

Research Note

Mother Tongue Education Initiative: The Case of Aari Language Development Programme

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Abstract

The Aari language development initiative and its integration into the educational system represented a departure from the conventional practices observed in other language development programs across the country. The Aari language development programme embraced a bottom-up approach that actively involved and mobilized the broader community, ensuring political and social engagement at the grassroots level within the linguistic community. Decisions were made judiciously, based on informed considerations, and were monitored through a gradual implementation process with ample time allocated for evaluation, piloting, and testing of materials before their full deployment. The testing of orthography and teaching materials, piloting the materials in selected schools prior to their introduction to all 89 schools, and the decision to teach the language as a subject with future plans to utilize it as a medium of instruction in lower primary schools all point to a deliberate process of consultation in decision-making. The design and preparation were afforded adequate time, and implementation was carried out gradually over a span of four years. We contend that there are several lessons to be gleaned from the Aari language development programme and its emphasis on empowering the local community and fostering local ownership, which are fundamental principles of linguistic citizenship. These lessons could prove valuable as the country endeavors to expand the use of additional languages in education and other formal domains.

1 Introduction

Immediately after the declaration of the Charter of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE 1991), and the pronouncement of the Educational and Training Policy (ETP 1994) issued by the Ministry of Education (MOE) of the federal government, demands for the official uses of local languages for administrative purposes as well in formal education had gained importance among the various linguistic groups of the country. According to the Ethiopian language policy stipulated in the 1994 ETP and the 1995 Constitution of the FDRE (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia), every nation, nationality and people has the right to develop and use its language in any domain including in education. The policy further proclaims that the medium of instruction at primary level shall be the mother tongue (ETP 1994).

Following these policy decisions, a massive language development work began in several languages where orthographies were designed and teaching materials were prepared for primary education. To date, around 48 languages have been introduced into the school system either as a subject to be taught or as a medium of instruction for the lower grades. Until 2006 twenty languages were being used as a medium of instruction in their respective regions or sub-regions. By 2016 twenty-one more languages had been added to the list. Seven more languages were also being taught as a school subject in their respective localities (Heugh et al 2007; MOE 2009; Ahlberg 2020). The language development initiative in Aari was begun two decades after the national policy pronouncement. Hence, Aari happened to be one of the latest to join the mother tongue education programme and become a written language.

The formulations of Ethiopian language and educational policies followed a top-down approach. No public consultation was made to establish popular support and the rapidity with which the policy was introduced raised questions about its implementation. The time span in which some of the major languages of the country implemented the policy was rather too short. Over the past few decades, by and large, language development projects were initiated by a handful of the political elite and decisions were often made without the benefit of adequate preparation and research. Language development programmes were invariably conducted in an amateurish way without proper technical support from linguists or language planners.

We claim that the process of the Aari language development initiative and its introduction into the school system was quite different from the customary practices followed by other language development programmes in the country. The Aari language development programme not only had the advantage of being a late-comer but it

followed a bottom-up approach that involved and mobilized the community at large and ensured the political and social participation of the linguistic community at grass roots level. In this report, we shall describe the process through which the Aari language development programme had been going in light of the concept of linguistic citizenship, as proposed by Stroud (2001), which emphasizes the local ownership and political participation of the community rather than reliance on legal provisions.

2 Linguistic Citizenship

Linguistic citizenship (LC) is a concept proposed to extend the notion of linguistic human rights (LHR) to the politics of language, particularly to mother tongue education initiatives and sustainability. LHR tends to promote selective agency and ignores the material and economic constraints in the implementation of rights, and rests on a form of affirmative politics of recognition (Stroud 2001). Proponents of the LC concept argue that it offers a more comprehensive and theoretically robust framework for understanding the challenges inherent in language politics compared to the limitations of LHRs. LC is a way of capturing how issues of language may be accorded a central place in the arena of education and politics. It rests on a different conception and policy of multilingual schooling and advocates for an approach to resource distribution in a politics of identity framework. LC claims to provide an integrative view of language policy and planning in the context of mother tongue education programmes. While conventional language development initiatives have predominantly focused on technical, pedagogical and economic aspects, LC contends that the success or failure of mother tongue education programmes hinges upon community involvement in formulating and executing their language development initiatives. Consequently, LC underscores the significance of political and social participation within linguistic communities, prioritizing this over reliance on legal provisions. The fundamental tenets and strategies of LC involve empowering local communities and fostering a sense of ownership through inclusive and consultative approaches and engagements.

3 The Aari Language and Its speakers

The Aari people, primarily agriculturalists residing in the highlands of South Omo region, engage in cultivating various cereal and cash crops like cardamom and coffee, alongside raising various domestic animals. The Aari are an Omotic speaking people of about 280,187 individuals (CAS 2008) living in the current Aari Zone of the South Ethiopia Regional State. As recently as September 2023, the Aari community achieved

recognition as a sub-regional state forming the Aari zonal administration, comprising the former five woredas of the Aari speaking communities. Prior to that, it was part of South-Omo Zone of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPR).

The Aari people are surrounded by various ethnic groups and bordered by Goffa and Basketo to the north, Hamer, Dasenech, Benna and Maale to the east, and Mursi, Dime, and Bodi to the west. The area, the people and their culture have been relatively marginalized. For example, access to basic education is low and it is only recently that the language has been introduced into the school system. The Aari people are proud of their history and culture and attempts have been made to enjoy their cultural self-determination, including recognition and development of their language.

4 The Aari Language Development

4.1 The Initiative

The Aari language development project was a locally initiated program by a group of former educators who transitioned into political and local administrative roles. The initiative was a result of several informal brain-storming sessions conducted between the local elite, linguists and educational experts engaged in describing and documenting languages spoken in the region.

At the initial stage, technical and financial support was provided by the Federal Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the regional Bureau of Culture and Tourism through the small grant secured by linguists affiliated with Addis Ababa University. Subsequently, further backing was secured from the NORAD-funded project entitled: “Linguistic Capacity Building” which was implemented by the Department of Linguistics of Addis Ababa University through the involvement of the same professional linguists in charge of the project management. The language development process passes through different phases of work, as detailed below.

4.2 The Consultation Phase

The consultation phase was an all-embracing activity involving community members, political elite, school principals and teachers, and experts from the Department of Education of the local administration. In addition, individuals who were engaged in language development endeavors in one way or the other were invited. These include members of the local church community who have been working on the translation of the Bible into the Aari language for several years and individuals who were involved in documentation of the oral literature on their own personal initiatives.

In total, six consultative workshops were held in which all the above-mentioned stakeholders took part in the various discussions on issues ranging from accommodating dialect variations to the issue of script choice. In all the workshops conducted linguists were involved as experts providing technical advice on dialect variations of the Aari language, script choice, orthographic development and issues related to launching and running mother tongue education programmes. The technical support had always been demand-driven, and without interfering in the decision-making processes. These consultative workshops were effectively used for consensus building among the members of the community as well as major stakeholders such as religious leaders, local administrators and the political elite in general.

In order to streamline language development activities, a language development committee was formed, comprising all sectors of the community, and assumed full responsibility to carry out the language development activities required to make the Aari language ready for use in education. Consequently, sub-committees on the preparation of teaching materials and compilation of a trilingual dictionary were also formed.

4.3 Language Development Activities

The major language development activities were outlined by the language committee. These include: script choice and the development of orthography, preparation of teaching materials, dialect harmonization, compilation of a trilingual dictionary, preparation of teachers' guide, testing of the materials as well as organizing teacher training programs on the newly prepared orthography and teaching materials.

i) Script Choice and the Preparation of Orthography

Script choice was one of the most delicate issues. It took a longer time and required a series of consultations to decide because of the varying interests among the members of the community and the political elite. Ethiopia has a bi-script policy where language communities have to choose between Ge'ez/Ethiopic and Roman scripts for writing their language and at least initially community members were divided between the two scripts.

The local church has spent several years translating the Bible into the Aari language using the Ge'ez script and published biblical literature. So there was an interest on the part of the church to continue the tradition of using the Ge'ez script for the envisaged mother tongue education. On the other hand, the political elite, who had been influenced by the practice of adopting the Roman script in writing the

various Cushitic and Omotic languages over the past decades, had shown preference for adopting the Roman script.

In order to help with the script choice, linguists involved in the process designed preliminary practical orthographies in both Ge'ez and Roman scripts. Both versions of the script were distributed to the participants of the workshops as well as to school teachers so that they could try both scripts and see for themselves the suitability of each script to the Aari language. It was clear that script choice is not only a technical matter but also a political and social concern.

After a while, a workshop was organized for a larger gathering that included top politicians, parliamentarians, woreda council members, community and religious leaders, professionals in the zonal administration, teachers and other members of the community such as the representatives of youth and women. After rounds of debates and consultations a consensus was reached among members of the participants on the adoption of the Roman script for writing the Aari language. Apparently, the local church representatives had withdrawn their suggestion for adopting the Ge'ez script and agreed to the proposal of the majority of the participants as a result of deliberate consultations made to build a consensus on the issue of script choice. As shown in the process of consultations, the factors that mattered most in the choice of script were not the technical considerations but the political and societal considerations. The development of orthography is always the result of a series of compromises and in order to ensure acceptability and ownership among all stakeholders the process of consensus building was critical.

Then, the Aari orthography was designed by professional linguists. In the preparation of the orthography technical considerations such as ease of learning, ease of printing and the principle of economy were utilized. Linguists may prefer a writing system that takes the structure of the language fully into account; indeed, it may be that the linguistic reality and its analysis offer solutions which are elegant and relatively simple. However, orthography is not only a linguistic reality, it is also a social convention, to be adopted and used by a community of speakers with their particular history, social relations, political context and cultural heritage. Thus all these factors must form part of the decisions about how to write a language.

Finally, the woreda council approved the orthography and gave a green light, as part of the procedure, for launching of the mother tongue education programme in the Aari language.

ii) Preparation of Teaching Materials

Upon the approval of the orthography by the woreda council, the preparation of the teaching materials for the lower grades had been started officially with the technical support of professional linguists. The teaching materials were prepared following the national curriculum framework prepared by the Federal MOE with localization to the Aari culture and environment.

iii) Dialect Harmonization

Most languages have distinct dialects, which may differ from one locality to the other, from one group to the other, etc. These varieties often systematically differ in their sound patterns, vocabulary, etc. The challenge is to devise an orthography that will serve all the varieties of the language.

The Aari language is reported to have seven dialects. The issue of dialect choice is also a sensitive matter. There was a heated discussion among the community members on which dialect to choose and how the other dialects would be incorporated in the process of designing the orthography and other teaching materials. Choosing one central dialect proved to be difficult and no consensus was reached on the selection of a central dialect. The very idea of selecting one variety as a main one for the design of the orthography was strongly opposed by some participants. At the end, a compromise was reached to follow an inclusive approach of harmonization of the dialects rather than the standardization. To this effect, a training workshop was organized by experts on how to harmonize dialectal variations for the purpose of designing an orthography. Harmonization was agreed to be implemented not only in the preparation of orthography but also in the development of teaching materials and the trilingual dictionary. It was a multi-lectal approach where at least the major dialects were accommodated and thus one group was not clearly favored over the others.

iv) Compilation of a Trilingual Dictionary

A sub-committee established for compiling a trilingual dictionary (Araph¹-Amharic-English) commenced working on the dictionary with technical support from professional linguists. The trilingual dictionary was prepared by the local staffs that were given three-day training on the principles of dictionary preparation. Then the draft manuscript was reviewed by experts and given feedback for further improvements. The

¹ Araph is the name of the language in the Aari language like Amarigna is for Amharic.

corrected and edited version of the dictionary was published in 2018 through the support of the NORAD-funded project: Linguistic Capacity Building. Some 5000 copies were delivered by the project to the Department of Education of the zonal administration to be distributed to the various schools.

v) Preparation of Teachers' Guide

As part of the development of supporting teaching materials, the preparation of teachers' guide was undertaken concurrently with the language development team and then it was evaluated by experts. Based on the feedback drawn from experts the teachers' guide was improved and finalized for publication and distribution. The teachers' guide was meant to introduce the teachers to how the new orthography works, its special features and how to teach the orthography in classrooms.

vi) Testing the Materials

Orthography must be field-tested to discover how adequate it is, how easy it is to read and to write and to identify the kinds of problems that may emerge. Testing orthography or a teaching material can be used to check on acceptability and learnability of a specific system.

The Aari orthography and teaching materials were tested in 30 sample primary schools overall before its implementation. In 2014 the materials were tested in 6 primary schools and in 2015 they were tested in 24 schools. Based on the feedback received from school teachers, supervisors and principals revisions were made before the publication of the materials.

vii) Conducting Teacher Training

In order to familiarize the school teachers with the new orthography, five capacity-building workshops were organized for training of trainers between 2014–2015. The training covered topics such as the principles of orthographic development, mother tongue education programme, and preparation of supporting teaching materials for the planned mother tongue education in the Aari language.

5 Launching the Mother Tongue Education

Finally, the revised version of the orthography and the teaching materials were introduced in all the 89 primary schools as of the 2016–2017 academic calendar, and Aari has been taught as a school subject since then.

The Aari language development initiative and the preparation made for launching the mother tongue education programme had taken more than three years of work. But the most important highlights of the process were community participation and ownership in the initiative, design and implementation of the language development processes which were complemented by the process of building consensus among the major stakeholders through consultations, training and informed decision-making activities.

Among the Aari speakers, as elsewhere, language is not only a means of communication, but also a symbol of identity. Transforming an unwritten language into a written one is a matter of great cultural significance that changes the nature of the relationship of the community to its language. For the members of the community this means that the language has come of age or has acquired a new status alongside the other written languages of the country.

Following all the preparations and consultations the programme has officially been approved and mother tongue education was launched in 2017. The Aari language then started to be taught as a subject as of grade one in 89 primary schools. The decision to start teaching the language as a subject was deliberate in order to gradually move to the use of the language as a medium of instruction at the level of the first-cycle of primary education. At different stages of development, many issues and challenges had emerged and that is to be expected and to be appreciated. Some had been settled by a deliberate process of consultation and decision-making, others evolved slowly with a consensus gradually emerging.

6 Summary

Unlike many language development initiatives in the country, the Aari language development programme can be characterized by local ownership and community involvement from the design of the programme up to its implementation. We claim that the introduction of the Aari language into the mother tongue education programme demonstrates key features of linguistic citizenship. The whole process was consultative, inclusive and participatory. Several consultative processes had taken place to create a sense of ownership and to build consensus among the major stakeholders on the vital issues.

The decisions made and the activities undertaken were measured, informed and monitored in a gradual implementation process with reasonable time span for evaluation, piloting and testing the materials before putting them into use. The testing

of orthography and teaching materials, piloting the materials in selected schools prior to introducing them to all 89 schools, and teaching the language as a subject with future plans to using it as a medium of instruction in the lower primary schools are all indications that decisions were made by a deliberate process of consultations and their implementations were measured and carefully evaluated. Understanding such projects need time, the design and preparation has been given reasonable time and the implementation was done gradually in a span of four years.

Above all, there was a political and social participation of the linguistic community that helped to build local ownership. Technical support was provided strategically and it was demand-driven without compromising the central place of local ownership.

We believe there are a few lessons to be drawn from the Aari language development programme and its approach of empowering local community and creating local ownership, which are core tenets of linguistic citizenship. These lessons could be useful as the country expands the use of more languages into education and other formal domains, which requires spoken languages to be converted into written ones.

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