Language planning and development of the new Ethiopian language policy

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Language is considered a mark of cultural and ethnic identity. Therefore, language, culture, and identity are such interconnected entities that we can’t isolate one from the other. The choice and use of the right language makes a difference in achieving a high degree of quality in education. A failure to integrate social, linguistic, and cultural contexts within the education system would make the system irrelevant and unsuccessful. With the demise of the Derg in 1991, Ethiopia has already made a radical shift from a monolingual to a multilingual education system.

But the implementation of multilingualism in Ethiopia is currently hotly debated. Some strongly argue that the use of many languages (multilingualism) is a threat to the national unity. Others argue that multilingualism avoids the socio-cultural and linguistic imposition of one ethnic group to another. So, multilingualism is understood as a way of resolving cultural and linguistic hegemony and thereby accelerating national unity. UNESCO 1953 and 1982 recommend the use of the mother tongue in education regardless of the homogeneity or heterogeneity of a nation.

Currently about 86 languages are spoken in the country, and nearly 46 languages are used for schooling process as a medium of instruction at the primary level. A few Ethiopian languages have been developed so that they are used also at the university level. Amharic is the federal working language of the country, but the constitution gives equal opportunity and status for all languages of the country so every region has its own local working language.

This paper focuses on the development process of the Ethiopian language policy. What are the main pillars of the current language policy of the country and how does the policy handle each language? The paper will show the policy preamble, rationales, fundamental principles, and objectives of the current policy; discuss the focal spheres of the policy; and lastly also discuss the modalities and strategies of policy implementation.