

Language Management and the Science of Governance among the Bafut People of Cameroon

Sirri Elsie Chebe

Abstract:- This article seeks to explore the operation of the phenomenon of language planning and language policies as it operates within a traditional multilingual community. Among the Bafut people, language and culture are the most important things that build up peace, understanding, cooperation, obedience and abidance to authority. Language planning/policy issues are not set from the top as sort for and imposed by most governments. Rather, these are natural and take a bottom-top circulation cycle. The bases are the surveys of the culture, customs and traditions that are transmitted from one generation to another. These set out to be the duty and responsibility of all and not a few in the position of authority. It is the intention of this paper to prove that language planning is not an imposed activity as a means to seek solutions to language problems but an art and act of the science of governance that brings in awareness of language use in controlling a society. It is shown that the norms of a society are determined by language practices that jointly bind users at all levels and that language in itself is a planner of society.

Keywords:- language planning, language policy, language management, language practices .

I. INTRODUCTION

Bafut, a village in the North West Region of Cameroon with “Bifii” as its official language is a traditional multilingual community due to the urban influence of Bamenda, capital of the North West Region of Cameroon. As Puppel (2009) notes, language is a cultural phenomenon and so can be treated as an institution on its own and the question covertly linked to language planning is who regulates and controls the activities of language. The inability of most African governments to arrive at the implementation stage of language planning policies is an indication that there is a problem between the realities of society and the planning that is done on them. This has resulted in strife among language users, the stigmatization of languages and attitudes towards these languages and their users. Faced with these problems, there is a need to look into traditional means that promote bottom-up language planning as an alternative means of handling language planning which promotes diversity and community involvement (Mühlhausler, 2003).

McArthur (1992) defines language planning and language policy (LPP) as a trial of taking control over the use and status as well as the structure of a given language and comprises official activities of a government of a given country to make a language official. A language policy is a

body of ideas, laws, regulations, rules and practices intended to achieve the planned language change in a society, group or system and only when such policy exists can any sort of serious evaluation of planning occur (Rubin, 1971). Spolsky (2004) views Language Management as a synonym of the term language planning while other linguists like SauKuen Fan (2009) see language management as bottom-up approach to language planning which takes the perspective for language users at the discourse level with the aim of viewing problems of language as a management process to start from a micro-macro phase of inquiry followed by a micro-macro design and micro-macro implementation.

The great challenge faced in language policy is the variance between language planning and implementation because planning, is usually based on a policy document or even a law, hence easy to formulate (Andrew Gonzalez, 2003) while implementation has been slow or ineffective. Practice is aborted in spite of rational and well-thought-out policy. The key element towards realization of language policy is political will, based on a developing or a developed cohesion within the state that leads to genuine nationhood. Therefore, there is the need for an alternative method of language planning in an increasingly multilingual context like that of Bafut village in Cameroon.

II. OBJECTIVES

This paper had the following objectives: to survey language practices among groupings in Bafut, to look into the role of language in planning the smooth functioning of other activities, to bring out traditional LPP strategies among the Bafut people.

III. METHODS

The paper relied on a survey design by using purposive sampling techniques through observation and interviews to gather information from social groupings. In all, 40 Njangi groups, 30 dance groups, 11 farming groups, 15 cultural and development associations, and 10 quarter houses as well as some families were surveyed for their language policies and practices. Findings were descriptively presented in continuous prose.

IV. THE RESULTS

The study therefore brings out the following results;

- Language Practices Among Groupings

Despite the multilingual nature of the Bafut community, there is still a pre-dominance of Bifii over other languages such as English, French, Mankon, Nkwen and other Ngemba languages. This shows that the Bafut community still upholds its cultural identity and values. There is unity and peace that is manifested in many organs of this society. There is a way of life that is unique to the people and makes them what they are. What keeps them as such is hidden in their language planning, language policies and practices.

➤ *In the Family*

Within a traditional family in Bafut, we found that there is a subconscious rule of language through the “mind your language” policy which is not dished out overtly. This policy naturally springs from the bond of the family where children are conscious on how to address their elders (“ndagha Neba” for a male or “ndagha sirri” for a female) and be quite when elders are around in the house. Of the 30 families that were observed for the study, 26 of them showed uniqueness of one type or another in the way they communicated with each other. This gave an 86% of positive unique language cohesion that reigns within families. The language policy of silence also applied to women in the company of men and strangers. It was not meant to downgrade but to respect the men and to give an opportunity for the woman to be vigilant on things that are discussed so as to better inform the husband on what he might have missed out.

➤ *In the Social Groupings*

The Bafut community derives its strength from social groupings. There is a saying that “he who eats alone should be ready to fight alone”. Nobody in this community is willing to let this be attributed to him. Hence, each member in the community strives to belong to one group or another and can belong to as many as he wants. These groups can be Njangi, dance, farming, development and cultural associations, and quarter houses. We found that the members of these groupings hold the Bifii language in high esteem. Fines and penalties are attributed to those who bring in foreign language(s) in their gatherings. Of the 40 njangi groups visited 32 of them had cases of fines and penalties to members who had defaulted in one way or another while they were in session. Of the 30 dance groups each had a particular format and formulae for communicating and interacting both indoors and outdoors.

In each of the groups I visited, I noticed that at the beginning of the session, upon signal by either a gong or a remark, the house went into total silence. This remark was not just a “Good day”, or “Good Afternoon”. It was a specially coined greeting that carried with it, the motto, pledge, name or something special that represented the group. In one of them for example, the coordinator called out “akongne-eeeh” and the hall that had been fidgeting answered in unison “bignetswa signee”. This actually is “love”.....]”let us hold it well”. In other groups it was just a special unique expression and everybody came in with a responsive chorus.

During deliberations, being conscious that there is a multiplicity of languages within the community, it is only the Bafut language that is used. Once members are assembled for a meeting there is no way he can speak either pidgin, English, French other languages spoken in the community. In this way every member of the community is obliged to learn and speak or use the Bafut Language when there is community gathering. In some of the groups, the leaders organized language sessions which functioned as a forum for learning for those who actually found it difficult to speak the Bafut language without code-switching and mixture. These formed comic scenes with laughter and a type of language that some hardly recognize as the Bafut language. Lexical items and proverbial expressions are even at times put up to be given a price if well answered.

The continuous practice of these forms of language unifiers, leads to the omnipresence of the Bifii language in the community which indicates that the Bafut community still upholds its cultural identity. These mark and keep them as one.

➤ *The Role of Language in Planning the Smooth Functioning of other Institutions*

The second objective of this work was to look into the role of language in this community. For every social group that operates within this community system, there are binding rules and regulations. These may be written but given the social factors involved they might not be. However, with law on registration of associations, most of them are put down for official reasons. One of the clauses that were found in the binding rules is that of language. In more than 22 out of 30 of them that I was opportune to read, this was well spelled out “the language of the group shall be Bifii at all times and all circumstances where they meet”.

As Gal (1993) has rightfully noted, “Ideologies of the state are partly constructed through ideologies of language”, and part of this process of construction unfolds through the very process of regimentation in the form of control over linguistic norms’. This is done, and taken seriously by everyone, in everyday life and institutions which makes it significant. No particular institution is set up to undertake the work of linguistic regimentation, Addison (1999). It is the family and these social groups that do the work. They do the production and reproduction of linguistic norms we find in Bafut and other traditional multilingual societies. The Bafut people attribute value to their language forms and practices which are in turn linked to their social relations and categories (Bourdieu, 1977).

➤ *Traditional Language Planning and Policy Strategies of the Bafut People*

There are a few but salient strategies (not written) that are used by the Bafut people to see that their language, which faces competition in the face of multilingualism with other languages, remains and is used officially.

In the first place, the set-up of a family in this community is built on the management of peaceful co-existence. This implies that a family/group where we will find a lot of disorder, change, fragmentation, anarchy and lawlessness will signify a breakdown of social settings and relations. Deborah Cameron (1995) observes this and even relates it to bad grammar and bad behaviour which indicated that, we are losing values. She opines that conforming to rules of orderly speech will inherently lead to conformity to the laws of society.

From the survey done in the different social groups, we found that traditional practices (general greetings, language use, relationship and respect for hierarchy) were highly esteemed which leads to a conscious awareness of who they are. Puppel (2009) expresses his opinion that language as a cultural phenomenon can be treated as an institution. The emphasis on the use of their (official) language is an unconscious strategy. It is a policy planning strategy that eventually takes control of the other aspects of the group both in and out of the meeting place.

The tradition requires that the language of women be softer, sweeter and different from that of men. Children language is not left out. Using this traditional background, the women, have a special way in which they are addressed. They are given a lot of duty post and they initiate a lot of lucrative language initiatives. In this way, they become the trainers of the children who in turn build up a united force in policing the language practices in the community.

Another strategy used by the Bafut people is rule and order. This goes along with planning and policing. As they have an expressed desire to use the Bafut language officially as found in the clause in the bylaws, any member who is found using another language during any of their gatherings is fined. These fines range from financial payments to suspensions and many others depending on what and how it was said. The policy here is that it is everybody who takes charge of the use of another language and reports. Sanctions are always immediate and are never let to go without implementation. Failure to implement once a case comes up bounces on the executive.

Within the more close-up groups, the language that is used is often blended with the “mubaakoh” variety (a variety drawn from ancestry usage). This helps in coding messages and giving a unique identity to those using it. These are not borrowed words but words of the language that are so meaningful in context that only those who care about language revitalization will know and therefore use to show their affinity to the language, culture and tradition.

V. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This work goes a long way to prove that any attempt to impose language planning and policies in a society are bound to meet with implementation failures. This can be seen first in

the story of the unification of East and West Cameroon. Bilingualism is a good phenomenon in our present global world. The fact that it was imposed as a unifying strategy in 1961 now makes it possible for the stigmatization and marginalization of the English-speaking minority in the union. Had it been the Cameroonian people were allowed to socialize and use both languages as situations demanded, true bilingualism would have been realized for these 58 years after independence. The fact that we have looked into language as an institution on which other institutions rely, has been proven. There can be no successful LPP when policies are imposed from above. Rather, being a social institution it is the responsibility of the masses to set the pace they want for the language they value.

VI. CONCLUSION

As discussed above, the phenomenon of LPP is as old as human society. It has evolved through the years to an extent that, the original purpose and reasons for its existence have been manipulated for the interest of the modern state. This has also led to a lot of effort being put in to encourage language death and language shift. There is therefore a need and a call to further new perspectives in LPP that take into consideration, ecological factors that will manifest peaceful co-existence and recognition of official status of languages found within a community.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Addison Wesley (1999) Linguistic Minorities and Modernity: A sociolinguistic Ethnography. Longman Ltd.
- [2]. Andrew Gonzalez (2003) Language planning in multilingual countries: The case of the Philippines.
- [3]. Bourdieu, P (1977) L'conomie des echangeslinguistiques. Langue francaise.Paris Miniut.
- [4]. Cameron, D.(1995) Verbal Hygiene. London, Routledge.
- [5]. Gal, S (1993) Diversity and contestation in linguistic ideology: German speakers in Hungary. Language in society 22(3).
- [6]. Puppel, S (2009) the protection of language diversity – fancy or duty? In: Scripta Neophilologica Posnaniensia X, 97–109.
- [7]. McArthur, T (ed.) 1992. The Oxford Companion to the English Language Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [8]. Mühlhäusler, P (2003) Language of environment–environment of language. A course in eco linguistic London: Battle bridge Publications.
- [9]. Rubin J & Bjorn J (eds) (1971) can language be planned? Sociolinguistics theory and practice for developing nations. Honolulu: university of Hawaii press.
- [10]. Spolsky, B (2004) language policy. Cambridge university press.
- [11]. Sau k. fan (2009) language planning or language management.. Treatment of problems of the development of “Japanese in context” [http://www.kandangaido.ac.jp/memorial\(2009\)historyarchive|post|files|pdf|21_02.pdf](http://www.kandangaido.ac.jp/memorial(2009)historyarchive|post|files|pdf|21_02.pdf).