

Federal language policy and practice in Ethiopia: A critical discourse analysis perspective

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Abstract

This study aims to delve into Ethiopia's federal language policy and practice from a critical discourse analysis perspective. Primary and secondary data were collected from 8 key informants and government documents, respectively. The data were analyzed through critical discourse analysis. The results indicate that there is a self-contradiction in both the text and discourse internal structures of the federal language policy of the government. There is also inconsistency in the implementation of the policy. For one, the government recognizes the equality of languages constitutionally, but it, in practice, promotes only Amharic at the federal level. For another, it obliges all linguistic groups to learn at least one indigenous language other than their own. Still, many children, specifically of the Amhara linguistic group, are not learning any indigenous language besides their own.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis; Ethiopia; Federal language policy; federal language practice

Introduction

In this study, language policy refers to laws and guidelines for the use and status of federal-level language in Ethiopia. Language policy-making is inherent in the legal and political practices of issuing regulations, laws, and reports on language matters (Lo Bianco, 2009). In other words, language policy regulates the government's use of language and comprises steps to facilitate communication, train and recruit personnel, foster political participation and guarantee due process, and provide access to public services and documents (Crawford, 2000). On the other hand, language policy analysis refers to the review of language policy texts in the context of the use of Amharic as the sole federal language from a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective. The term discourse refers to the bundle of ideas that express a certain thought. It is a configuration of thoughts that provides the threads from which ideologies are interwoven (Sutton, 1999). Thus, it is used to denote a complex collection of simultaneous and sequential linguistic acts that are interrelated and that manifest themselves within and across the social fields of action and oral or written tokens as texts (Wodak, 2001), while discourse practice refers to the production, distribution, and

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consumption of a text (Fairclough, 1995). The term critical is “understood as having distance to the data, embedding the data in the social, taking an explicit political stance, and focusing on self-reflection as scholars doing research” (Wodak, 2001, p. 9), and CDA refers to a particular way of revealing implicit views woven into language policy texts. One of the main strengths of CDA is precisely its specificity regarding linguistic and sociocultural analyses. This model recognizes a textually oriented discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992). The model, which is used in this study, recognizes the constitutive nature of discourse whereby language signifies reality in the sense of creating meanings for it rather than simply referring to an external fact.

Amharic is the only officially declared working language of the federal government of Ethiopia. Accordingly, it is offered as a school subject across the country and used as the language of commerce, education, communication, and meetings at the federal level. On the other, the government maintains the argument that all languages are equal at the federal level, but none of the other indigenous languages are used as a medium in formal domains. This clearly reflects the presence of self-contradiction in the policy statements of the government. Therefore, the aim of this study is to unmask such inconsistencies and hidden language policy texts through CDA. In so doing, public texts and public discourses as types of language policy discourses are taken into consideration.

Public texts refer to the official documents of an independent state or an agency entrusted with the jurisdictional authority of the state to influence language (Lo Bianco, 2009). A national constitution is the most obvious example of an official state text and the constitutions of many states include formal declarations on the status, role, and standing of languages. As the most decisive sources of information, constitutions, therefore, serve to portray the linguistic intents of states (Lo Bianco, 2009). Consequently, three language policy statements are extracted from the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia to determine the intention of the government and the roles of languages at the federal level. Language policy texts are also extracted from other government documents.

The other instance of language policy text is public discourses. Public discourse means the ongoing debates and arguments about language policy and language status matters. The focus of such public discussions is the texts that spell out the roles and relationships of languages within a country. As such, public discourse is a collection of discussions, accounts, and

public attitudes that responds to, accompanies or precedes public statements (Lo Bianco, 2009). The groups or individuals involved in such language policy debates are mostly educated people because huge segments of the populations in developing countries remain substantially untouched by most of the specific products of language policy (Fishman, Das Gupta, Jernudd, & Rubin, 1971). For this reason, government employees and university professors and lecturers were the public discourse sources in this study.

Methods and materials

The qualitative research design was employed in this study. Qualitative data were gathered from primary and secondary sources. Policy texts constituted secondary sources and were drawn from various legal and policy documents of government, namely the Constitution, education and training policy, and education and training policy. Primary qualitative data were collected from 8 purposefully selected key informants through in-depth interviews in 2017. The qualitative data were gathered from key informants in high-ranking academic positions at Addis Ababa and Mekelle universities. The primary data were gathered through in-depth interviews conducted in Tigrinya and Amharic. The views of the key informants were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data were translated into English. Lastly, the primary and secondary data were analyzed concurrently. The primary data were coded and categorized and analyzed thematically, while the secondary data were analyzed through CDA. CDA was used as a research instrument to unpack tacit discourse entrenched in federal language policy and practice. It supports the critical examination of social inequality as it is constituted, expressed, and legitimized in discourse (Wodak, 2001).

Despite the work of many other critical discourse analysts, Norman Fairclough's model was employed in this study because it provides detailed descriptions and interpretations for the analysis of texts. One of the main strengths of his work in CDA is its specificity regarding linguistic and sociocultural analyses. This characteristic emphasizes "textually oriented discourse analysis" (Fairclough, 1992). Fairclough's discourse analysis model recognizes the constitutive nature of discourse whereby language signifies reality in the sense of creating meanings for it rather than simply referring to an external fact. The model consists of a linguistic description of the language text and interpretation of the relationship between the discursive processes and the text and explains the relationship between discursive and social processes.

More generally, a number of discourse analysis features such as modality, lexical choices, and sociocultural practice were used to reveal conjecture and inconsistency in federal language policy and practice discourses. Modality refers to the judgment of the probabilities, or the obligations of a speaker or writer, involved in what the speaker or writer says or writes (Halliday, 1994). Modality in grammar is associated with the modal auxiliary verbs (must, may, can, shall, should, and so forth), the use of which is important in expressing modality (Halliday, 1994). Such modal auxiliary verbs are used in speaking or writing to affect a situation by giving permission and portraying likelihood, capacity, obligation, order, and so on. The use of modal auxiliary verbs in speaking or writing is called deontic modality. In this study, *modality* means language policy writers' judgment of the probabilities or obligations involved in what they wrote. Modality was discussed at the lexical level of the discourse analysis. The features of the genre at the lexical level include the use of resources of modality to build the writer's opinion and message with respect to the events (Bolivar, 1994). The lexical level analysis was done concurrently with the sociocultural analysis of federal language policy texts. Discourse is simultaneously seen as language text, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice in which a piece of discourse is embedded at a number of levels in the immediate situation, the wider organization or institution, and society (Fairclough, 1995).

Analyzing federal language policy and practice

Language policy-making is inherent in the legal-political practice of issuing regulations, laws, and reports on language questions, and at this level language policy accounts for the body of policy statements of authoritative organs (Lo Bianco, 2009). In the world, "some countries record their language policy in their constitutions or in-law; others do not" (Spolsky, 2004, p. 4). In Ethiopia, multilingual language policy was accepted as a firm political agenda, officially declared and implemented after 1991. It appears that the country has stated its language policy explicitly in various documents. There are overt statements about the policy in the Constitution, the education and training policy, and other related documents. However, the present government has not yet developed an independent language policy document to serve as a comprehensive statement on the matter.

Policy analysis in this study is based on language policy statements extracted from the various government documents referred to above. Article 5 in the 1995 Ethiopian Constitution stipulates that "All Ethiopian languages shall enjoy equal state recognition" (The constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995, Text A). This

constitutional statement is a written language text that declares the equality of languages. It is expressed by the use of the deontic modal “shall,” which is equivalent to “must”. The constitutional statement hence implies that recognizing all languages equally is the responsibility of the country and its citizens.

With respect to the textual analysis of Text A at the lexical level, it seems that the phrase “all Ethiopian languages” refers to all indigenous languages, whereas the phrase “enjoy equal state recognition” is ambiguous; mere recognition of all languages by the government hardly causes for celebration. Besides, a brief sociocultural analysis of the statement shows that there were language inequalities and linguistic conflicts before the current government came to power. Declaring equality among all indigenous languages is thus used to appease the irresponsible inequalities and linguistic conflicts of the past. However, it remains unlikely that recognition on its own will promote equality of languages. There must be a political commitment to use all languages in various formal domains such as federal offices, mass communications, administration, and education.

In contrast to the above stipulation in Text A, another provision, also in Article 5, specifies that “Amharic shall be the working language of the Federal Government” (The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995, Text B). A more related statement included in the 1994 education and training policy document of the government reads: “Amharic shall be taught as a language of wider communication” (Federal Democratic Republic Government of Ethiopia, 1994, Text C). The reason for making Amharic the only federal language is contained in the document covering the education and training policy and its implementation: “Due to certain historical circumstance, the language that, in content and distribution, can be of great service to the country as a common national language is Amharic” (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 40, Text D). The policy statements mentioned (texts B, C, and D) are written language policy texts that affirm Amharic as the sole federal language. Indeed, three of the policy statements belong to the genre of language policies. Both the constitutional statement (Text B) and the education and training policy statement (Text C) use the deontic modal “shall,” which is equivalent to “must.” The use of the deontic modal implies that government agents as well as the citizenry are obligated to accept the language policy statements and to put them into practice, especially the constitutional statement, because the Constitution is the ultimate authoritative voice that governs the country and its people.

Moreover, the “unique” features of Amharic that render it capable of being of great service to the country as a language that everyone has in common (Text D), are stipulated through the deontic modal “can”, which reflects the ability of Amharic to serve as a federal language. That implies that other indigenous languages do not have the capacity to render the same service and should, consequently, not be allowed to serve as federal languages, but should be restricted for use at regional and local levels. Such an expression further reinforces the idea that Amharic is the language that must serve as a common language because of its content and distribution, and, as such, the great service it can offer the country.

In terms of sociocultural analysis of texts B, C, and D the federal language policy and practice clearly reveal the presence of linguistic inequalities in the larger social practice. It also reveals self-contradictions in the policy statements, especially in both the text and discourse internal structures of the Constitution. This is because it declares equality among all languages on the one hand but pronounces Amharic as the only federal language on the other hand. Accordingly, if the discourse practice is taken one step further, we recognize the presence of language policy and practice discourses, which are related to this inconsistency, in the language policy discourses of research participants in this study. For instance, one of the informants (Key Informant 3, 2017) argued that “we say all languages are equal, while there is inequality practically” as the result of using Amharic only at the federal level. Consequently, promoting Amharic only, which contradicts the general language policy of the country, is considered a practice that undermines linguistic equality.

In the language policy statements mentioned above (texts B, C, and D), the terms “working language”, “language of wider communication”, and “common national language” are collocates that refer to the genre of using Amharic as the single federal language. Also, the terms “historical circumstance”, “content,” and “distribution” are collocates that refer to the historical legacy of the Amharic language. From the viewpoint of discursive practice, the terms belong to the interdiscursive mix of discourses about the use of Amharic as a sole federal language. These lexicons imply that history, content, and distribution do not apply to other indigenous languages. Thus, they cannot render great services and are, therefore, not equal to Amharic. Moreover, the term “national language” in Text D reflects the interest and ideology of the producers of the text who seem to have an interest in using Amharic as a national language, which might elevate the status of the language to the level of national

symbols such as the national emblem. However, the interest reflected is completely different from the language discourse of the federal government that circumvents the symbolic association between the Amharic language and the state by designating it as a federal language—a mere instrument—in the Constitution of the country, though it remains politically biased and a source of discontent. It is argued that the federal language policy planners seem to be bypassing the language ideology of the government and inculcating their own language ideology, which is likely to bring about further language use crises. Irrespective of how language is authorized, planned, and “‘implemented’ by language planners on behalf of governments, without these complementarities what we might term a language-related ‘crisis’ can arise, for language is never hermetically sealed off from the broader political domains which surround it” (Luke, McHoul, & Mey, 1990, p. 35).

When the current government came to power, the status of Amharic as a national language and its attachment with national symbols were eradicated. The replacement of the term “national language” with “federal working language” in the Constitution circumvented the symbolic value that used to be attached to the language and the value that could result from using it in the Constitution of the country. Using the term working language rather than national language has important implications (Abraham Demoz, 1990). The term national language, “especially when used in the very constitution of the nation, raises the language in question to the status of the national flag and the national anthem”, whereas the term working language emphasizes the practical aspect of the reasons for designating one or a few languages as common currency” (Abraham Demoz, 1990, pp. 73–74). Thus, designating Amharic as a federal language helps to downgrade its symbolic value and emphasize its practical and contingent nature. Public questions about federal language use and the instrumental values attached to it have nonetheless become unavoidable. For instance, the use of Amharic as the medium of recruitment at the federal level favors its first speakers at times of competition for jobs at federal institutions.

At present, the formal domains for all indigenous languages except Amharic are restricted because of their limited distribution, content, and the consequential inadequate services they can offer. As such, the power relations between Amharic speakers whose language is of great service and other linguistic groups whose languages are of limited services are unequal. The idea that Amharic is of greater service implies that it is more powerful than other indigenous languages. The use of Amharic as “the language of government business” provides the

language “with a unique position in terms of language status, which other languages would be hard pressed to compete with” (Yonatan, 2022, p. 13). Likewise, it may give rise to Amharic speakers being more powerful than speakers of other languages because it allows them to dominate the “linguistic market”. They can produce saleable properties like music and films, move from one locality to another, express their interests freely in the mass media, and communicate easily with various linguistic groups who are less proficient in Amharic within the broad domains of the language. As such, Amharic speakers possess the power to dominate the practices of the linguistic domain rather than the language itself for “language is not powerful on its own – it gains power by the use powerful people make of it” (Weiss & Wodak, 2003, p. 14).

The government’s promotion of Amharic as the only federal language, while there are dozens of languages spoken by millions of people, indirectly prohibits the use of other languages at the federal level. One of the key informants (Key Informant 1, 2017) compared this practice with weed and grain, saying that “Amharic is a grain that must grow in the garden, while other languages are weeds that must be uprooted to create a favorable environment for the cultivation of Amharic.” Thus, it appears that the federal language use signifies the presence of the weed metaphor in the “linguistic garden” of the federal government in that the historical coincidence of Amharic makes the language invaluable at the expense of other indigenous languages. This language use restriction has some connections with the language use history of the country. Prior to 1991, indigenous languages other than Amharic were considered as weeds, as “birds’ languages” and banned from any formal domains. All indigenous languages were likely to be weeded out from the “linguistic garden” where only Amharic was allowed to flourish. While describing the then language use situation, one of the key informants (Key Informant 1, 2017) said:

In the Haile Selassie and Derg regimes, languages were not recognized equally. All languages were perceived as irrelevant or as weeds that hinder the development of Amharic. As languages that cannot be used as mediums of various purposes. As a result, they were not used as mediums of communication and instruction. The governors of Ethiopia were suppressing all nationalities. No chance was given for the promotion of nationalities’ languages.

However, the informant pointed out that it was proved that everything the governors were doing was proved wrong following the current use of multiple languages as mediums of communication, television, and instruction. Based on the informant’s view, it could be argued

that the time of promoting Amharic only in all formal domains became something of the past when the current government came to power and the trend changed so that all languages have theoretically been declared equal and valuable. In spite of this, the exclusive federal status of the Amharic language and the rejection of the use of other languages are allowed to continue through the introduction of normalization strategies such as “historical circumstance” and “common federal language”. Thus, it is argued that the federal language policy promotes the political interests of the government. In other words, the policy limits participation by the non-chosen languages in favor of a common medium for business and communication and the interlocking necessities of the political, economic, and sociocultural systems (Luke, McHoul, & Mey, 1990).

Therefore, it is argued that the promotion of Amharic only as a federal language and restricting the use of other languages to regional and local levels are intentional. The government wants a common language notwithstanding the discontent of competent linguistic groups, which makes the implementation of the policy difficult. As indicated earlier, the government believes that Amharic is spread throughout the country. Nonetheless, the countrywide diffusion of the Amharic language and its acceptance by all linguistic groups, especially by those who are competent, are questionable. Although Amharic is used as a medium in the routine activities of citizens who live in the Amhara regional state and big cities such as Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa, it is not used in the routine activities of most of the nations and nationalities of the country.

Had Amharic been in general use throughout the country and accepted by all linguistic groups, it would have been a blessing in disguise. However, the language is the mother tongue of only about 27 percent of the total population (National Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia, 2008) and used by 10 percent as a second language (Alem Habtu, 2003). On top of that, as one of the key informants (Key Informant 4, 2017) said, “The decision to use a single federal language is unfair in that other major languages speakers such as Tigray and Oromo are expressing their interests to use their languages in federal institutions, but their interests have not got the attention of the government”. Hence, it seems that the use of Amharic as the only federal language is not recognized by all linguistic groups, especially by people whose mother tongues have millions of speakers. The informant added that it has given rise to a considerable controversy that the government has not yet paid any attention to. Conceivably, the intention of the government and policymakers seems to suppress the

language use interests of competent linguistic groups. Language policymakers have to control government language policy activities because members of competent linguistic groups can claim to have some expertise to put their ideologies into practice in defiance of the imposed language policy (Baldauf, 1994).

In general, the Ethiopian government has disguised the federal language use issue through various mechanisms. For instance, as discussed earlier, despite the 1995 constitutional decree that all languages are equal, Amharic is used exclusively as the federal language owing to its historical circumstances and wider distribution, while other languages are restricted to local and regional uses only. This discourse practice is triggered by the general social discourse that the constitutional statement has remained on paper ever since the Constitution came into existence. That is, despite the constitutional decree that all languages are equal, all indigenous languages except Amharic are restricted to local and regional use only, which renders the federal-level language policy of the government multilingual in theory and monolingual in practice. There is clearly inconsistency between the federal language policy and its practice.

Despite the use of disguising strategies such as normalizing the choice and use of Amharic as a federal language through various strategies like more pronounced development of the language in relation to other languages, there are visible contradictions in the statements related to language policy. For instance, the 1995 Constitution declares equality among all languages, while simultaneously rewarding an exclusive status to Amharic. Amharic is declared as the sole federal language because of its great service and historical circumstance, while other languages are not, and thus it is superior to other languages. Historical legacy has enabled the language to perpetuate its exclusive status that underpins the superiority of the language to other languages and the government's intention to have a common single language that serves as an instrument to promote social and cultural cohesion. The historical circumstance, distribution, and content of Amharic are the strategies that are used by the government to legitimize, if not to normalize, its political stand concerning federal language policy and practice. A process of normalization occurs in which it comes to appear natural that one language dominates others, is more legitimate, and provides greater access to symbolic resources (Blackledge, 2005).

In addition to the texts A, B, C, and D analyzed above, there is a partially implemented language policy statement included in the 1994 education and training policy of the government that declares: “Students can choose and learn at least one nationality language...for cultural...relations” (Federal Democratic Republic Government of Ethiopia, 1994, Text E). The deontic modal “can” included in the statement reflects the authority of the policy writers concerning permission or control over students’ language choices. The statement is a written language text that obligates all Ethiopian students to learn at least one indigenous language as a school subject to promote cultural relations among nations and nationalities. It could also be read as meaning that it is a necessity for students of any linguistic group to learn at least one local language other than their own. As a result, students of all linguistic groups except Amharic speakers are learning at least one indigenous language, that is, at least Amharic, other than their mother tongue as a school subject. This practice has created a sense of dissatisfaction towards the learning of Amharic on the part of other language speakers. As one of the informants (Key Informant 6, 2017) articulated:

All students across the country are learning Amharic. This practice would have been helpful to create a shared culture delivered through the language if other languages had been included in the school curriculum. It is, however, ineffective because it is one-sided in that other languages speakers are obliged to learn Amharic, while Amharic speakers do not have any obligation to learn any of the other Ethiopian languages. This has created a sense of repugnance to learn Amharic on the side of other major language speakers.

From this response, it can be gathered that the teaching of Amharic as a language of countrywide communication has become a source of resentment on the part of speakers of other major languages who want their languages to be learned by Amharic speakers in response to their learning of Amharic. For instance, Oromo speakers say, “Why should we learn the riflemen’s language [Amharic] if they do not learn ours?” (Yonattan Zemaryam, 2021, p. 53). This implies that the prevailing practice is perceived as abnormal and unacceptable. The Amharic linguistic group is the only group that does not abide by the obligation imposed in the policy, while other linguistic groups are obliged to learn at least Amharic, the mother tongue of the only linguistic group not learning the mother tongues of other linguistic groups. This social practice enabling Amharic speakers not to learn any other local language is also minimizing the language-learning burden of Amharic speakers. While others are required to learn more than two languages—their mother tongue, Amharic, and English—as school subjects, Amhara learners learn only Amharic and English.

When applying textual analysis of Text E, at the lexical level, the term “nationality language” refers to an indigenous language that is spoken by a given community in a specific geographic area of the country. The proviso that students can learn an indigenous language other than their own is seen as a means of promoting cultural relations among linguistic groups because apart from learning a language, it is likely that they will also learn the cultural values embedded in and reflected through that language. Consequently, cultural relations with mother-tongue speakers of that language will be enhanced. The term “at least one” refers to the intention of the text producers to oblige students to learn more than one indigenous language. As can be understood from the language use practice in the country, some students learn two indigenous languages other than their mother tongues as school subjects. For example, besides their mother tongue, students belonging to the Kunama linguistic group learn Tigrinya and Amharic as school subjects.

Concerning the textual analysis of text E, at a socio-cultural level, the social practice that all linguistic groups except the Amhara linguistic group are learning at least one additional nationality language implies that Amharic speakers are the only linguistic group that does not adhere to the implementation of the language policy. Some see this non-adherence practice and the use of a single language as an instrument to promote national unity. For instance, according to one of the informants (Key Informant 4, 2017), Amharic speakers say that learning other dominant languages such as Oromo, Tigrinya, and Sidama could hinder the development of one national language that serves as a medium of communication for all Ethiopians; hence we do not encourage people to learn other languages.” From a hegemony theory perspective, such a practice is typical of dominant language speakers as they intend to assimilate other linguistic groups into their language and culture. Linguistic and cultural “unification is accompanied by the imposition of the dominant language and culture as legitimate and by the rejection of all other languages into indignity” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 46). As mentioned, the general social practice in Ethiopia of Amharic speakers rejecting the learning of all other indigenous languages has resulted in resentment on the part of other dominant ethnolinguistic groups such as Tigrinya and Oromo speakers.

Conclusion

Despite the constitutional recognition that all languages are equal, all indigenous languages except Amharic are prohibited from the formal domains of federal institutions in Ethiopia. While government language policy pronounces equality among all languages, it does not

pave the way to have the policy put into practice. There is a self-contradiction in the statements contained in the language policy. The use of only Amharic as a federal language is promoted and politically normalized through the discourses of historical circumstance, spread, and the relative development of the language, while the use of other indigenous languages is prohibited. The strategies aimed at establishing one language only as essential and standard are manifestations of the contradictions in the written language policy texts of the government. Such linguistic practices advance linguistic inequalities and Amharic dominance that make the language equality statement in the Constitution of the country unrealistic. In other words, the present language policy is playing an insignificant role in preventing linguistic inequalities at the federal level in that the linguistic rights of neglected language groups are denied and Amharic hegemony is overtly reflected and politically legitimized.

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