

Literacy-Empowered Languages for Sustainable Development in Africa

by

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Résumé

Le niveau de développement d'une communauté humaine peut s'évaluer selon la capacité de celle-ci à adapter sa vision du monde à son environnement naturel et social dans l'optique d'améliorer ses conditions de vie. Ceci revient à dire que le développement est étroitement dépendant de notre vision du monde qui elle, peut être régulièrement revue et corrigée grâce à la langue, mais à condition que celle-ci soit enrichie de sa plus-value, c'est-à-dire, l'écriture. Mieux que l'éducation formelle classique, les programmes d'alphabétisation des adultes, mis au point autour des langues maternelles sont tout à fait indiqués pour développer des réflexes de lettré aux populations africaines. C'est la condition de la mise en œuvre d'un développement endogène, donc durable.

Mots-clés :

- *Contextualization/decontextualization, development, thinking strategy, literacy, cultural added value (CAV)*

Abstract

Development can be assessed through the way in which each human community organises itself to adjust its world perception to the social and natural environment so as to improve its living conditions. Implicit in this view is the assumption that development is, to a great extent, determined by our world perception. In turn, world perception can be constantly updated and re-adjusted through native languages empowered with their added value: literacy. Better than formal schooling systems, adult literacy programmes conducted in the context of non-formal education can capitalise on native languages and help instil literacy skills across the spectrum of African societies and so ensure a customised type of development on a sustainable basis.

Keywords :

- *Contextualisation/décontextualisation, développement, mode de pensée, littéracie, valeur culturelle ajoutée (VCA)*

INTRODUCTION

International organisations concerned with development in the world have set up and imposed quantitative methodologies to assess development performances. These indicators, ranging from Gross National Product (GNP), Gross Domestic Product (GDP), inflation rates, life expectancy, to number of cars or telephone lines per inhabitant, etc. generally apply to a very precise and short period on the life of the community under study. The problem with this methodology is that it favours the impression that development is a static reality that can be

likened to an *end product*. Such an approach amounts to assimilating development to an easily transferable *plug-and-play* product.

An alternative approach to development could be the qualitative one whereby development is perceived as a *process*. The process approach to development would consist in determining how each community deeply reaches into its internal and intellectual resources to organise itself over time, and to challenge natural or environmental adversities to improve its living standards. If we trace out how the development undertaken progressively emerges from the social dynamics, then we will be in a better position to identify the weak points in the process and possibly work out solutions for the special case of the African continent. Our hypothesis is that the differences among communities on the development scale are constrained, right from the start, by the way in which each human community organises itself to convert its world perception into social praxis. In this respect, communities which have empowered their (native) languages with the *cultural added value*, that is literacy, have a better chance to inch close to the standards of sustainable development.

The present paper is divided into three sections: the first section highlights the relationship between development process and world perception; the second section discusses how the original world perception can be “manipulated” so as to adjust to development prospects via language. The third section inspects the imbrications of development and language, especially language with its *cultural added value (CAV)*: literacy. In this section, we shall suggest ways to address development issues on a sustainable basis with native languages as the central component.

1. DEVELOPMENT AND WORLD PERCEPTION

1.1 Defining development

Development can broadly be defined as the body of actions that a community undertakes to improve its living conditions. The development process has many dimensions: historical, social and anthropological.

Obviously, development does not come out as a spontaneous generation. It first starts with the necessity to meet immediate biological demands to ensure survival (e.g. food gathering or production); next it extends to any other action destined to raise the living standards of a community (e.g. modern housing, improved sanitation, better health conditions, individual and collective security). Generally, all these are realised through an adequate social organisation and some of the resulting achievements are even reinvested as seeds to refuel the overall process.

1.2 The anthropological dimension of development

The anthropological dimension of development is that development is presumably the defining line between mankind and the animal kingdom. While change among animals is generally dictated by external factors (hunger, danger, sharp emotions, etc.), among humans, it generally originates from voluntarily planned actions. The anthropological factor inherent to development is also the fact that the actions humans initiate to face natural or social adversities are closely related to their perception of the world.

Broadly speaking, world perception refers to the way in which each human community views itself and how it is internally organised to act on or accommodate to the environment. In order to take action to monitor natural adversities and subsequently transform some of its resources, a community must conceive the universe as accessible to humanly conducted transformations. By way of example, the technological achievements of the conquests of space did not pop up overnight. Fiction writers (e.g. the French Jules Vernes) first imagined, long ago, that the universe could be explored and domesticated in some way. Later, the scientific discoveries that followed became subsequently converted into technological inventions. The themes developed in fiction literature stemmed from the prevailing world perception; for example, if the world-view of a traditional society is that a certain sacred forest must not be ploughed, then, their production endeavour will be limited to that extent. By contrast, if the dominant world perception of another community rules out such taboo-related limitations to the domestication of nature, their range of productivity will increase accordingly. Then, in order to initiate development, a community is bound to constantly re-adjust its initial world perception to development objectives and this *conscious manipulation* or *reshaping* of world perception is human in essence.

But if world perception is something deep-rooted in the human mind and presumably coalesces with our psyche, how do we access our world perception in order to manipulate it? We would hypothesise that in the history of mankind, scientific thought has been very crucial for the successive adjustments of initial world perception to fit actual development prospects. Obviously, literacy is a way of empowering language so that it can efficiently help manipulate our world perception.

2 SCIENTIFIC THOUGHT AND THE RE-ADJUSTMENT OF WORLD PERCEPTION

The contribution of science and technology to modern development cannot be denied. Indeed, scientific and technological advance correlate fairly well with development performances. In contemporary societies, science and technology are presumably the most formalised tools for reconsidering ancestral world perception, for rejecting most questionable beliefs or updating

them so that they adjust to novel social and economic practices. But how do we upgrade primitive world perceptions? Is the simple sophistication of the human mind enough to go about this tremendous task? How has scientific thought emerged from world perceptions? Psychologists like J. P. Denny (1991) account for the rise of scientific progress by a thinking strategy known as the *decontextualized thinking strategy*.

2.1 Decontextualisation and scientific thought

As opposed to “contextualisation thinking strategy” that relies on the information available in the immediate context, “decontextualized thinking” is the possibility of conducting conceptualisation tasks independently from contextual clues. Decontextualized strategy might have been crucial for the emergence and evolution of scientific epistemology. Scientific activity or conceptualisation necessarily starts with hypothesis-building; but hypothesising “about the imperceptible involves disconnecting one’s thinking from the reality that one perceives” (J. P. Denny 1991: 84). Since hypothesis building requires disconnecting oneself from reality, decontextualisation might have been the condition for scientific development. J. P. Denny next states that decontextualisation is specific to the industrialised societies of Western World while contextualisation is more specific of non-industrialised societies, such as African ones. In any case, being “*the process by which people think hypothetically about the world*” (C. A. MOSS & K. R. DYER 2010, p. 88) is perfectly in line with scientific reflexes and practices...

Although J. P. Denny does not relate overtly scientific development to languages, he does implicitly suggest that some societies are better prepared for modern scientific activities than others, his claims can be paralleled with similar hypotheses put forward by a prominent African intellectual like Senghor (1988, p. 170) who unequivocally relates language to scientific epistemology, but in a rather questionable way.

2.2 Language and scientific epistemology

2.2.1 Senghor’s controversial linguistic typology

Using some suspicious biological arguments, Senghor has come to the conclusion that European languages that are *subordination-dominated*, are genetically gifted for sciences. By contrast, non-European speech forms, hence African mediums, are *juxtaposition-dominated*. He insists that the *juxtaposition* feature causes logical reasoning to be more difficult and eventually draws the conclusion that African languages especially are more eligible for arts (poetry, music and dancing):

A la syntaxe de coordination et de juxtaposition des langues africaines, si propres à la poésie, s'oppose la syntaxe de subordinations des langues albo-européennes. C'est-à-dire que celles-ci sont essentiellement des langues scientifiques parce que de raisonnement (1988: 170)

Senghor's claims are ideological issues but we shall challenge them on linguistic grounds. The godfather of Négritude has, in fact, built his hypothesis on a misconstrued comparison between *oral speech* and *written speech*. In effect, Senghor's corpus of European languages is certainly compiled from written sources while the African texts come from oral sources. Our hypothesis is that the analytical property of some languages that make them more flexible for abstract speculations does not come from their internal structure as such, but rather from the fact that they have been empowered with scripts and the empowerment of language impacts and also empowers other aspects of development at large, including social, economic and political development (A. Robinson-Pant 2005; N. P. Stromquist 2005).

2.2.2 *The analytical power of written speech*

Let us compare oral speech to written speech, using a contrast discussed by Ong (1986, p. 30) between. According to Ong (op. cit.), oral speech is highly *integrative*, in the sense that it relies on contextual information. Instead, written speech is disconnected from background informational clues. Oral speech is used in communication situations where all the parameters of discourse (i.e. speaker and co-speaker, referents, etc.) are all *in praesentia* so that any complete elaboration of the speech becomes redundant (Silué 1999). As for written speech, it is called forth in situations of significantly reduced discourse parameters and so requires all necessary details because the reception is delayed and the receiver absent. As a result, written discourse is bound to be fully elaborated, hence its analytical status.

We would further hypothesise that languages with a writing tradition undergo changes (more limited in non-written ones)¹, namely with the progressive emergence of linking words acting as logical connectors. A more systematic survey on oral and written speeches from the same language supported by statistical evidence would certainly show that logical connectors are significantly more recurring in written speech than in oral speech. Therefore, it is, in fact, the literacy tradition that has favoured the progressive emergence of analytical properties of written

¹ *Most Africans who are bilingual of a European language and their own mother tongue are borrowing-addictive. There are general tendencies in this process: firstly, the borrowing is generally a one-way, from the European language to the African one; secondly, an African bilingual may decide to avoid borrowing but s/he is generally more successful at avoiding lexical borrowing and proves unable to have a significant control over the borrowing of function words. Those items acting as logical connectors (e. g. but, because, since, therefore...) are very recurring in his speech output. More than a manifestation of cultural alienation, this phenomenon reveals a sort of code mixing of elements characteristic of the written speech. It is as if the European language was interfering but more significantly through those linguistic operators specific to the written speech.*

languages, and that has eventually reinforced their rigorous, logical and abstractive properties over time. So, rejecting Senghor's ideologically biased hypothesis, we wish to conclude that it is rather literacy that makes a language appropriate for scientific activity and not an allegedly congenital structure. As a matter of fact, the development of some African languages like Ki-Swahili in Eastern Africa, Mandingo (ACCT, 1983) is fairly advanced. A language like Igbo (Emenanjo 1998; 1999) is now equipped with a meta-language in highly technical domains such as electronics. Besides, the relationship between language and thought is so tight that it seems reasonable to admit that language and thought influence each other in such a way that the language we frequently use may, in the long run, bring about considerable modifications to our thinking style².

2.3 Literacy and scientific epistemology

Scientific activity generally consists in hypothesis-building, and we agree with Denny (1991) that decontextualisation is a crucial operational strategy. Hypothesis-building involves a constant to and fro movement between prior experiences (contextual information actually) and unprecedented projections (decontextualised concepts). Manipulating former hypotheses in order to reconsider, update and possibly rectify them requires highly abstract skills, and such operations are clearly above the capacities of an ordinary human memory. Pre-scientific statements that are more abstract than concrete observable practices cannot be decontextualised and manipulated properly if they are not available in a plain and tangible format. Writing systems seem particularly suitable for fulfilling this function.

The role of literacy can be readily assimilated to an additional external memory. Let us imagine an individual who has to formulate a hypothesis; s/he is compelled to process simultaneously former information in his "long-term memory" (Wolvin and Coakley 1996: 83) and to work out subsequent constructs in "his short-term memory" (ibid.). Clearly, this task is highly complex and requires a great deal of memory investment. However, when the content of the long-term memory is recorded on an external support like a sheet of paper, the individual temporarily "ignores" the information already in hand to concentrate on anticipatory constructs necessary to formulate the hypothesis. Let us now consider a very practical example in scientific research: we would certainly agree that there is no way one can efficiently discuss a complex mathematical equation with several embedded parentheses. However, a reasonable alternative would be to resort to scriptural representation (i.e. literacy) whereby the individual can take time to disconnect himself from the cabalistic mathematical scripts of the formula, reconsider

² No doubt that intensive and continued reading of literary works written in a highly formal style may change an individual's speaking style. By dint of reading books, highly educated people come to adopt a very formal speech style close to written speech: it is as if they have come to "speak like books"! The most important thing here is to see that the long-standing reading of scripts contributes to modify the speech style.

it carefully so as to be able to suggest an original answer. In short, literacy stands out as an external memory³ that enhances the hypothesis-building capacity crucial for scientific progress.

3. LITERACY AND DEVELOPMENT

The process approach to development views development as the outcome of successive stages, among which the advent of literacy is one of the most decisive. The cause and effect relationship between development and literacy stands out with the figures yearly issued by the UNESCO. Indeed, the UNESCO data (displayed in Table 1) clearly indicate that development negatively correlates with the rates of illiteracy:

Table 1: Estimated Rates of Illiteracy and Development in 2000

Development Profile per Continents and Major Areas	Raw figures (millions of illiterates)	Percentages of illiterates
<i>World total</i>	876	20,6
Developed Countries	11	1,1
Developing Countries	184	26,3
Least developed countries	865	49,3
Europe	8	1,3
Oceania	1,1	4,6
America	44	7,3
Asia	641	24,9
Africa	182	40,3

Source: UNESCO Statistical Yearbook compiled in Silué (2000)

The least developed countries in which the African nations are naturally listed score poorly. There are also indications that the little amount of literacy obtained with formal schooling is not fully capitalised on to serve social and economic purposes. This can be measured indirectly through the circulation of newspapers. There again, the figures recorded for the Sub-Saharan area are lower in comparison to other areas of the world.

³ *The role of literacy to thinking tasks can be readily assimilated to the ROM (Read Only Memory) and the RAM (Random Access Memory) devices in computer systems (Silué 2000).*

Table 2: Daily newspapers: number and circulation in 1994

<i>Continents & Major Areas</i>	<i># of Dailies</i>	<i>Total</i>	
		<i>Estimated Circulation (millions)</i>	<i>/ 1,000 inhab.</i>
World total	8 391	548	96
Developed countries	3 972	276	226
Developing countries	4 419	272	60
Least Developed Nations	172	3.9	8.0
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Southern Asia	2 299	44	33
Latin Amer. & Caribbean	1 309	49	101
Eastern Asia & Oceania	400	102	56
Sub-Saharan Africa	168	7.1	12
Arab States	140	9.2	36

Source: UNESCO Statistical Yearbook compiled in Silué (2000).

The lower circulation of newspapers in the Sub-Saharan regions is an indication that literacy is not yet part of the cultural or social landscape. This also means that literacy still has a limited impact on more practical practices like improved agricultural techniques. A study by N. J. Kouadio (1992) gives evidence that, due to the low level of literacy, peasants of the Sub-Saharan region are the most assisted farmers in the world. For technical assistance in agriculture, while the ratio monitor-farmers is 1/600 in Southern-Asia, in Africa it is comparatively higher with a 1/68 ratio. The figures displayed in the two tables cover two kinds of information crucial for the present discussion. Why do developed nations score better at literacy than less developed ones (Table 1), and why do all other nations make a better use of literacy than Sub-Saharan nations?

Literacy is generally disseminated across society through formal education and the higher literacy rates in the developed world can be accounted for by their long-standing tradition of schooling. This explanation hardly holds for other areas like South Asia where formal schooling started around the same period as in Africa. But developed nations in Europe and less developed areas of Asia have one thing in common: the use of local languages both for social life and for education. Analysing this fact, K. K. Prah and King (1999, p. 12) have come to the same conclusion, highlighting the strong correlation between higher development performances and the use of native languages. They point out that all the most developed nations and even emerging countries of Asia use their native languages as the mediums of instruction while, correlatively, the least developed nations (with African nations as the typical cases) are distinctive for carrying out instruction in languages other than theirs. That would suggest that there is also a correlation between the conceptualisation and subsequent implementation of development and the language we speak, the more so as language and world perception are

closely related. This remark seems to be in line with Whorf's strong claim (R. Wardhaugh 1996) that our perception of the world is significantly determined by the linguistic structure (the semantic features, the syntactic layout and the grammatical apparatus) of the language we speak.

3.1 Native languages, literacy and education

Experts in education generally distinguish three forms of education: informal, formal and non-formal. Informal education starts with the rearing of children in the family context and it is meant to prepare them for socialisation and ensure the regeneration of the society with its conventional values. Formally education specifically concentrates on literacy, with the objective of preparing young generations for social and economic life. Formal education, be it traditional or modern (Silué 2000), aims at social and economic development. However, on the African continent, this form of education still has a long way to go; quantitatively (reduction of illiteracy) and qualitatively (full exploitation of literacy skills)) formal school has a rather limited impact on the lives of Africans. Rural adults who are in the vanguard of agricultural production crucial for the economies of the Sub-Saharan region of the continent are precisely those who are left out by the current schooling systems. African decision makers have but to turn to a third alternative, and non-formal education could well be a solution worth trying out.

3.2 Non-formal education for development in Africa

Non-formal education seems appropriate for the specific situation of development in Africa because of its cost-effectiveness both in monetary terms and for its pedagogical advantages.

3.2.1 The financial cost-effectiveness

While formal education is a life-time matter, adult literacy programmes are implemented in relatively short periods. For example, the REFLECT method suggested by D. Archer and S. Cottingham (1996) require no more than 45 days to complete some self-contained literacy modules. The long-term benefits of non-formal education are also the sustainability of the development effects achieved through adult literacy programmes. In current adult literacy projects, the functionality of the training is based on the social and cultural specificities of the target communities. In most successful adult literacy projects, local trainers who are permanent members of the community are in charge of the training. This is likely to ensure the sustainability of such adult-literacy schemes and so to reduce the costs of external expertise. An example of sustainability derived from an adult literacy programme is the case of the CPAFs, (the *Permanent Centres for Literacy and Training*) in Burkina Faso, (C. Kielwasser

1998)⁴. Another example of self-contained and sustainable development scheme is the CIDT project that started in Mali and Burkina Faso and has been extended to the north of Côte d'Ivoire⁵ in the mid-1980s.

3.2.2 The psychological and pedagogical cost-effectiveness

While the choice of the medium of instruction for non-formal education generally raises theoretical or ideological controversies, such is not the case for non-formal education. The use of native languages for this form of education stands out as the most reasonable alternative. It should be recalled that non-formal education first aims at instilling literacy skills that should, next, help extend and improve pre-existing social and economic practices. For illiterate adults used to practical tasks, literacy represents a highly abstract exercise implying the drawing (i.e. writing) and deciphering (reading) of conventional symbols. The intellectual and psychological investment required to carry out these tasks will be almost unbearable if literacy skills were to be implemented into their minds via a medium other than their own. However, as the native language stems from any individual's inner psyche, such a medium will be the better vehicle to channel literacy skills into his mind. Along the same lines, the shift from long-standing social and economic practices to improved techniques where productivity is praised over production (Silué, 1999) is also a challenge. Conservative reflexes are likely to be shaken off if the underlying novel concepts used to name improved production techniques are channelled through the language of the target community. In other words, the native language will successfully lower the positive filters (S. Krashen, 1985) that might hinder the acquisition of literacy skills and negatively impact on the voluntary participation of adults to modern production schemes. The related advantage for the use of native languages in non-formal education is that adult literacy projects are tailored according to the social and linguistic profiles of target communities. But what should be considered as an advantage can be interpreted as a major defect for the extension of literacy across multi-linguistic nations: how to achieve development at the national or regional level when the populations are not culturally and linguistically homogeneous? This raises a very recurring controversy in socio-linguistic circles: the myth of African linguistic diversity that is generally presented as another congenital 'plague' of the African continent.

4The CPAFs are entirely independent from external expertise and government subsidies; member villages of a county (often involved in market gardening activities) contribute in various ways to benefit the specially designed literacy and numeracy programmes that the centres offer: they contribute either in cash or in nature (premises) and this seed investment is used as a turnover to ensure the sustainability of the CPAFs.

5 The Ivorian Company for Textile Development (CIDT) has been providing financial and technical assistance to cotton-farmers in Côte-d'Ivoire, Mali and Burkina Faso. A survey conducted in the mid-1990s disclosed quite intriguing things: while the CIDT's investments are 8 times higher in Côte-d'Ivoire than in Mali and Burkina, paradoxically enough, peasants in Côte-d'Ivoire achieve significantly lower productivity rates. The revealed cause appeared to be that peasants in Mali and Burkina had benefited from functional adult literacy programmes while their Ivorian counterparts were still assisted by external monitors using French essentially.

3.2.4 The *domino strategy* for the emergence of a literate environment

The argument runs that an adult literacy programme designed for a particular community using a particular medium and involved in a specific type of production cannot be strictly replicated in different other communities. Implicit in this argument is the strongly deep-rooted and yet questionable belief that the African continent is one of the most linguistically heterogeneous areas in the world. It should be emphatically asserted upon that the myth of linguistic diversity in Africa is, in fact, fuelled by pre-existing ideologies and fortunately this debate is being now successfully cleared off from socio-linguistic discussions (A. Bamgbose, 1994).

It can be reasonably hypothesised that the multiplication of these projects integrating an adult literacy programme will help instil literacy skills with the provision of extending them to adjacent linguistic communities whose production practices and linguistic features do not vary in unpredictable proportions. As for literacy skills themselves, they are generally *acquired once in life* and are transferable from one dialect to the other and even from one language to another⁶. The duplication of non-formal education programmes over time and space should, in the long run, bring about a *network* of literate constellations. The progressive expansion of literacy according to this *domino strategy* is likely to favour the rise of a wide-scale literate environment useful for modern and sustainable development. This is also the precise point where the form of literacy provided by formal schooling systems will intersect with the one conveyed through non-formal education programmes. The two forms of education will positively cross-fertilise and speed up the extension of the locally global literate environment - extended to female actors (UNESCO 2014) - and so fuel the overall development process.

CONCLUSION

The implementation and the management of development by a community are closely related to its world perception. For a community to engage development and improve its living conditions by means of novel production techniques, it has to adjust its initial world perception to modern developmental requirements. The adaptation of world perception to the natural and social environment and its re-adjustment to modern development prospects will be more easily realised in the framework of scientific thought. In its turn, scientific epistemology that is crucial for the emergence of innovation reflexes cannot emerge without literacy.

6. By way of example, when we started learning English as a foreign language in the secondary school, we did not have to re-start learning the English alphabet altogether!

In modern societies, formal education is presumably the best strategy to extend literacy to populations. Unfortunately, five decades after Independence, formal education in most African nations has not been effective enough to reduce illiteracy and spread literacy skills across African society, and one of the major causes of the ineffectiveness of schooling systems seems to be the use of non-native languages as mediums of instruction.

Development-oriented literacy (functional literacy actually) can easily and more rapidly help disseminate literacy thanks to non-formal education for adults. Non-formal education has two related advantages: by using native languages, it can help speed up the acquisition of literacy skills and enhance the production capacities of adults. Indeed, it is almost unanimously admitted today that "*literacy skills are fundamental to informed decision-making, personal empowerment, active and passive participation in local and global social community*" (N. P. Stromquist, 2005, p. 12). The new production techniques being the improved and extended versions of pre-existing social practices, non-formal education is likely to favour development from inside the community and thus, to make it more sustainable. Adult literacy projects, first customised for a particular community, can be progressively extended to adjacent communities sharing reasonably close commonalities. This can only be brought about if two conditions are met: first, Africans of any social condition have to rid themselves from the myth of the so-called linguistic heterogeneity; second, African intellectuals, especially linguists, have to set up orthographies to encompass dialectal and though superficial differences between most African speech forms.

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