

The Politics of Language Planning in the Sudan: Naivasha Language Policy and the Discursive Construction of the 'Indigenous' as 'National'

Ashraf Abdelhay A.K.Abdelhay@sms.ed.ac.uk

The 9th of last January marked the second anniversary of the comprehensive peace agreement signed in the Kenyan town of Naivasha between the National Congress Party, NCP (representing the government of the Sudan), and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, SPLM (representing the southern opposition). Having a language policy interwoven in the very discursive fabric of the Power-sharing protocol is indicative of the fact that language planning in the Sudan has always been an arena of intense power struggle between the South and the North. This historical power struggle, which incorporates unequal power relations between the South and the North Sudan, is encoded (i.e., lexicalised) in the linguistic signs of the language policy. The current Interim National Constitution has adopted the Naivasha language policy. One of the language policy statements declares: 'All the indigenous languages are national languages'. This paper has three objectives. First, it intends to construct an interpretation of overt and hidden meanings behind this political status-planning declaration by performing a critical analysis of this policy pronouncement. The social-historical conditions (at the textual, intertextual, and contextual levels) which have led to the discursive construction of the 'indigenous' as both 'language' and 'national' will be critically examined. In the course of doing so, I shall contend that language planning in the Sudan in itself has acted, in the language of Blommaert (1999: 429-430), as an 'ideology broker', both when: 1) it has ideologically and coercively 'objectified and 'naturalized' the imposition of the Arabic language as a single official/national language upon non-Arabic speaking regions, and 2) when it has endorsed a top-down approach with the intention to shape the linguistic social practices of the diverse multilingual polities. I shall argue for a radical conceptual reframing in the Sudanese folk and institutional discourse of the role language should play in the gradual restructuring of the existing socio-political configuration, and consequently, the construction of a new sociolinguistic order, as part of the project of 'New Sudan'. Otherwise the Naivasha language policy will remain a rhetorical device that will be employed by power holders to perpetuate the existing structures of the Arabicisation policy which is widely blamed for the current social disorder. Secondly, the paper will consider the twin organizational principles of 'linguistic federalism' and 'linguistic citizenship' as both a strategic corrective to the divisive official monolingualism, and as foundation for a new regime of language rights determined by a bottom-up approach. Finally, the paper will provide an assessment of 'where we are' with respect to the institutional-implementation process of the language policy.