local language as a federal working language itself creates inequalities among languages. ... A foreign one ... that helps to neutralize the competition that has been created at the federal level has to be solved ... Making all languages federal working ... is impossible. Creating a situation to make English a federal working language is thus the best option. (Abadi, 2013)

Another key informant articulated his view that:

If Oromo becomes a working language, the Oromo language speakers will benefit more than any other nations and nationalities. If Amharic becomes a working language, Amharic speakers will get a better advantage. On the contrary, if English becomes a working language, in the context of Ethiopia, all nations and nationalities cannot be advantaged or privileged owing to their

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ethnicity, but they can be advantaged because of their learning English. Hence, I think using English as a federal working language is a better option. (Anonymous6, 2012)

It can thus be inferred from the above two extracts that English is considered a neutral language that does not belong to any group in Ethiopia. It puts all ethnic groups on an equal footing, while the use of either Amharic or Oromo, or both, benefits their speakers only. English is believed to be a means to solve the existing federal language use problems. It would also alleviate the burden that students face, learning many languages as school subjects, namely their mother tongue, dominant regional languages such as Oromo and Tigrinya (for minority students such as Irobs and Kunamas), English and Amharic. The idea is that students would learn only two languages, their own mother tongue and English if English becomes a working language of the federal government. More importantly, using English as a government language is suggested because it is a culturally and politically neutral language. For a language to become a working language “it should be politically neutral,” if it is not “it is too often regarded merely as a tool by which a particular language group seeks to extend its domination” (Capotorti, 1991, p. 39).

Another key informant said that the use of English as a federal language “will help to solve linguistic resistances, to bring peripheral linguistic groups such as the Nuer and Somali, who prefer to communicate with other Ethiopians in English, closer to the federal system, and to promote regional and global integration” (Anonymous12, 2017). Thus, it appears

that English is likely to serve as a device to bring the Horn of African countries, in which various linguistic groups that have similar complexion and shared culture are dwelling, into one. English will also help to promote Ethiopia's global interaction if it receives more attention and status than its current one because it is an international language that serves as a medium of communication and transaction with other countries.

Therefore, using English as the working language of the federal government is believed to be the best option to create regional, continental, and global interaction and confirm political, linguistic, and cultural equality. In contrast, if the government continues to use Amharic as a single federal language, the Amharic speakers would remain the only group to dominate the political, social, cultural, and economic activities of the country. Also, the use of Amharic as the only federal language, where many rival languages exist, underpins the suppression of other linguistic groups' cultures, languages, and will. As Lagerspetz (1998, p. 197) argues, "giving the right to some and denying it to others may also mean favouring some traditions and conceptions of human good at the expense of others". Such a practice is, in turn, likely to bring about linguistic resistance and resentment. Hence, the federal government should employ a neutral working and recruitment language and assign the major indigenous languages as co-federal languages to prevent linguistic resistance and mitigate social, linguistic, and cultural inequalities. Otherwise, the existing explosive language use issues, specifically the use of Amharic as the only federal language which put other groups in an unequal position, are likely to create resentment on

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the part of nations and nationalities that eventually can lead to social strife.

In general, it appears that English is a possible means to solve federal language use friction for two important reasons: It is a neutral language that does not belong to any linguistic group, and it is an international language that cannot be overlooked. English benefits though it can disadvantage all linguistic groups equally. Unlike English, Amharic, which is not a politically, socially, and culturally neutral language, benefits its mother-tongue speakers only. As a result, other competent language speakers have resisted its use and demand the equality of their languages. This is a common phenomenon for multilingual countries that have two or more rival languages, but the attempts made to resolve the issue differs from country to country. Other multilingual countries try to resolve their central governments' language use problems by utilizing either a neutral language that does not belong to any ethnic group or all major indigenous languages; Ethiopia has ignored these options. For instance, English is used as a language of compromise to prevent linguistic resistance and mitigate linguistic inequalities in India and Nigeria.

In India, English, which is an ex-colonial language, is the official language of the country. In fact, English was supposed to be replaced by Hindi 15 years after independence; but the condition was suspended owing to resistance from non-Hindi linguistic groups (Bamgbose, 1991). Other competent groups' resistance against Hindi and the difficulties of selecting one or more indigenous languages worked in favor of English,

despite resentment against it (Van Dyke, 1985). Likewise, English is the official language of Nigeria. English has functioned as the official language of the country because it is a neutral language, and no ethnic group in Nigeria can claim ownership of it; thus, it will continue to belong equally to all Nigerians (Attah, 1987). Because of the past and present roles English has played in the social life and administration of the country, some Nigerians nowadays think the language is the greatest heritage bequeathed to them at the end of British colonialism (Bamgbose 1971, quoted in Attah, 1987). Therefore, multilingual countries, particularly in Africa and Asia, use neutral languages to alleviate linguistic resistance. Most African countries employ a single major European language like English or French, and assign local languages to their respective areas equally. Using a neutral language helps to mitigate internal linguistic divisiveness and competition because it does not place any indigenous language at an undue benefit as the language of nationhood (Fishman, 1968). It is thus not uncommon to use English as a language of compromise where two or more rival languages exist.

#### **4.3.2 Model 2: Major Indigenous Languages**

A substantial number of the key informants said that the use of Amharic only as a federal language is inappropriate. Some suggested the use of both Amharic and Oromo as federal languages. Their reason is that the majority of the Ethiopian population speaks Amharic and Oromo; therefore, the use of both would solve linguistic resistance. As one of the key informants, an executive of *Medrek* political party, said, “we [the party members] decided to use at least two languages [Amharic and Oromo] as working ones in federal offices and the capital city to prevent

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dominance and realize the presence of other linguistic and cultural groups” (Merera, 2012). Also, the political programme of Medrek coalition party (2012), as stated under Article 3, declares that, in addition to Amharic, another language that is spoken by a substantial percentage of the total population of the country will be made a working language of the federal government. This clearly refers to the use of Oromo as a second federal language, since Oromo has several more speakers than any other language in the country. In so doing, the intention is to offer the Oromo language as a subject throughout the country. Therefore, if a decision is made to use Oromo as a federal language, the language should be taught as a subject and spread throughout the country before the action is taken.

Nevertheless, introducing Oromo as a school subject is considered impractical because it adds more burdens on students’ learning and ignores the federal language use question of other major languages’ speakers. For this reason, many of the key informants argued against the use of either Amharic, or both Amharic and Oromo. Instead, they argued for the use of all major indigenous languages as federal languages. For example, one key informant said:

I believe that introducing a language that is spoken by several people in schools, as a second language, is good. There is no problem with introducing the language. The problem is with how to introduce it. For example, if we introduce Oromo as a subject besides Tigrinya, English and Amharic, we are introducing four or five languages to the school system, which will become a burden for the students, and thus they could not learn the languages

properly. For example, the big reason for introducing Amharic at grade three [in Tigray region] is to alleviate such a burden as it is English and Tigrinya the students could learn at most; introducing Amharic before that could make the students learn neither of the languages. (Solomon, 2012)

As can be inferred from the above view, if students are forced to learn three to four languages, they would spend most of their time learning languages only. Thus, introducing the Oromo language as a school subject throughout the country would add more burdens on minority nationalities. Minority linguistic groups would be forced to learn about five languages as school subjects. For example, a student from the Irob linguistic group of the Tigray regional state will be forced to learn Irob, Tigrinya, Amharic, Oromo, and English. Such a policy would thus aggravate linguistic groups' inequalities. As stated, the use of Amharic as a sole federal language is the basis for linguistic, cultural, and social inequalities, and it creates linguistic resistance because other competent languages are ignored; thus, their speakers have been pressing to make their languages federal languages. It is hence unlikely for such a policy to be effectively implemented as it aggravates linguistic groups' inequalities and resistance. Of course, language choice is inevitable in Ethiopia because there are numerous languages, but it should consider the major indigenous languages to include linguistic groups that constitute a significant percentage of the total population of the country.

The use of 11 indigenous languages, namely Afar, Agew, Amharic, Gamo, Gurage, Hadiya, Oromo, Sidama, Somali, Tigrinya, and Wolaitta as federal languages, which have more than two million speakers each,



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was suggested by many of the key informants as a mechanism to alleviate the present linguistic inequalities and frictions, as this practice would include most of the Ethiopian people. One of the key informants said that “it is not justifiable to use Amharic as the only language of the federal government because we have other languages such as Tigrinya, Agew, Hadiya, Somali, Oromo, and other languages that have millions of speakers” (Anonymous15, 2017). Thus, using the 11 major languages as federal languages would serve as a tool to strike a balance between Amharic dominance and linguistic resistance. Besides, another key informant said:

In our country, there are many nations and nationalities, and the nations and nationalities are multilingual. There are several languages. When we see it in terms of this, using Amharic only as a federal language may have a certain limitation. Perhaps, it might exclude other languages. ... There should be a common consensus to eliminate this. ... Others, other than Amharic speakers, at least the speakers of the major languages should be considered. There are many minority languages that are spoken in a limited area. It is impossible to include such languages. (Getnet, 2012)

From this point of view, it can be inferred that the use of Amharic as a federal language has limitations that result in the exclusion of other major languages, other than Amharic, which has led to, as Yonattan (2019) argues, conflicts between those who want to promote Amharic only and those who want to change it to accommodate the interest of other major linguistic groups. Those who want to change the federal language policy frame their argument along the numerical significance of

linguistic groups, which is one of the principles of language choice. Numerical size and inclusion can thus be used as a guide in choosing languages (Capotorti, 1991). Since more than 90 percent of the country's population speak one of the 11 major languages, it would thus be reasonable to use these as federal languages. This practice would be more inclusive than using Amharic only, or even Amharic and Oromo. Moreover, with each of these 11 languages having over two million speakers, they are all numerically significant.

Some key informants suggested the use of English as a federal language, along with the 11 major indigenous languages. The reason, as one informant indicated, is “to accommodate the interest of minority ethnic groups such as Nuer that have exposure to English” (Anonymous15, 2017). It is also unlikely to avoid English in federal government institutions because it is the only instrument that has been used to participate in international commerce and communicate with other countries and their citizens. Thus, the use of the 11 major languages as federal languages, along with English, is related to the South African official language-use model. Nevertheless, a model that confirms the equality of languages at the central or federal government level is usually referred to as the Swiss Model, since Switzerland was the first country to declare all major languages, namely German, French, Italian, and Romanche as official working languages (Phillipson & Skutnab-Kangas, 1995).

As indicated by the 1996 Constitutional Assembly of the country, South Africa has 11 official languages, wherein, as stated in Article 6(3), the

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national government and provincial governments may use any official languages for the purposes of government, taking usage, practicality, regional circumstances and expense into account. Nine of the 11 languages are African languages; the remaining two are Afrikaans and English (Kamwangamalu, 2004). Nonetheless, “there is a mismatch between the language policy and language practices” given that the policy promotes multilingualism, while the practice demonstrates a trend toward English monolingualism in virtually all higher domains of language use (Kamwangamalu 2004, p. 197). This practice, together with vested interests and market forces, has been a stumbling block in the country’s efforts to promote the status of African languages in the higher domains, including education. This implies that “it is not enough to have legislation in place that accords recognition and equal status to all the official languages” (Kamwangamalu, 2004, p. 267).

It is thus wise to learn from the South African experience. If the Ethiopian government is going to use the major languages at the federal level, keen attention should be given, from the very beginning, to the effective implementation of the model. In fact, minority speakers might raise the question of the federal status of their languages; still, it is far less risky than ignoring the speakers of the 11 major languages that constitute the lion’s share of the total population of the country. Using all indigenous languages at federal level would be a seamless solution to mitigate any language use questions and sociolinguistic inequalities, but it is hardly likely to deliver services through 80 or so languages; thus, language choice is inevitable in that, as Pool (1991, p. 495) says, “the choice of official languages is a natural political issue”. It is owing to

such reasons that languages that are spoken by a small number of total populations are neglected in the official status of countries that promote several official or working languages at national levels, such as South Africa.

## **5. Conclusion**

The use of Amharic as a single federal language has become advantageous only for its mother-tongue speakers in terms of political participation, cultural and linguistic development, and employment opportunities. In other words, the use of Amharic as the only federal language is the basis for social discrimination and linguistic and cultural inequalities. This phenomenon has led to other major language speakers' agitation and fierce resistances against the use of Amharic as a federal language. The practice of using Amharic as the sole federal language cannot hold constant; it will be distorted. However, no attention is given to it when there should be a move to effect language policy change, prior to other consequential thoughts and aggressive social strife emerge. It is hence a *sine qua non* for the government of Ethiopia to mitigate linguistic and cultural inequalities and eradicate linguistic resistance by means of identifying viable language policy options, such as the use of a neutral language or all major indigenous languages. The government should formulate an effective and inclusive language policy to solve federal language use problems because, as a commentator in the German Paper *Die Zeit* (quoted in Phillipson, 2003, p. 13) recommended: "... language issues may, like medical problems, be well under control, or in a state of chronic or acute pathology. Proper diagnosis, consultation with

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those affected, and the existence of well-tried remedies are essential for progress and linguistic health.”

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