

University of Pannonia
Faculty of Humanities
Multilingualism Doctoral School

EVALUATION
of Keresza Kumera Chali's Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

Title:

**Exploring Language Policy and Practices in Ethiopian Higher
Education Institutions towards Multilingualism
– A case study of Mattu University**

Supervisor: *Andrea Parapatics*

Assessor: *István Cserniczkó*

The thesis summarizes the evolution of the language situation in different periods of Ethiopian history. Here we can read about the political support of the Amharic language, the mandatory introduction of English language teaching in schools, or the specific language policy of the Derg regime (Wagaw 1999, 81). Although Ethiopia is a multilingual country, for much of its history only one language (Amharic) was used as the language of instruction in education. This is an educational model that we know well in East Central Europe, which is intoxicated by the ideology of the nation-state and suffers from the delusion of the superiority of the state language. The status of English as a global world language is proven by the fact that the 1994 Education and Training Policy state that in Ethiopia English will be the medium of instruction for secondary and higher education, English will be taught as a subject from grade one, and the necessary steps will be taken to strengthen language teaching at all levels.

The parts of the thesis that show how different political regimes politicize the ethnic and linguistic issue and education are very instructive. In this way, the policy contributes to the low efficiency of educational reforms. Unfortunately, such examples are not only known from Ethiopia, but there is no doubt that the state located in the Horn of Africa could not avoid these traps either.

It is also a very interesting part of the thesis, where the author shows how the political support of the Amharic language in Ethiopia tried to help the creation of a unified state on the one hand, but on the other hand, how the same policy contributed to the

stigmatization of the other languages spoken in the country and how it supported the assimilation of minorities.

The thesis examines the language policy and practice of Ethiopian higher education institutions in relation to multilingualism. The author places the research problem in a broad international context, addressing issues arising in connection with multilingual education (including higher education) in many parts of the world (e.g. Europe, North America, Africa). It covers in detail the advantages and social usefulness of multilingual education and multilingualism. However, the young colleague also draws attention to the fact that there are states that insist on monolingual higher education. University monolingualism can be chosen for several reasons by the language policy model of a state. There are countries, especially in Europe, which, in order to create a homogeneous nation-state, only allow education in the state language at universities. Recently, this was the case in Ukraine, where in 2019 a law was passed that allowed only Ukrainian-language education at universities. There are also universities that were established by national minorities in order to provide higher education in this minority language. In certain states of Europe (for example in Romania, Slovakia) there are universities that choose practically monolingual higher education in order to support of minority and counter the assimilation pressure of the state. In other cases, however, it also happens that the university (or the state language policy that also regulates the higher education sphere) does not choose a local language as the language of education, but instead designates the global world language, English. As we can see from the thesis, Ethiopia also chose this path. There are cases when the linguistic ideology of nationalism, and in other cases the linguistic ideology of globalization, is behind the introduction of monolingual university education. It can therefore be seen that different language ideologies can lead to the application of a monolingual higher education model.

The thesis presents the language policy of Ethiopian higher education at the macro, meso and micro levels from both theoretical and practical perspectives. This is important and noteworthy because it is common for language policy research to focus on only one aspect: either they only show the legislative background regulating the language situation, or they only describe language policy practice.

From the thesis, we learn that although in Ethiopia the policy of Mother-Tongue-Medium education is promoted in primary school (grades 1-8), the implementation of this policy is undermined by the prominent status of the English language among the country's ruling elites. In high school and university, English is the only medium of instruction. Ethiopia's policymakers defend the use of English as the sole medium of instruction despite its impact on university students' studies and the country's academic life. This education model is also shocking because in Ethiopia, English hardly exists outside of classrooms. Most Ethiopian citizens do not use English in their daily lives. However, in Ethiopia, no one can get a high school certificate or university degree in their own language, only English. Because students are trained in a language that will not be used in most professional and almost all personal contexts, the use of English begins and ends within the academic system. Even those teacher candidates who teach children in their mother tongue at the primary level after university are often only trained in English (Woldeyes 2023). At least this is the case in theory. The practice is much more complex than that.

The chapters of the thesis where the author presents, based on concrete classroom practices, how English-language higher education works in Ethiopia, more precisely at Mattu University, are extremely valuable. It sheds a light on how challenging this educational model is for both students and instructors. It becomes clear what difficulties

are caused by, for example, the difference between the English language competences of the lecturers and the students. For example, many young people enter higher education having acquired English at a low level in primary education. Many teachers of English in Ethiopia are not high-level bilinguals or multilinguals themselves. The 'native' speaking English teachers involved mostly do not know the Mother Tongues of their students. In Ethiopia, the English of teachers whose first language is the same as the students' MT is often not good enough. The researcher showed that there is often a huge difference between the situation declared in the legislation and the reality. Everyday practice at universities is far from monolingual (English) education. The research highlights the discrepancy between the institutional language policy at the macro level of the multilingual context and the observed language practices at the micro level in the classroom, and illustrates the discrepancy between language policy and teaching practice.

This is a real applied linguistics work, so-called useful linguistics. The thesis directs attention to a social problem that has linguistic implications. From a different perspective, the author reveals an applied language policy problem, the social consequences of which are striking. I congratulate the author for covering such an important topic in his thesis.

While reading this thesis, it occurred to me that although Ethiopia was never colonized by Europeans, the impact of English-language imperialism in the country shows strong similarities with other African countries. There is no point in having MTM education at the lower levels, if at the secondary school and university level the language ideology of the state conveys that English is the only language an educated Ethiopian should know. Knowledge and upward social mobility can only be achieved through the English language (Wodajo 2014). In Ethiopia, linguistic imperialism is encouraged and imposed by the ruling elite because it serves to exclude the masses from the sphere of power. The cultic belief in the magical power of the English language reproduces linguistic imperialism again and again.

The author superficially touches on the connections between the educational model presented in the thesis and linguistic human rights. Woldeyes (2013, 401) writes that "English sounds like a sword of Damocles over LHRs in Ethiopia". It seems to me that although English is glorified as a "neutral language" by the makers of Ethiopian education policy, the different languages of the country are forced to experience linguisticism due to unequal power relations. The use of English as a Medium of Instruction in Ethiopia washes back the gains of linguistic rights (Heugh 2010, Negash 2010). Many children fall victim to linguisticism even in primary education, especially if (for example, due to the use of modern technical tools) MTM education is pushed into the background (Bitew 2008). The English language thus plays a key role in keeping the rural masses away from elite power (Molla 2019). It would have been useful if the author shed light on the language ideologies behind the educational model chosen in Ethiopia.

I am glad that the author accepted many of the reviewers' suggestions when editing the final version of the thesis. I believe that the expansion of the dissertation raised the quality of the work.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that Keresu Kumera Chali's thesis meets the professional requirements of a PhD thesis. The methods used during the research match the research topic and goal, the conclusions drawn from the research results address very important social issues. I thank the author that I now know much more about the language situation in Ethiopia than I did a few weeks ago, and I congratulate him on his work.

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Beregszász/Berehove–Veszprém, June 20, 2024



István Cserniczkó