

BOOK REVIEW: HERMAN M. BABITO'S LANGUAGE, DECLINE AND DEATH IN AFRICA: CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES AND CHALLENGES

The book, *Language, Decline and Death in Africa: Causes, Consequences and Challenges*, is written by Herman M. Babito, a professor of African Linguistics, who has extensive experience with language issues in the continent. The book provides scholars interested in language endangerment in general and in the decline of African languages in particular an overview of the complicated and complex language situation in Africa. Babito provides readers a fascinating insight to the state of the 2,000 languages spoken in 50 countries in Africa through the presentation of the relevant theoretical framework and facts. The book is divided into eight substantive chapters.

In the first chapter, the author provides an overview of the complex linguistic situation in Africa. The author does not attempt to provide a definite figure for the number of languages in Africa but instead describes the four major language families, sub-families and the countries where these languages are spoken. Ethnic groups in Africa are easily identified through their language and the author argues that it becomes increasingly important to preserve the linguistic and cultural identity of the various ethnic groups in the continent. In addition, he explains that movements, marriage and inter-marriages which promote language contact among the languages results in “complex dominance patterns and linguistic marginalization” (Babito, 2005: 15). The author argues that this plurilingualism phenomenon in Africa is indeed a challenge for the governments and that it has a considerable impact on decisions that affects the nations. The author ends this chapter with a call for a new model, such as one that embraces plurilingualism, and a new approach to language issues in Africa. The impact of this unique language phenomenon is further explored in the next chapter. In chapter 2 entitled ‘Patterns of language use in Africa’ the author describes how most multilingual Africans use language. Factors such as domains and relationship with the interlocutor determine what language is used in a specific situation. Babito introduces the triglossic structure model in explaining the language use patterns. He describes the status and function certain languages such as ex-colonial, dominant and minority languages have in the society. Some languages are more prestigious than others and therefore used in domains that are more public

and formal. As a result of this hierarchical structure, dominant and minority languages are marginalized.

The author explains in chapter 3 that contact between languages in Africa results in the differing patterns of language choice among Africans. He reiterates that the role and function each language plays in the community are important factors in language choice among most Africans. However, Africans are shifting their language use from their mother tongue languages to dominant languages because these languages are socially and economically more attractive. While the cultural and artistic wealth of African languages is undeniable, the author argues that minority languages can also serve as a vehicle for national development. He calls for the African governments to examine the language situation in their countries and establish policies that will allow for the development of the minority languages. In chapter 4 the author explains the disadvantaged position many minority languages have in Africa communities and explains that because these languages are ‘inferior’ Africans tend to use them only for family and village communication. This marginalization and limited public functions are factors that characterizes a minority language. Because of the lack of status and prestige, speakers of minority languages are disadvantaged culturally and socially. More importantly, the minority language-speaking children are disadvantaged in the unfamiliar linguistic environment of school where the medium of instruction is the chosen national language or the ex-colonial language.

Babito’s focus in chapter 5 is the state of the endangered African languages. He first provides a generally accepted view of what make a language endangered and then describes the factors that are likely to cause language extinction. Babito provides country-by-country case studies in this chapter to reveal the extent of language endangerment and language death in the African continent. He concludes that the 1,623 African languages that are regarded ‘relatively safe’ are facing challenges that may not ensure its survival. Chapter 6 begins with definitions of terminology often used in language maintenance and language shift literature. He then presents two major theoretical approaches that have been used in the literature to explain how a language becomes endangered and eventually die and the reasons speakers of a language shift to another language. The causality-based model emphasizes the external setting of the language, the speech behavior of the speakers and structural changes of the language that contributes to the slow abandonment of a

language. The process-based model involves five phrases that explain how a language loses its viability and is replaced by another more dominant language. These two models are relevant in the African context because they explain the causes, effects and processes involved in language shift and death. According to Babito, pressures caused by demographic superiority, socio-economic attractions and political predominance result in speakers of a weaker African language shifting language use and abandoning their mother tongue.

Apart from positive language attitudes of the speakers, there are other factors that can help the maintenance of a language. These aspects of language maintenance are examined in chapter seven. When there is enough use of a language in various domains, Babito posits that stable diglossia happens. The well defined function for each language made by a bilingual or multilingual African helps the maintenance of the minority language. Other factors that are equally important in maintaining a minority language is a written mode, strong emotional attachment by the speakers, a normal intertransmission of the language and the regular reinforcement of language use by in-migration. Auburger's theory of language maintenance is used by Babito to examine the state of African languages and he emphasizes that speakers' attitudes towards their language is vital in language maintenance in Africa.

In the final chapter, the author advocates 'empowering' minority languages. He believes this would ensure the survival of the minority languages. He calls for governments to institutionalize measures to raise the social status of the languages which would make the languages more 'viable in handling public domains' (Babito, 2005: 115). He continues to argue that African governments must have a systematic language plan that addresses languages questions that exists in the individual countries. While there are many external organizations and foundations that are providing support to preserve the minority languages in Africa, Babito believes that speakers of these minority languages must be involved in the maintenance and revitalization programs. In the end, the author argues, the fate of a minority language remains in the hands of the speakers and communities concerned.

The Babito's insights and experience drawn from his previous studies provide readers with a glimpse of the grave language situation in the African continent. While there are language revival programs sponsored by non-governmental agencies currently underway in many African countries, the complexities of reviving and maintaining a minority language are undeniable. African governments must make it

a national priority to intervene and work on a more comprehensive language policy. Babito's book also serves as a wakeup call for governments around the world to preserve their indigenous and heritage languages and to address the problem of language shift among the minority languages before it is too late.

Reference:

Babito, H.M. (2005). *Language, Decline and Death in Africa: Causes, Consequences and Challenges*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

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