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Literacy Use and Instruction in Multilingual Eritrea

by Yonas Mesfun Asfaha, Jeanne Kurvers, Sjaak Kroon*

Abstract

The use of literacy in education, religion and commerce, together with a prevailing multilingualism and a historical mother tongue policy that gave rise to multiple script literacy, characterize the language and literacy environment in Eritrea. The social use of literacy and the values attached to different scripts are explored here through a combination of methods of survey, unstructured and structured interviews with lay and key informants, observation and photography. As various ethnolinguistic groups view and value literacy in specific scripts differently, interventions at the levels of policy, policy implementation and classroom instruction have to take into account these cultural discrepancies in the way literacy and scripts are valued and viewed.

Introduction

Eritrea, a newly independent (1993) African country, has a mother tongue education policy that allows delivery of elementary education to all its language groups in the nine different languages they speak. The policy allows a member of an ethnolinguistic group to attend elementary schooling in his/her own mother tongue. English is also taught in elementary schools in preparation for English medium instruction in secondary and higher-level education.

The nine languages of the ethnolinguistic groups, originating from different language families, have three different writing systems. These are the full Latin alphabet (Bilen, Bidhaawyeet, Kunama, Saho, Nara, and Afar), consonantal-alphabetic Arabic script (Arabic) and syllabic Ge'ez script (Tigrinya and Tigre). This means, within one national curriculum, three different writing systems are taught.

Outside the educational institutions, the scripts and the languages of the country are in use in public broadcast media, in business, and local informal commerce. A simple observation in the main streets of most of the Eritrean towns reveals the use of three scripts and languages in naming businesses like shops, bars and restaurants. Public offices bear their official names in the three scripts although

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most of their business is conducted in the Tigrinya language which uses Ge'ez script.

The social and educational use of the three scripts in the multilingual context of Eritrea is the focus of this presentation. As part of a Tilburg University project investigating literacy acquisition and literacy practice in different scripts and languages in Eritrea, this article looks at the daily uses of Ge'ez, Arabic and Latin scripts in schools and in society at large and the values attached to them.

Language and Script Landscape

Mother Tongue Policy

Eritrea, located in the Horn of Africa, was an Italian colony for over half a century before it was handed over to Great Britain at the end of the Second World War. After 10 years as a British protectorate, it was federated with its southern neighbour, Ethiopia. A long war for independence that started in 1961 after the federation was dissolved by Emperor Haile Selassie ended in 1991 when the rebel Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front (EPLF) took control of the country and formed the Provisional Government of Eritrea. Formal independence was declared in 1993 after a UN supervised referendum where the majority of Eritreans voted for independence.

The EPLF, during its guerrilla days, had tried to provide to inhabitants of areas that fell under its control social services that included mother tongue basic education and adult literacy. One of the first announcements by the Provisional Government of Eritrea (EPLF) was the 'Declaration of Policies on Education in Eritrea' (1991:3) with its now popular assertion that 'learning opportunities in the elementary school will be given to all nationalities in their own languages'. The policy document promised further efforts in the commitment to put the hitherto unwritten Eritrean languages into Latin script and thus declared for 'those nationalities, whose languages have no scripts, the EPLF has adopted the Latin alphabet as the medium of reading and writing' (Department of Education 1991:1).

The rationale behind the use of all languages in education and media was mainly to strengthen the different ethnic groups' sense of belonging to their country (Interview Naib, 2005). The EPLF was concerned about creating 'unity out of diversity'. One way of doing this was through the 'development of the language of every group', and development could come through the use of the languages in education and media (Interview Naib, 2005).

Textbook production efforts, started in the movement times, continued in all the nine languages after 1991 (Woldemikael, 2001). For some of the languages

(Nara and Bidhaawyeet), the EPLF effort in the 1980s was the start of their written history; others had a much older history as written languages, going back more than 100 years for Kunama, Afar, Bilen, Saho and Tigre, and over a thousand years for Tigrinya and Arabic (Dutcher, 1998). In a short period of time, the EPLF and later on the Ministry of Education have accomplished enormous tasks in committing languages to writing and standardizing them (Hailemariam, 2002).

Despite these successes, education in the mother tongue has faced several problems. Reluctance to embrace mother tongue education from some language communities was one of these problems (Hailemariam, 2002). Too many hours of language instruction, cognitive mismatch, and 'low levels of learning achievement' (UNESCO, 2000) are perhaps the most tangible criticisms directed at the mother tongue elementary education in Eritrea. More than 45% of the school time (Habtai, 2001) was dedicated to language teaching, which in some cases meant learning four languages and amounted to a 'demanding cognitive load' for students (Dutcher, 1998).

At the moment the educational system is undergoing a major change to address issues of reach and quality (*Menesey*, 2004). The proposed transformation will bring changes over the entire educational system and will affect the mother tongue education at the elementary level. However, the mother tongue policy remains intact with the reaffirmation that 'a child will have the right to study in Elementary School in his or her mother language' (Government of Eritrea, 2002:18).

The changes in curriculum mean new textbooks for elementary instruction in nine languages, new teaching approaches and, for some groups, new orthographies. These amendments were partly the result of low reading levels reported in a huge survey of reading skills in most of the Eritrean languages as well as in English carried out in 2001.

Scripts and Orthographies

Tigrinya and Tigre, the two languages that use Ge'ez as a script, have speakers that account for 80 percent of the Eritrean population. The Tigrinya are predominantly Christians while the Tigre are mostly Moslems. Ge'ez is also a script of a classical language with the same name that is used by the Coptic Orthodox Church whose followers are mainly Tigrinya.

Arabic is the mother language of the Rashaidas, who make up around 1 percent of the Eritrean population that stands at about 3.5 million (Alders, 2005). Because of the country's proximity to the Middle East and because many

Eritreans lived in Arab countries as refugees for many years, the Arabic language plays an important role in the society. Arabic, as the language of the holy book in Islam (half of the population of the country are Moslems), carries religious significance.

The majority of the official, commercial and religious publications and written interactions take place in the languages of Tigrinya and Arabic and the scripts of Ge'ez and Arabic. The language of the second largest group, Tigre, also uses Ge'ez. Tigrinya, Tigre, and Arabic languages and Ge'ez and Arabic scripts cover a substantial area in language and script discussions.

Around 20 percent of the population are speakers of the languages of Afar, Saho, Kunama, Nara, Bidhaawyeet and Bilen, which use Latin-scripted orthographies. Speakers from these smaller language communities usually have a substantial percentage of multilinguals who can use their mother tongue and one or two of the languages in wider use in the country.

The use of Latin script dates back to the advent of missionaries around 100 years ago and in the case of Nara and Bidhaawyeet to the mother tongue education efforts a couple of decades ago. The social use of Latin-scripted orthographies is still limited. Besides its use in the respective elementary education programs for the six languages, Latin has a limited function in the public media and in the Catholic and Protestant churches. Although the six languages (now using Latin script) have seen private and missionary efforts to commit them into orthographies that employ Arabic, Ge'ez and Latin scripts, these sporadic attempts have eventually given way to officially sponsored use of the Latin script in education.

Some orthography specific problems and some social issues regarding the use of Latin are still evident in this process of writing and standardizing the languages. For instance, the Afar orthography in use in Eritrea differs in its representation of three sounds (written as dh, x and c) from those used in Djibouti and Ethiopia (written as x, c and q) (Interview Wedekind, 2004). Different Kunama orthographies, reflecting the Catholic and Protestant churches heritage, are in use in the Kunama areas (Interview Oddi Gagasi, 2005). The introduction of tone and vowel length markers in the Kunama orthography by the Ministry of Education in the new primers still needs to be spread out into the wider community. Similar issues exist with the newly introduced tone markings in Nara. Most of the orthographies may still be better served by finding simpler ways of representing one or two of their unique sounds (Interview Wedekind, 2004). Bilen was written in Ge'ez for many years starting from the early 19th century (Dutcher, 1998) but has recently adopted Latin as a script.

Social Use of Literacy

After describing the prevailing multilingualism and multiple scripts literacy context in the country, this section looks at the different cultural practices and values associated with literacy use and the three scripts in different communities.

A sociolinguistic survey explored the use of literacy, the values attached to literacy and preferences expressed regarding scripts. About 60 – 80 respondents each from Eritrea's nine ethnolinguistic groups made up a sample of 670 adults in a 2005 survey that employed a questionnaire covering literacy use in everyday life, views and opinions on literacy, values attached to different scripts and background information on education, age, occupation, multilingualism, and other relevant factors. Prior to this structured survey, an unstructured exploratory assessment posing open-ended questions to 25 respondents was conducted. Observations and photography of literacy practices supplemented this literacy practice study in an effort to combine quantitative data with ethnography.

Although the illiteracy rate among adults in Eritrea is estimated at 50 percent (Ministry of Information, 2004), higher percentages in the sample (around 60 percent) allow closer examination of the literacy activities of literate Eritreans. The literates use their skills in different domains of their life to a varying degree. Respondents reported reading and writing at work, while engaged in entertainment, in functional activities of seeking or giving information, in religious ceremonies and in activities related to citizenship.

Most of the reading and writing is being done in the work place and around activities related to the functional use of literacy. If the effect of most regular but routine practices of literacy like signing in for work are excluded by differentiating between the fluent readers (with higher education thus likely to have clerical jobs requiring literacy skills) and the beginning readers, a clearer picture of literacy practice appears. The beginning readers show substantially lower frequency of literacy practice. However, the overall frequency of engagement in literacy activities by respondents is low, with most respondents reporting engaging in literacy activity rarely, less than once a month and sometimes once in a year.

The lowest frequency of literacy activity is observed in the domain of citizenship. Contacts with the state and local governance, represented by instances of writing complaint letters, for example, are low, originating from the weak, sometimes non-existing, institutions or the low civic traditions of communities in developing countries like Eritrea.

There are differences among the language groups in their overall use of literacy. The Tigrinya and Afar reported a slightly higher frequency of use of literacy, while most of the rest of the ethnic groups show frequency of literacy activity well below the 'rarely' indicated by many respondents. Use of literacy on religious occasions reveals differences among the religious groups with the Catholic-Protestant respondents reporting the highest frequency of religious literacy activity followed by Orthodox Christians and Moslems.

Respondents highly value literacy. Views on values of literacy ranged from the functional uses of reading and writing to the power of literacy in bestowing balance and moderation upon its users all the way to the intrinsic values of goodness in literacy. One respondent, for instance, says: 'Literacy helps you to communicate easily and have an understanding with one's surrounding. It helps in leading your life properly'.

Analysis of responses reveals two main arguments related to values of literacy. Respondents attach importance to literacy for its economic value and the social status it confers to its users. Ethnic groups differ in the way they assess the social and economic value of literacy. The language groups with somewhat longer literary tradition put slightly lower economic value on literacy.

The majority of the respondents agree literate people have better paid jobs and are more confident in their skills and in themselves. Others prefer to equate better life with hard work independent of whether one is literate or illiterate: 'Better life is how hard you work and not because you can read and write.' Those who cannot read and write asked relatives, neighbours and their children to read and write them letters.

In most of the interviews, literates were referred to by words of status such as 'noble' and 'master', and similar words indicating wisdom, knowledge, and moderation ('one who knows what is beneficial and what is harmful for him/her'). On the other hand, illiteracy was equated to darkness and dependency. There is frequent reference to the practice of asking people to read and write your letters as 'mental dependency.'

Results of questions on reported use of scripts show not only the dominance of Ge'ez but also the lack of any meaningful application of the Latin script in the different domains of life. Arabic is the next widely used script. The limited use of Latin in the different domains corresponds to the lowest rate it gets as the most beneficial script to learn from among the three scripts in use in the country. It also matches with the concerns persistently expressed by speakers of the languages that adopted Latin script. Some of them question the wisdom of teaching children reading and writing in Latin script in school when the majority

of work in public offices, formal businesses, and related activities are conducted in Ge'ez. Officials argue the spread of Latin script and the availability of Latin print materials could improve with time (Interview Naib, 2005).

Substantial percentages of respondents from Nara, Bilen, and Bidhaawyeet language groups would like to see their language make a change of script. Among the Bilen supporting script change, the majority would like to have Ge'ez. Nara, Bidhaawyeet, and Tigre respondents prefer Arabic script. Some speakers of Bidhaawyeet fear their language is not that much used and is threatened by neighbouring larger languages such as Tigre and Arabic (Interview Nafee Osman, 2005). The first school that uses Bidhaawyeet as a medium of instruction opened only in 2002.

Conclusions

To understand the uses of literacy in general and the different scripts in particular, and the values attached to them by their users and owners, one has to look at a range of factors that include ethnic identity, religion, national and regional status of a script, and literary history of a language. Frequency of engagement in literacy activity and the perception of wider application of one's own script in different domains of daily life contribute towards defining literacy practices and values of multilingual communities. These socio-cultural factors are behind significant differences between ethnic groups in their attitudes to literacy and the three scripts in Eritrea. Despite these inter-group variations, all language groups value literacy highly.

Respondents gravitate to the Ge'ez and Arabic scripts, the scripts of the holy books in Orthodox Christian and Islam respectively. Both represent the oldest literary traditions in Eritrea. Ge'ez, and to a lesser extent Arabic, are widely used in official functions and commerce. This mix of use of scripts and the perception of longevity influence opinions and views in such a way that the more widely used and more preferred script increasingly serves populations in bigger geographical locations. Arabic as a regional, Ge'ez as a national and Latin as local scripts carry different weights.

The official use of Latin in schools could easily be contrasted to the low use of the script in society at large and the lower position it holds among a significant number of its users. This mismatch between the minimum social use and the lower values attached to Latin and its officially sanctioned use in public institutions attracts attention towards the unique language policy in Eritrea.

The study of social uses and values of literacy and scripts may prove helpful in implementing changes to the mother tongue education and the classroom

instruction of literacy in multilingual Eritrea. Interventions that target social perceptions could also benefit from studies of the social use of literacy.

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