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PROBLEMS OF STANDARDIZATION IN A MULTILINGUAL NATION^{*/}

Paper presented by the Sudan

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Problems of Standardization in a multilingual Nation

The language situation in the Sudan is very complex. There are about 136 languages in the Sudan. Out of this total number 128 are African languages. (1) These languages belong to different families of African languages. Some studies have indicated that all families of African languages are represented in the Sudan except the Khoisan of South Africa. (2) This gives the Sudan a very high degree of linguistic diversity, a matter which is reflected in a multiplicity of phonological features and variations. Out of the number of languages cited above at least 114 languages are native to the Sudan. The other languages have entered the Sudan at different periods - some of them very recently e.g. as late as the 1960s. In fact the language map of the Sudan is increasingly changing due to the political instability and the natural disasters such as drought and famine which afflict some of the neighbouring countries.

In order to understand the gravity of the problem of standardization of geographical names in a country like the Sudan, we must remember that settlements have emerged in different parts of the country. Such settlements have been given names in the local languages (114 in number) and possibly in some of the invading languages. These geographical names carry within them the diverse phonological features of the Sudanese languages. Accordingly, whoever is writing down these names must be able to distinguish and represent accurately the sounds that are inherent in such names. A matter like this requires a certain degree of linguistic sophistication, and/or familiarity with the language concerned. Thus the first (and, indeed, the major problem) facing the writing of geographical names hinges on the acute linguistic diversity.

There are also different problems of policy which are related to the question of linguistic diversity. Shall we produce maps in Arabic - the national language - or in English, the second principal language in the country and the language of wider international communication; or else shall we produce maps in the vernacular languages? It is clear that the third alternative (producing maps in the vernacular languages) has so far been ruled out. The Sudanese Survey Department has produced maps in both Arabic and English. This, however, produces the basic problem of how to reconcile the phonological systems of English and Arabic with the systems of local languages. It is clear that regardless of whether we produce maps in the vernacular languages or not, we cannot continue to ignore accommodating phonological features of vernacular geographical names into Arabic and English - the languages used in Sudanese maps.

In the following lines we cite some of the major problems of representing and writing Nubian place names in Arabic script. Professor Herman Bell who has studied this problem writes the following about the census report for 1960. He states "unfortunately its entries are in Arabic script without the vowel markings. Even had the markings been given, the disadvantages of recording names in the five vowel system of Nubian by means of the three vowel system of Arabic script are obvious".(3) There are also other problems associated with tone and with consonants that have no equivalent in Arabic.

Problems similar to those discussed above are not unique to Nubian. Different studies have indicated that several Sudanese languages have a five-vowel system (which includes e and o) in comparison with the three-vowel system of classical Arabic. Among such languages are Dinka, (4) Beja (5) and Fur. (6) These four languages (Nubian, Dinka, Beja and Fur) which use a five-vowel system are spoken in the northern, southern, eastern and western regions of the Sudan. A matter which indicates the spread and gravity of this problem.

If we look into the language map of the Sudan, we find that beside the vernacular languages which dominate in the north, south, east and west (and that are represented by the four languages mentioned above) colloquial Arabic dominates in the central parts. The problem of Sudanese colloquial Arabic in relation to classical Arabic is an extension of the question of the vernacular languages. For instance, if we choose the same linguistic aspect which we have discussed above - the vowel system - we find that the Sudanese vernacular languages have influenced Sudanese Arabic. They have extended their vowel system to Sudanese Arabic, and consequently Sudanese colloquial Arabic has a five-vowel system which is akin to the dominant Sudanese local languages rather than to the three vowel system of classical Arabic. Accordingly the problem of reconciling and accommodating diverse incongruent systems is still prevalent here.

The following place names are quoted from the topographic map no. 47 - 625 which uses the medium of the Arabic language. These names are written incorrectly and can be misleading because the map does not cater for the major phonological features (e.g. vowel system discussed above of Sudanese vernacular languages and colloquial Arabic).

Name as written in Arabic map	Name written in correct phonetic transcription
(1) محمد قول	Muhammad gol
(2) الكوبو	akobu
(3) بور	bor
(4) أم دوم	umm dom
(5) جيبيت	jabet
(6) درديب	durdeb
(7) قيسان	gesan
(8) ابورليق	abu dileg

The first four names in this list can be misinterpreted as Muhammad gul, akubu, bur and umm dum respectively. The remaining four names in the list (5 to 8) can also be misinterpreted as jabit, durdib, gisan and abu dilig respectively.

If we turn to English, the other language (beside Arabic) in which Sudanese maps are written, we also find a number of problems. Some of these problems are similar to the one discussed above. However, a number of problems are due to misinterpretation of Arabic and vernacular sounds by personnel whose mother tongue is English. In other words they are due to sounds heard incorrectly, and consequently represented incorrectly. Examples of such phenomenon are apparent in the writing of place names such as El Damer, El Fasher, Shendi which are written with (e) rather than (a) and (i). In this way the names cited above are written and read in a way which is so different from the way in which they are actually pronounced.

In the following brief summary, we reiterate the major factors affecting standardization in the Sudan.

1. The acute linguistic diversity which aggravates the problem of standardization.
2. The divergent phonological systems between the local languages and Arabic (the national language) and English (the language of international communication).
3. Within the area of maps using Arabic language a special problem is caused by sticking rigidly to the writing system of classical Arabic.
4. In the field of English different orthographic systems have been used, e.g. the adoption of different writing by different missionaries in the southern region.

Proposals

While the problem of standardization of ways of writing down geographical names may be discussed at regional and international levels, there are various measures which have to be started at the national level taking into consideration the specificities of different nations. It is, nevertheless, evident that individual efforts of various countries need to be co-ordinated regionally and internationally. The following proposals are directed towards the situation in the Sudan. However, some of them may also be pertinent to other nations in the Third World.

- (a) We need to create national awareness of the problem and try to explicate its various aspects. This short paper is seen as an attempt in this direction.
- (b) On the professional plane, we need to train and develop a cadre of specialists who are competent to write geographical names accurately and on standardized basis. Phonetic training is an indispensable tool in this venture. (7)
- (c) In the Sudan the problem of standardization of geographical names should be looked at within the broader problem of the lack of unified orthography. Geographical names constitute only one aspect of the problem. Personal names and names that designate the fauna and flora of the Sudan all suffer from this problem. In fact, in certain cases the complete written traditions of some local languages suffer from this problem. The problem - in its broader context - is reflected in maps, books, journals, dictionaries, newspapers, signs, ... etc. It is a national problem that needs a national solution based on regional and international experience.

Notes

- (1) Sayyid Hurreiz & Herman Bell, Directions in Sudanese Linguistics and Folklore, Khartoum, K.U.P., 1975, pp. 159-162.
- (2) R. Stevenson, "The Significance of the Sudan in Linguistic Research, Past, Present and Future" in Y.F. Hasan, ed., The Sudan in Africa, Khartoum K.U.P., 1971.
- (3) Herman Bell, Place Names in the Belly of Stones Linguistic Monograph Series, No. 5, Khartoum, Sudan Research Unit, 1970, pp. 46-47.
- (4) See P.A. Nebel, Dinka Grammar, Missioni Africane, 1968.
- (5) E.M. Roper, Tu Bedawie, London, Steven Austin & Sons, n.d.
- (6) A.C. Beaton, Fur Grammar, Linguistic Monograph Series, No. 1, Khartoum Sudan Research Unit, 1968.
- (7) Last year the Survey Department organized (in collaboration with the Institute of African and Asian Studies) a seminar for its field team. Training included introduction to the symbols of the International Phonetic Association (IPA) and the writing down of geographical names on phonological basis.