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Language Policy in Federal Ethiopia: Too Much or Too Little?

Yonatan T. Fessha

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LANGUAGE POLICY IN FEDERAL AND DEVOLVED COUNTRIES
Project Overview

Language is a highly significant marker of individual and collective identities. It often provides an impulse for national or community affirmation and claims to self-government. Provisions to recognize and accommodate linguistic differences can be particularly salient in federations, many of which have highly diverse populations. Indeed, in quite a few cases linguistic diversity was one of the key reasons why federalism was central to a country's founding framework or the result of its constitutional evolution.

Several federal countries have designated more than one language as official (or national) languages in the federal constitution and/or legislation. In turn, the constituent units (states, provinces, etc.) may accord a similar status to one or more languages. The different designations are not merely symbolic: they usually require or lead to policies, programs and other measures to govern language use. In some nonfederal states where more than one language is spoken, a measure of authority over language policy has sometimes been devolved to regional governments (or the equivalent).

Language rules, including for service provision, are frequently an important dimension of policy sectors that are exclusively or largely the responsibility of constituent unit governments. One such sector is education. In various countries, there are calls for teaching to be given not only in officially recognized languages but also in others that are spoken by minorities that are fearful about the future of their language. Indigenous peoples in particular have concerns about the viability of their languages, many of which have a long history of suppression.

In some countries, language policies are well established and are largely uncontested. In others, the policies and/or their application are controversial – even divisive. This may be true not only in newer federations and devolved systems but also in those with a longer history. Because of their links to identity and culture (among other factors), languages can be – indeed, quite often are – a potent basis for political mobilization.

Even when political dynamics are not highly charged, pressures to change or reform language policies and programs are not uncommon. Some demands are fundamental (e.g. additional or stronger constitutional protection), while others are more administrative or technical. In light of their salience to citizens and their relevance in a range of sectors, it is not surprising that language policies are debated, reviewed and (at least in certain cases) modified.

Although there are a number of individual case studies, particularly covering countries where language has been a flash point for political division, there is a lack of comparative research. Moreover, existing comparative studies often focus on western Europe and North America. As more countries have adopted federal or devolved structures in recent decades, there is a need to expand the scope of research on language policies in plurilingual contexts.

The focus of this project is on language policy (broadly interpreted) in a range of countries that are federations or have a significantly devolved structure of government. It aims to take a holistic perspective on language policy and its place within governance arrangements. In addition to providing an overview of the country's demography, constitutional recognitions and protections, and language

laws and policies, in order to encourage comparison authors were asked to address a common set of questions:

A. What potential changes to the regulation of language – constitutional, legislative, administrative – have been proposed or are currently being debated?
B. What are the pressures and who are the main actors behind the proposed changes?
C. Which have received the most attention and/or seem the most feasible?

We hope that the authors' responses to these questions will inform public discussion and understanding in their own countries as well as in others where similar issues are on the agenda.

This project was developed following an initial discussion with Felix Knüpling, Vice-President (Programs) of the Forum of Federations. To provide expert advice, we created an editorial team comprised of the following: Elisabeth Alber (Institute for Comparative Federalism, Eurac Research), Linda Cardinal (Université de l'Ontario français) and Asha Sarangi (Jawaharlal Nehru University). The editorial team commented on the initial outline of the program and provided suggestions for potential authors. We were fortunate to attract leading scholars from a range of disciplines. At least one member of the editorial team reviewed and provided comments on the initial version of each paper.

Felix and I are indebted to Elisabeth, Linda and Asha for their excellent cooperation throughout the process. I would also like to express my appreciation to the authors of the country papers for agreeing to join the project and for their responsiveness to comments on their draft papers. We are grateful to Carl Stieren for copy editing this paper. Finally, a big "thank you" to the Forum of Federations staff who administered the project and prepared the papers for publication: Olakunle Adeniran, John Light, Soumaya Marhnouj, Deanna Senko, George Stairs and Asma Zribi.

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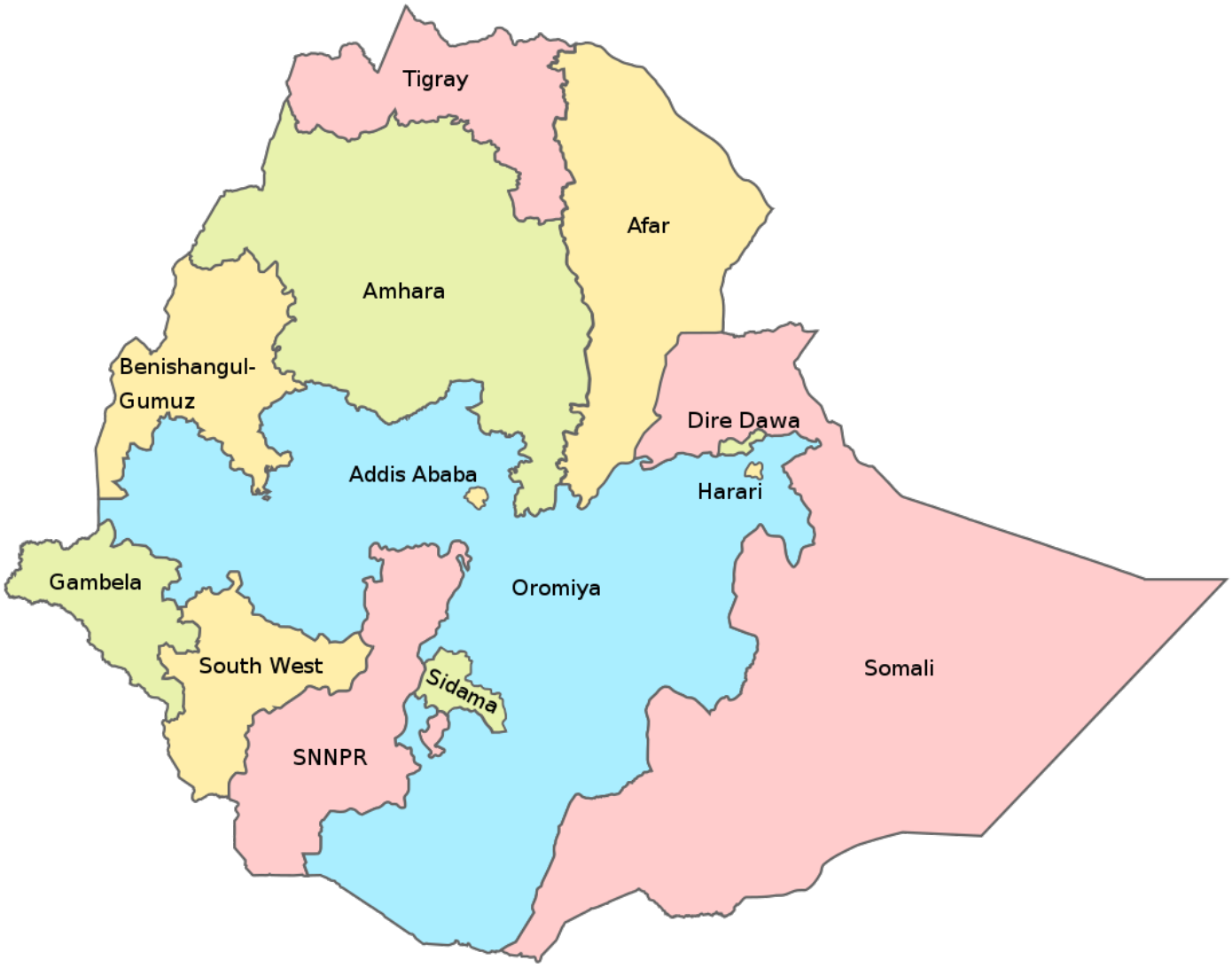
Language Policy in Federal Ethiopia: Too Much or Too Little?

Yonatan T. Fessha

ETHIOPIA[1]



[1] Map image downloaded from Jfblanc, CC BY-SA 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons. No changes were made to map.

Introduction

Ethiopia, a federation composed of 11 states and two self-governing cities, is home to a linguistically diverse society. More than 70 different languages are spoken by approximately 80 ethnic groups. This paper addresses current debates about language policy in Ethiopia and potential changes that might be introduced.

The paper shows how the country has significantly moved away from its days of unitary language policy. Ethiopia, for the most part of its modern history, was using one language for the purposes of government and education. It now uses multiple languages to conduct government business and facilitate education. Its detractors accuse the Constitution of creating a biblical tower of Babel that harms the unity of the country. Others complain that multilingualism is perpetuating the hegemonic status of Amharic, the historically dominant language. This paper concludes, however, that the Ethiopian Constitution by and large provides a territorial model of language planning that recognizes the linguistic diversity of Ethiopian society.

The paper begins with a brief account of the history of language policy in Ethiopia, including the development of Amharic as the dominant language of national communication. This dominance began during the Imperial period that ended in 1974 and continued during the military government that replaced it and ruled the country until 1991. I then explain the introduction of federalism in Ethiopia and how that has changed language policy dramatically. A review of language use at the federal and subnational levels follows. An explanation of how the language clause of the constitution has been implemented by the different states is then provided, along with the implications of that clause for the accommodation of diversity and the promotion of social cohesion. This is followed by a section on the laws and policies that regulate the use of languages in education. The paper then addresses some of the current and emerging issues with the use and regulation of languages in Ethiopia.

The Era of Unitary Language Policy

Although the Oromo are the largest ethnic group in the country, Oromiffa, the language of the Oromo, is not the most widely spoken language. Rather, Amharic is the most widely spoken language. Originally the language of the Amhara, the second-largest ethnic group, Amharic had around 31,800,000 mother-tongue speakers in 2018, accounting for about 30% of the country's population. An additional 25,100,000 individuals, or 23 percent, speak Amharic as a second language (Eberhard *et al.* 2021). Oromiffa is spoken by 34% of the population. Other common languages used by Ethiopians include Somali (6.25%), Tigrinya (6%), Sidami (5%) and Wolaytta (2.2%). The 70 or so different languages spoken in the country belong to two major language families, namely Afro-Asiatic and Nilo-Saharan (see Levine 2000; Bender *et al.* 1976). The Afroasiatic languages group, in turn, includes the Semitic, Cushitic and Omotic language groups. Twenty-two languages are considered endangered because they currently have 10,000 speakers or fewer (World Population Review 2021). For instance, according to UNESCO, Ongota, a language spoken in southwest Ethiopia, had only 12 elderly native speakers in 2012.

Table 1: Major ethnic groups in Ethiopia

Ethnic group	Number	% of population
Oromo	25,488,344	34.5
Amhara	19,867,817	26.9
Somali	4,581,793	6.2
Tigrie	4,483,776	6.1
Sidama	2,966,377	4.0
Guragie	1,867,350	2.5
Welaita	1,707,074	2.3
Hadiya	1,284,366	1.7
Afar	1,276,372	1.7
Gamo	1,107,163	1.5

Source: Data from Ethiopia, Central Statistics Authority 2007.

The linguistic diversity that characterizes the country is linked to King Minilik, who ruled the country between 1889 and 1913. Minilik increased the extent of the empire to five times its original size. That has turned a country of largely two linguistic groups (Tigre and Amhara) into the multilingual country that we call Ethiopia today. Yet even the first constitution of the country, adopted in 1931 by Emperor Haile Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia from 1930 to 1974, said nothing about the use of language. By the time Haile Selassie was crowned emperor of Ethiopia, however, Amharic, thanks to his predecessors, had already acquired huge significance.

> Teweodros II (1855-1868) was the first to make Amharic a literary language, elevating it into written form. He ensured his royal chronicles were written in Amharic rather than Ge'ez like those of his predecessors. Yohanes IV (1872-89) followed his lead, using Amharic in his correspondence with regional kings; although a Tigrigna-speaker himself, he believed Amharic could help unify the state. Minilik (1889-1913) then further spread the language as he expanded his territory, incorporating new ethnic groups and local elites into his power structures as he went along. Under him, Amharic became the language of Ethiopia's rulers. (Nebeyou 2019)

One of the earliest government mandates for a particular local language in Ethiopia came in 1944. That year, Imperial Decree 3 required missionaries to learn Amharic and teach in Amharic. However, it was only after the 1931 constitution was replaced by the 1955 constitution that Amharic was declared as the official language of the country (art. 125 of the 1995 Ethiopian constitution). During most of the imperial period, Amharic continued to serve as the sole language of government and education (Fellman 1992). A draft constitution that was prepared in the dying days of the monarchy included a clause that recognised the right of nationalities to maintain and develop their language and culture.

The overthrow of the monarchy through the 1974 revolution and the emergence of the military government as the undisputed ruler of the country did not bring significant change in its language policy. The military government, prompted by its Marxist-Leninist ideology that declared the emancipation and equality of nationalities, introduced only a few linguistic developments. Languages other than Amharic, such as Oromo, Tigrinya and Somali, started gaining more significance as there were more radio and TV broadcasts in these languages (Fellman 1992). The military government introduced the use of about 15 local languages in the literacy campaign that it conducted in the 1980s. That, however, did not extend to the use of languages other than Amharic in the education system.

Making matters worse, most of the teachers of the campaign were Amharic speakers who used their language to communicate in the areas they were teaching (Antenah and Ado 2006).

In 1987, the military government adopted a constitution that affirmed its commitment to the equal recognition of nationalities (Article 22, Constitution of the Peoples' Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, adopted 22 February 1987). That, however, was not translated into reality. In many respects, the language policy of the military government represented a continuity of the language policy of the imperial era. Amharic continued to serve as the only official language in which government communications were conducted and services provided. It also continued to serve as the sole medium of instruction in primary schools, and the country saw the introduction of English as the medium of instruction for secondary schools.

The fact that Amharic enjoyed a superior position throughout the country unavoidably benefitted native Amharic speakers disproportionately. The use of Amharic as the sole language of government and education has had an adverse impact on the identity and economic opportunity of individuals for whom Amharic is not their mother tongue: "[T]he distribution of the political goods of communication, recognition and autonomy has been highly skewed, benefiting native Amharic-speakers disproportionately" (Smith 2007, 5). It represented an extension of a policy that failed to recognize formally the existence of different linguistic groups or regard them as equal members of society.

Federalism and Multilingualism

If there is any particular year that can be regarded as a watershed in so far as the linguistic landscape of the country is concerned, it was 1991. That year, the armed struggle that had begun in 1974 in Tigray, in northern Ethiopia, by the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) reached a turning point. The TPLF managed to form a coalition of ethnic-based liberation movements under the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF),[2] and brought down the military government. This move paved the way for the establishment of a transitional government that was dominated by ethnic-based political organizations. The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) then joined the transition as a junior partner. At this time efforts to redefine the Ethiopian state started in earnest under the leadership of the EPRDF and its junior partner, the OLF. The latter two organizations regarded Ethiopia as the "prison house of nationalities." They declared the establishment of a new political and constitutional order based on the rectification of historical injustice and the emancipation of nationalities as their main objectives.

Ethnicity emerged as the principal basis for the political and administrative organization of the country. This was already evident in the Transitional Charter, the constitutive document of the transitional government that was adopted in July 1991. It declared the equality of all languages and organized the subnational units along ethno-linguistic lines. This view of the Ethiopian state was codified in the 1995 constitution, which eschewed the commonly used opening words, "we the people of..." and instead opted for "We the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia." The political

[2] As the TPLF took control of Tigray, it decided to proceed south to overthrow the military government. Along the way, it created alliances with other political groupings, beginning with the Ethiopian National Democratic Movement in the state of Amhara. The war against the military junta then expanded into what is now Oromia. There the TPLF established the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), formed from captured Oromo soldiers and officers. These three groups came together to create the EPRDF. The last to join the coalition was the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Front, primarily created by the TPLF.

and constitutional arrangements that the constitution established are thus commonly referred to as a system of ethnic federalism. Irrespective of the designation used to describe the federation, the words from the constitution quoted above represent a major departure from a past that claimed, or sought to construct, a common nationhood and to discourage—or even suppress—the political expression of ethnicity.

Although Ethiopia is home to more than 70 ethno-linguistic groups, the federation is composed of only 11 states that are by and large demarcated along ethno-linguistic lines. Six of the 11 states, though home to a number of ethnic groups, are designated by the name of the ethnic group that accounts for the overwhelming majority of the population of the state. Ethnicity is also not absent in the organization of the remaining five states, which are internally far more diverse than the other states. Most of these states are composed of ethnic-based local governments. Ethnic groups that do not acquire their own state have therefore been given their own local government, in one form or another. However, this idea of giving ethnic groups a homeland flies in the face of a demographic reality that betrays homogeneity at almost every level of territorial organization. For example, although the state of Oromia is defined as the homeland of the Oromo, more than three million inhabitants of the state belong to other ethnic groups. The same is true with the other states. Some might be more diverse than others, but linguistic diversity characterizes the population of all 11 states.

In addition to establishing ethnic-based states and local governments, the constitution provides ample recognition of cultural diversity. That is, in fact, a central feature of the current constitutional order. In addition to the declaration at the outset of the constitution, article 39 grants every ethnic group "the right to speak, write and develop its language and to promote its culture, help it grow and flourish, and preserve its historical heritage." The recognition of cultural diversity was accompanied by the introduction of multilingualism. The constitution, under article 5, declares the equality of all languages spoken in the country.

As the ensuing discussion reveals, the current constitutional position on language usage represents a major departure from the past where only one language enjoyed the privileged status of the language of government and education. Unlike the 1987 constitution, the first and only constitution adopted by the military government, the current constitution does not simply pay lip service to the equality of languages. It has gone a long way in translating the constitutional promise of equality of languages into reality.

Language Use for Government Business

Federal government and language policy

From the outset, it is important to note that Ethiopia, faced with an ocean of linguistic diversity, has opted not to adopt an official language or languages. Formally speaking, the federal government does not have an official language policy. Instead, the constitution stipulates that Amharic is the working language of the federal government. In consequence, Amharic, according to Article 5 (2) of the constitution, is the only language in which the federal government provides services. It is also the only language of communication between the federal and state governments.

The decision to designate Amharic as a working, but not the official, language of the federal government was obviously intended to avoid conveying the message that one language is dominant over others. It can be debated how successful the system is in overcoming the dilemma that it tries to

circumvent. Certain sections of society regard the continued predominant use of Amharic at the federal level as a continuation of their marginalization and the perpetuation of past policies that subordinated all other languages to Amharic. They regard it as a "little more than the continued endorsement of the superior position of the language, and the sections of society associated with it, by the Ethiopian state" (Cohen 2000, 111). For these sections of the society, the policy undermines the constitutional principle that all languages are equal. The strongest vocal opposition to the decision of the constitution to use Amharic as the sole working language of the federal government comes from political parties that claim to represent the Oromo, who call for the adoption of Oromiffa as the co-working language of the federal government (Bulcha 1997).

It is true that the retention of Amharic as the language of national communication can appear to some as the continuation of the Amharic hegemony. However, its continued use can hardly be associated with deliberate symbolic dominance. As the next section shows, the constitution is clearly committed to multilingualism.

Subnational units and language policy

Article 5 (3) of the constitution allows each state to adopt its working language—that is, the language in which it provides services. In practice, six of the 11 states have opted to make the language of the majority in the state their working language. Languages like Oromiffa, Tigrinya, Sidama, Afar and Somali serve as a working language of state governments in Oromia, Tigray, Sidama, Afar and Somalia respectively. Four states (the SNNPR, Benishangul, Gambela and South West states) have opted to retain Amharic as their working language. So far, the only state which designated two working languages is Harari. By law, ethnic-based local governments can and have picked the numerically dominant language in the local area as the language of local government business and services (Ayele 2014).

By leaving the decision of language policy to the ethnically defined state and local governments, the constitution has obviously adopted a territorial model of language planning. The approach provides ample room for each ethnic community to develop its language. Its decision to adopt such a model also represents recognition of the linguistic identities of the constituent units. Moreover, it marks a clean break with the past during which Amharic enjoyed a superior position throughout the country.

Table 2: Language use by states

State	State working language(s)	Minimum number of other languages spoken
Tigray	Tigrinya	2
Afar	Afar	1
Amhara	Amharic	3
Oromia	Oromiffa	2
Somali	Somali	2
Benishangul- Gumuz	Amharic	5
SNNP	Amharic	50
Gambella	Amharic	5
Harari	Harari and Oromiffa	1
Sidama	Sidama	2
South West	Amharic	6

Source: Compiled from Ethiopia, Central Statistics Authority 2007.

In the early days of Ethiopian federalism, the language clause was criticized on the ground that it was attempting to create a "biblical tower of Babel" in Ethiopia. If that was not the intention, so the argument goes, the drafters of the constitution would have opted to encourage the use of Amharic, ultimately developing it as the national language. According to this argument, Amharic could serve "as an important instrument for the eventual creation of greater cohesion among Ethiopians in language and in a sense of common national destiny as one people" (Minase 1996, 37). This view does not take account of the reason that Amharic retains a special place in the Ethiopian linguistic landscape. Generally, Amharic is still given precedence over all other languages. As noted above, it is the working language of the federal government. Communications between the federal government and a state government or between two state governments are conducted in Amharic. With the view of promoting Amharic as the language of national communication, it is taught as a subject in almost all primary schools throughout the country. As mentioned above, four states use Amharic as their sole working language. A fifth state, Harari, uses two official languages, Amharic and Oromiffa. Generally, Amharic can still serve as a cohesive force by facilitating communication between and among the different ethnic groups. In any case, after more than two decades of federalism and multilingualism, there is hardly any political or social group that criticizes the power of state governments to use their local language for government business.

The major criticism often directed against the language policy is that it has led to state governments using only one working language, with the sole exception of Harari. This has created a problem in some areas where an important number of minorities are scattered amid the locally dominant linguistic groups, especially in major urban areas of some of the member states. For example, close to three million Amharic-speaking citizens living in Oromia do not enjoy language protection and can only access government services in Oromiffa, the sole working language of the state of Oromia. In a country like Ethiopia where the subnational units are home to many people who do not belong to the empowered subnational majority, the policy of unilingualism easily causes strain on inter-ethnic relationships and runs the risk of alienating members of some ethnic groups.

Language in Education

Under the Ethiopian constitution, providing primary education is a competence of state governments. This power, coupled with the constitutional provision that allows states to determine their language policy, suggests that state governments have the power to determine the language(s) used in education. Yet the federal government is authorized by the constitution to "establish and monitor" national standards and "basic policy criteria" in several areas, including education. This allows the federal government to limit the minimum floor beyond which the provision of services cannot be expected to fall.

The only major federal document that explicitly deals with language of instruction in education is the Education and Training Policy (ETP). It was issued by the federal Ministry of Education in 1994. It was inspired by the Transitional Charter which in 1991, declared the equality of all languages. The ETP mandates the use of local languages in primary education. This policy specifically provides that "cognizant of the pedagogical advantage of the child learning in mother tongue, and the rights of nationalities to promote the use of their languages, primary education will be given in nationality languages." The policy mandates the provision of mother tongue education until the student completes primary education. This means that a student is expected to receive education in his/her mother tongue until he or she completes 8th grade. It is important to note that the policy provides that "nations and nationalities can either learn in their own language or can choose from among those

selected on the basis of national and countrywide distribution." Thus, the policy does not make the use of the student's own language compulsory for the purpose of education. In practice, the power to implement mother tongue education is left to the states where schools are now using as the language of instruction not only the working language of the state but also many other languages spoken within the state.

The policy represents a change in language policy from one that authorized Amharic as the only medium of instruction to one that gives room for the use of various minority languages as a means of medium of instruction at the earlier stages of education. One great advantage of the ETP is that it left the power to decide on language in education policy in the hands of state governments. From a country of one language in education, Ethiopia has evolved into a country in which more than 45 languages are used as a language of instruction at one or another level of primary education. Efforts are also underway by state governments to prepare many other languages to be used as a language of instruction. This is a considerable achievement given that "[m]any of these languages have never been written before, requiring local "experts" to select orthographies, develop standardized grammars and oversee translation" (Smith 2008, 26). It has brought an end to the dominant position of Amharic in areas of education as the sole medium as well as a separate subject throughout primary and secondary education (Lanza and Woldermariam 2015; Bloor and Tamrat 1996).

However, a closer look at the implementation of the policy reveals that many states have not fully and consistently complied with the policy. To begin with, there are no clear criteria for determining the languages that must be used in education. This is simply left to the discretion of state and local authorities. Further, more than two decades after the introduction of the ETP, many languages have not obtained the status of a language of instruction. As a result, parents in some communities are left with no option but to send their children to a school that uses the language they would not choose otherwise. Such behaviour forces others to vote with their feet and send their children to schools in neighboring towns (Cohen 2000). In addition, some authorities have forced certain communities, who believe that learning in one's mother tongue is economically disadvantageous and prefer to stick to Amharic, to send their children to schools that use their local languages (Boagle 2009, 1097). This contradicts a clearly stated rule of the ETP that provides communities with the discretion to learn either in their own language or to choose from those selected by national or regional governments. Receiving education in one's own language is not compulsory. Further, this misapplication of the policy fails to note that the imposition of language policy can be counterproductive in some cases. As noted by Kennedy (quoted in Bloor and Wondwosen 1996, 330), "[l]anguage change should be phased, move to a speed commensurate with social acceptance and be made in line with social trends, not by decree, otherwise community antagonisms will prevent implementation."

Emerging Issues and Future Directions

In a country with more than 70 languages and twice that number when dialects are included, it is unavoidable that the use of language becomes a thorny issue. Indeed, the language policies of the federal and state governments have emerged as major area of contention.

The working language of the federal government

The decision to designate Amharic as the only working language of the federal government in the constitution has been increasingly contentious. Oromiffa is the language of the Oromo, the largest ethnic group in the country. With those numbers, Oromo nationalists have intensified the demand for

the recognition of Oromiffa as an additional working language of the federal government. The demand started to be intensified four years ago when the youth in Oromia, the largest state in the federation, took to the streets protesting the Addis Ababa Master City Plan. These youths believed the Master Plan was part of a policy to drive the Oromo out of the capital city, take their lands and threaten their cultural survival (Chala 2016). This quickly morphed into a protest against the marginalization of the Oromo from public life. The TPLF was displaced as the most influential member of the coalition, through an alliance between two other members that claim to represent the two largest ethnic groups in the country, the Oromo and the Amhara. It also led to the emergence of the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (since renamed the Oromo Democratic Party or ODP) as a major player in the coalition. Its leader, Abiy Ahmed, became the leader of the coalition and the country. This emboldened the Oromo nationalists who continued putting pressure on the government. In 2019, the federal government declared its intentions to introduce four more languages as additional working languages of the federal government. However, a formal decision is yet to be made (Emi 2020).

Language policy at the subnational level

Language policy at the subnational level is also not without controversy. As indicated earlier, the constitution was intended to manage the challenges of linguistic diversity by allowing state and local governments to adopt their own language policy. That has allowed communities to promote their language and culture. At the same time, such flexibility by state and local governments has led to unilingualism, disadvantaging linguistic minorities that do not use the language selected by the state and local governments (Assefa and Mohammed 2010). There are many geographically dispersed ethnic migrants, especially in urban areas, who would be disadvantaged when government business is conducted in the language of the regionally empowered group. The policy has also restricted movement across the states, disrupting existing patterns and networks of exchange and communication between different areas and peoples. The policy has prompted many, especially those in political groups that claim to represent the Amhara, to call for replacing unilingualism with two co-official languages at the subnational level. The proponents of this view recommend using Amharic and the largest other major language in each constituent unit (see Bekele 2003). Many, for example, call for the official recognition of the Amharic language alongside Oromiffa in at least the major cities of the state of Oromia.

Using Amharic along with the regional languages as co-official languages in all states might, as some argue, help to promote the relationship between the different linguistic groups and accommodate linguistic minorities. This view, however, belies the structural imbalance between Amharic and the other languages. and the effect that this imbalance may have on the development of the latter. As indicated earlier, Amharic, to the exclusion of all other languages, has been the language of government business for decades. This provides Amharic with a unique position in terms of language status, which other languages would be hard pressed to compete with. Even in states where the speakers of other languages are in a majority, there is no guarantee that a policy of co-official languages would manage to avoid the dominance of the Amharic language. This does not mean that a policy of co-official languages should be avoided but that such a policy must be accompanied by measures that protect and promote the status of the other local languages.

The "education roadmap" and the teaching of Amharic

Language policy in education has also emerged as a controversial issue. Matters came to head with a Ministry of Education announcement in 2018. As part of the periodic review of the education system,

the ministry presented a so-called "education roadmap for 2018-2030," which introduced several important changes to the existing education system. The roadmap included a proposal that Amharic should be taught as a subject beginning from 1st grade throughout the country (Teferra *et al.* 2018). This proposal met with criticism. One of the main arguments leveled against it by Tigray and Oromo nationalists, was that it would allow the federal government to usurp powers that belong to state governments (Borkena 2019).

The federal government is authorized by the constitution to establish national standards. This arguably includes the decision that every school must teach the working language of the federal government as a subject. Yet, the federal government is not allowed to dictate to state governments how they should go about achieving those national standards. It is up to the state governments to put in place measures to ensure that their provision of service delivery does not fall below the minimum level set by the federal government. This means that the powers of the federal government cannot include determining at which level Amharic should be taught.

The problem with the ongoing debate on language in education and the proposed solutions is that it may be barking up the wrong tree. Obviously, the proposal to start teaching the federal working language beginning from 1st grade is motivated by the opinion that attributes the low level of proficiency in Amharic among students to the late introduction of Amharic in primary education. In Oromia, for example, students start learning Amharic from the 5th grade. It is not, however, clear if the late introduction of Amharic on its own explains the low level of proficiency. Rather, factors that have their root in local ideologies may contribute to the low level of student proficiency in that language. There has been a lukewarm attitude towards the use of Amharic in some of the states, facilitated partly by the empowerment and increasing use of other local languages in the public sphere and partly by attitudes towards Amharic as a language of dominance. As a result, the implementation of the national policy that designates Amharic as a language of national communication has not been effective. It seems that the positive change in attitude towards local languages is not accompanied by an equal appreciation of the role that Amharic continues to play, both as language of the federal government and as a means of communication throughout the country.

Draft language policy

Apart from the constitution and the ETP, there is no other legislation or policy that regulates the use of language in Ethiopia. This is true at both the federal and the state level. The development of a national language policy has been on the agenda for some time. In fact, the final draft of a language policy was submitted to the House of Peoples' Representatives at the end of 2015. According to the draft policy (which has not been published), every nationality, irrespective of its numerical size, has the right to use, preserve and promote its language. This includes the right of a community to access public services in the area it inhabits, using the language of the community or another language of choice. This extends to the right to be taught in the community's mother tongue or a language of wider communication chosen by the community. It envisages the provision of mother tongue education to run "at least from the kindergarten to the end of primary school." The community could also decide "that its mother tongue be taught as a subject to its children." The right would also extend to determining "the schools where its children shall be taught in a language of its choice, or establish[ing] its own school that meets appropriate standards." These same rights, mentioned above, in part or in full, depending on circumstances, would be extended to communities that are not geographically concentrated. Communities whose language is endangered would have the right to receive special assistance from the government.

Although the draft language policy was expected to be adopted in 2016, that has not happened yet. Language will be one of the thorny issues in any future debates on constitutional reform, including the work of the recently established but already beleaguered Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission. Although the process that led to the establishment of the commission and the selection of the commissioners has been strongly criticized by the opposition (Harter 2022), the government has been touting the Commission as the forum to deal with "the most fundamental national issues" (Ethiopia 2021).

Conclusion

A language rights regime for a multi-ethnic federation should recognize the linguistic identities of the constituent units. A constitutional provision that recognises all languages as equal is an indication of a country that accepts linguistic diversity. The constitution, by allowing each state to determine its language policy, has made it possible for communities to receive government services in their languages. Notably, members of more than 45 linguistic groups can send their children to schools that use their language as a medium of instruction. Yet the decision to designate Amharic, in the constitution, as the sole language of the federal government has been criticized as contrary to the declaration of the equality of languages. However, the decision to pick Amharic does not reflect the hegemony of the speakers of that language but the special position of Amharic as the most effective means of national communication. The inclusion of other language(s) as co-working language(s) of the federal government is likely to happen in the future.

The question remains whether states that use a local language as the working language of the state should also adopt Amharic as a co-official language. Of course, adopting the federal working language as co-official would promote social cohesion, considering that there is extensive movement of citizens across internal borders. The problem is that it could promote the hegemonic status that a historically privileged language group enjoys. However, in a country where many people do not speak the working language of the state, the adoption of a co-official policy seems unavoidable if ethnic diversity is to be accommodated. The dangers that a co-official policy might pose to the status of the local language could be reduced by allowing the states to introduce special measures to support the most widely spoken local language. The basic aim of such measures would be to restore and maintain the majority status that local languages should assume in areas where they are widely spoken. Without at least some preferential treatment, there is a danger that the working language of a state will be relegated to a secondary status.

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