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## Reassessing the Impact of Colonial Languages on the African Identity for African Development

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### Abstract

The question of African development is examined as a close nexus between development and language. Language alone affects, structures, defines, and interprets all other aspects of human life. On the other hand, when we think of development, we think of human resources, about people who are the active agents in bringing about accomplishments in any field of endeavour. We cannot have a critical mass of human capital if the constituents are people who are defined by others through pejorative words and have, unreflectively, accepted these words as an indicator of their true identity. My focus is on the English language, which embodies attitudes, referential meanings and perceptions that have greatly helped to distort the identity of the Africans. Given that words act as guides to the interpretation of social reality, Africa, caught on the wrong side of the colonial language, cannot make meaningful progress in her spiritual and material civilisation. This paper concludes that until linguistic imbalances that demean the African are reviewed and righted, Africa's strivings towards sustained development will continue to be severely checked.

**Key terms:** Language and development, nationalism, sociolinguistic, and the development of the English language in Africa

### Résumé

La question du développement africain est analysée comme constituant un lien étroit entre développement et langue. La langue à elle seule influence, définit et permet d'interpréter tous les autres aspects de la vie humaine. En outre, lorsque nous pensons au développement, nous pensons aux ressources humaines, aux personnes qui constituent des agents actifs permettant de faire des réalisations dans diverses activités. Nous ne pouvons disposer d'un bon capital humain, si les personnes qui la composent sont des individus définis par les autres à travers des mots péjoratifs et qui, inconsciemment, ont accepté ces mots comme étant des indicateurs de leur réelle identité. L'objet de mon étude est la langue

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anglaise, qui symbolise diverses attitudes, divers référentiels et perceptions qui ont considérablement contribué à modifier l'identité des Africains. Etant donné que les mots guident l'interprétation de la réalité sociale, l'Afrique qui est située du mauvais côté par rapport aux langues coloniales, et ne peut effectuer de progrès substantiels en termes de civilisation spirituelle et matérielle. L'auteur conclut en affirmant que les efforts de l'Afrique vers le développement durable continueront d'être mis à rude épreuve, tant que les déséquilibres linguistiques qui désavantagent les Africains ne seront pas analysés et corrigés.

**Mots clés:** Langue et développement, nationalisme, sociolinguistique, et le développement de la langue anglaise en Afrique

### Introduction

The most virulent element working against the effort to assert the African personality after colonialism is the vision of Africa and Africans in colonial languages. In this paper, my focus is on the English language as a representative of colonial languages. Words invented both to justify colonialism and place the African at an inferior ladder of human race were carried forward. Today, the dictionary still lists words like bad-tempered, angry, horrible, dirty, malignant and so on as appropriate replacements for black and the black man as 'an evil spirit', 'the evil one', 'the devil'. This unreflective acceptance of colonial language has prevented a consciousness of the extent to which colonial language mangled and continues to disjoin the African from his reality.

Even the debate on the need to replace the colonial language with an African one, although it conveys an awareness of the dangers posed by the acceptance of colonial language at the expense of an indigenous one, fails to capture the extent and depth of the problem. As a member of the world community, the way the colonial language (which is the 'language of wider communication') connects Africa and the African to public identity greatly influences the reception both are given in world affairs. To emphasise replacement at the expense of a total overhaul will only address a portion of the problem. Without a review of the canonical acceptance of the colonial language, the attempt at comprehensive development—cultural revival, restoration of the African identity, advancement in science and technology and, indeed, in all areas of human endeavour—by Africans will continue to be severely hindered by racial prejudgement.

At this point, two vital observations are necessary. First, this paper fully appreciates the fact of the diverse nature of African countries. Yet, for the sake of the continental bond; for the reason of generally being

accepted as belonging to the black race; and for the purpose of proceeding under a framework, Africa is here treated as a single entity. Second, this paper is aware of the fact that there are other problems adversely affecting African development. Such issues include establishing a sustainable responsible government; setting procedures for curbing the excesses of the elite; and outlining rules and strategies for conflict management. Language is singled out due to its pervasive influence on all areas of development. It is for this reason that I will attempt to show the extent to which language affects, structures, shapes and interprets all aspects of human life, the ways in which language can be manipulated against an ideology, a person or, even, a people. There is also the role language plays in conditioning thought and perception and in identity formation, and the degree to which colonial language embodies attitudes, referential meanings and perceptions that have contributed to distort the identity of Africans and their continent. Linguistic imbalances reflect real-life inequalities, inequities and ultimately suppress development.

The main arguments are: First, the image of Africa and the African as painted in the colonial language is highly prejudiced. Second, words associated with the black man in the colonial language reveal and confirm an ideological bias against him and the place that he occupies in the structural relationship existing in society. Third to continue to accept colonial definitions that debase the black man is an affirmation, even if disguised, of the continuance of colonialism with its bifurcation of the world into superior 'civilised' beings and inferior 'primitive' sub-humans. And, finally, for us to move beyond this predicament, to fully utilise the benefits of our modern civilisational resources, and achieve sustainable development, linguistic imbalances that demean the black man must be reviewed and righted.

### **Positioning Language**

Of all the human inventions—computers, atomic bomb, bicycle, calendar, dynamite, electric light, fountain pen, printing press, radio, telephone, (the list is literally endless)—language alone affects, structures, defines and interprets all other aspects of human life. Indeed, it is through language that the benefits of all other human inventions are communicated and assessed.

Interaction between individuals, among a group of people, across nations and continents is made possible through language. Beliefs, ideas, ideologies, culture, knowledge, experience, value and, of course, prejudice, are acquired and conveyed through language. Words act as guides to the interpretation of social reality and, invariably, affect every aspect of a

people's spiritual and material civilisation. Depending on their positive or negative impact, words can shape people's ideas about themselves, their aspirations, their conduct, and their learning abilities as well as portray them in a favourable or unfavourable light before others.

Language, as the medium of all knowledge, is not just a means of communication but also a means by which a people are defined. The choice of words a speaker employs depicts his disposition—favourable or unfavourable—towards the object of his reference. The following example will be illustrative. If Mr A says that 'Mr Brown is reliable and just in dealing with others' and 'Mr Ade is horrible and unjust in dealing with others', the words 'reliable' and 'just' convey a favourable disposition towards Mr Brown while 'horrible' and 'unjust' portray a negative disposition towards Mr Ade. Such an assessment, whether objective or not, is bound to affect other people's acceptance or rejection of the two men. The fullest expression of man's personality lies in language—how he defines himself and how others define him through language.

### **Situating Development**

All human inventions and discoveries are efforts towards enhancing human welfare. Human beings are continuously striving to find new and better ways of improving their situation and managing their resources. Human beings are the active agents in the building and transformation of any society. For a society to progress, grow, advance, expand, change, in a word develop, depends on human resources. When we think of development, we think of human resources, about people who are the agents to bring about accomplishment in any field of endeavour.

Development, then, is used here to incorporate a wide range of assumptions implied by words such as advancement, expansion, growth, progress, and change, in any field of endeavour that takes place in a society as a result of the effort, support and participation of the people. It defines a situation in which there is freedom for people to interact on an equal basis. It specifies a condition in which no set of people are hindered from realising their full potential due to any imposed disadvantage.

Achieving development in any society lies with the people—their skills and knowledge—which are in turn influenced, shaped and determined by other factors, especially, language. We cannot have a *critical mass* of human capital if the constituents are people who are defined by others through apologetic and second-rate words and have, unreflectively, accepted these words as a reflection of their true identity.

### Labelling a Continent: The Vision of Africa and Africans in Colonial Language

Having attempted a sketch of the extent to which language reveals the way we relate to things in the real world as well as governs our expression about these things, I want, as a way of prefacing the focal concern of the discourse to also sketch the extent to which language—colonial language—embodies attitudes, referential meanings and perceptions that have helped to shape the identity of Africans and their continent.

Colonialism brought with it many ‘bogus’ notions regarding Africa and the African. Phrases and words like ‘the abode of barbarism and cruelty’, ‘a late-born child in the family of nations’, ‘a continent without a culture’, ‘savage’, ‘barbarian’, ‘dumb cattle’, ‘bush place’, ‘heart of darkness’, all served to refer to Africa and its people. These designations acted to distinguish the difference, especially in intellectual capacity, between the African and the European. The African by his constitution and mental development is inferior to the European.

Going to Africa—Congo—in Marlow’s account (in the *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad 1899: 105) is a penetration ‘into the heart of darkness’. And the encounter with ‘the pre-historic man’ is ‘as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse’. Since the first and last aim of Conrad according to the blurb is to make the reader hear, feel and above all see, he goes on to give us a more vivid portrayal of the African.

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at *a thing monstrous* and free. It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the *thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar*. Ugly (emphasis mine).

If the *thought* of a remote kinship between the African and the European is ugly enough, then, the proposition that they should be treated as linguistic equals should be inconceivable. ‘In truth’, Lugard (1968: 309) testifies, Africans are like ‘dumb driven cattle’. He sees his mission in Africa as the responsibility that it has pleased God and history to bequeath to Great Britain. This is to bring ‘to the dark places of the earth,—the abode of barbarism and cruelty the torch of culture and progress’ (Lugard 1922: 618). For Rudyard Kipling the white man’s burden is his alleged obligation to govern and educate backward coloured peoples (*Chambers Dictionary* 1998: 1906). Commenting on the intellectual capacity of the Africans who

worked for her on the farm, Ngugi in *Homecoming* (1972: 9) quotes Karen Blixen, a one-time candidate for a Nobel Prize for Literature, as stating that the dark nations of Africa, strikingly precocious as young children, seemed to come to a standstill in their mental growth at different ages. The Kikuyu, Kavirondo and Wakamba in early childhood were far ahead of white children of the same age, but they stopped quite suddenly at a stage corresponding to that of a European child of nine. Is there a better way to show the mental inferiority of the African than equating it with that of a European child of nine?

This is an established tradition of western scholarship, even championed by some notable philosophers. For Hegel (1991: 93), Africa is 'the land of childhood, which lying beyond the days of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of the night'. And 'the Negro' to be sure

exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality—all that we call feeling—if we would comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character. At this point we leave Africa never to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the world; it has no movement to exhibit... What we understand by Africa is the unhistorical under-developed spirit, still involved in the condition of nature.

David Hume (1964) 'suspects the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites'. Equally, in spite of the declaration that 'all men are created equal' in the American Declaration of Independence by Thomas Jefferson, Ngugi in *Decolonising the mind* (1986:18) quotes him as asserting that the blacks 'are inferior to the whites on the endowments of both body and mind'. Immanuel Kant (1960) was equally convinced that the difference between 'the black and white races ... appears to be as great as in regard to mental capabilities as in colour'.

It is interesting to note that most of these learned submissions had nothing to do with direct contact with Africa or Africans. The purpose as in Hegel's case was to establish philosophical justification for the deplorable treatments given to Negro slaves in Europe of his time. This observation is important for an appreciation of how the 'myth' about Africa and the African was produced and is being maintained. It is clear that colonial language has as its foundation the attitude that blacks are inferior to whites. He who defines the terms, so says a Chinese proverb, wins the arguments.

### Canonising a Prejudice

So far, I have tried to establish that the vision of the African as the quintessence of backwardness, or more liberally, as a subordinate player in the march to human development, is rooted in the grand conspiracy to justify colonialism. Today, although African countries have regained their independence, the colonial language has failed to reflect this change in social reality. Words formulated to twist, distort, dispirit and debase Africa and Africans are still very much in currency.

Almost a century after Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* invited us to see the Africans as 'a thing monstrous and free ... and made horrid faces' to the extent that one is thrilled at the 'thought of their remote kinship to the European', the *Oxford English Dictionary* Second Edition (1989) defines a black man as 'a man having a black or very dark skin; an evil spirit; also, the evil one, the devil; also, a spirit or bogey invoked in order to terrify children'. The white man, on the other hand, is 'a man belonging to a race having naturally light-coloured skin or complexion: chiefly applied to those of European extraction; a man of honourable character [such as was conventionally associated with one of European extraction]'. To be sure *The Chambers Dictionary* New Edition (1998) defines *black* as of the darkest colour; reflecting no light; obscure; dismal; sullen; bad-tempered, angry; horrible; grotesque, grimly humorous, making a joke of tragic or unpleasant aspects of life; dusky; dirty; malignant; unlucky; dark-haired; illicit; dark-skinned, of African, West Indian or Australian Aboriginal descent; of African, Asian or mixed descent (esp. S Afr.); (of an area or state) inhabited or controlled by Black people; of, belonging to, or relating to, Black people.

On the contrary, *white* is of the colour of snow, the colour that reflects the maximum and absorbs the minimum of light rays; belonging to one of the pale-skinned, specif European races; (of the soul, etc) innocent, pure, unblemished, purified from sin; bright; auspicious, favourable; reliable, honest, upright, honourable; (of a witch) not malevolent, using her power for good purposes.

The far-reaching implications of these definitions come into play when we consider the pervasiveness of the dictionaries and, even, of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Both in the introduction and the blurb, *Heart of Darkness* is praised as among the half-dozen greatest short novels in the English language. Before doubting this assertion, all we need do is to reflect on the more than a century literary appreciation *Heart of Darkness*

has enjoyed and is still enjoying. Equally, in the preface to the 1998 edition of Chambers, the editors note that:

The Chambers Dictionary is one of a select band of books that enjoys a devoted following and is known instantly whenever its name is mentioned. In earlier versions and under different titles, it is one of the oldest established single-volume dictionaries of its kind, designed for use in the home, office, school, or college, or wherever information is needed about all aspects of the meaning and use of words by those who want a dictionary that is stimulating and entertaining as well as informative and authoritative. In all fields of human thought and activity, it has become indispensable.

Further, let us consider some derivative and compound words from black. *The Chambers Dictionary* (1998) tells us that to blacken is ‘to make black’, ‘to defame’; black hand is ‘a secret society or underground influence’; black hearted is ‘having an evil disposition’, blackmail is ‘payment made to robbers for protection; hush-money extorted under threat of exposure, often baseless’, black sheep is ‘a disreputable member of a family or group’; black spot is ‘a small area which has bad conditions or a bad record’.

The opposite is the case when we turn to white. For instance, whiten is ‘to make white, to free from guilt’; white handed is ‘having hands unstained with guilt’; white hope is ‘a person on whom hopes for success, honour, etc are grounded’; white lie is ‘a forgivable lie, esp one told out of tactfulness’, and, even, a white-collar crime is ‘crime entailing some intellectual effort and committed without physical exertion or violence’.

The contrast between derivative and compound words from black and white is very clear to see. While words assume positive connotations when joined to white, the reverse is the result when applied to black. In fact, words relating to black are still made to reflect the black man’s inferiority in character and intellectual endowments when compared to the white man. Language, in this perspective, becomes a seal of shame, a mark of inferiority, a pointer to a people’s subordination, rather than a mode of communication between human beings united by common humanity, shared interest, and practical activities.

### **Brief Reflection on Connotation**

To appreciate fully how linguistic uses that by association and innuendo debase the blacks function, let us reflect briefly on how connotation works. Connotation carries with it all of the ideas that are suggested by a word. That is to say that the connotation of a word conveys its deeper meaning—it goes beyond the surface meaning of a word to capture the nuances, the



interior provocation, the subtle attacks that the speaker wants to suggest. Language, no matter how seemingly innocent the words and phrases may appear, conveys the speaker's attitude to his subject—the worth or value he places on it. Taken together, the way we are perceived is a summary of the connotations that surround most of the words that refer to us. Just as our reaction to a word, in most cases, is a reflection of our total experiences with the word and its referents.

Our reaction to words, depending on their connotative flavour can evoke 'deep-seated prejudice, for or against the ideas or ideologies behind the words, for or against the people who are called by those names' (Altick 1976: 151). Language, then, can be manipulated to portray a people in a positive or negative light. The use of words like unblemished, pure, bright, honest, reliable to refer to white; and horrible, dirty, malignant, bad-tempered, unlucky to refer to black, clearly tell us on which side the colonial language is favourably disposed. The litany of pejorative adjectives associated with black can only persuade us to see the black man in that light. Let us examine the devastating sense of connotative values employed in this description of Africans by Lugard (1968: 309-310):

These savages do not think or act as we do. They are, in truth, like 'dumb driven cattle'. With the slave caravan they suffer uncomplainingly starvation, the scourge, and all the painted horrors of so many writers. They meet a European safari, and they hide in the jungle and rejoin the slaves. Like cattle, they will face any misery but dread the unknown. They are brought on by us—fed, clothed, and spoken kindly to; they bolt. Why? ... I think, however, it is merely the dumb brute's instinct to wander which makes them go.

Further on he writes: 'The African holds the position of a late-born child in the family of nations, and must as yet be schooled in the discipline of the nursery'.

Here, in carefully selected words, Lugard has produced a vivid image of a sub-human whose closest contact with humanity is his ability to mimic humans. The African is a 'savage' with all the natural instincts of a 'dumb' animal. Although there is no hope of his ever being on a par with his white counterpart, he could be brought to a tolerable level through the salvation and redemptive grace of the white man. It was a God-given mandate to Great Britain, so said Lugard, to bring the light of civilisation to the 'primitive savages' of the 'dark continent'. Lugard's assertion with its committed stress on language suggestive of a backward people, an intellectually disadvantaged race, prepares us for the reception the black man has continued to enjoy until today.

Given this context, the attitude of the landlady in Soyinka's (1976: 116) 'Telephone conversation' is very understandable. There is no conflict as regards the price or location of the house. The point of tension is in the 'self-confession' the poet must make—'I am African'. And to that the landlady needs to know 'HOW DARK? ... ARE YOU LIGHT OR VERY DARK? It is the answer to this question that will provide an insight into the kind of person the tenant is and ultimately determine if he should have a roof over his head so as to settle down and make progress. If he is light, then, he is likely to be okay. On the other hand, if he is dark that probably means he has committed all manner of felonies since black is the symbol of the devil. So black becomes the *determinant of character* and the more weighty issue of whether the potential tenant has ever been convicted of any crime is replaced by a mere colour prejudicial question. More than that, the time the tenant would have used to make meaningful progress is diverted to house hunt, an exercise that would have been avoided if only he was 'light'.

Further, Jay Ford (1996: 495-496) narrates the responses he obtained from African-American children aged from nine to fourteen when he told them of his intention of taking a trip to Africa. Among the responses were: 'Why would you want to go to Africa to get even blacker than you are now?', 'Why don't you take a trip somewhere nice like Paris, London, Rome?', 'But they say in Africa every one is backwards, they can't teach you anything', 'People are so black and ugly there'. All this from black kids who had never visited Africa! For Ford these responses 'were exemplifications of how our educational system and other forms of external social propaganda affect a black child's mind'. These kids are mini-examples of some black Americans (a famous black American musician easily comes to mind) who daily destroy themselves in an attempt to wash off their blackness. Would such acts be necessary if the colour black enjoys the same positive connotations as the colour white? The point is, to quote Haig Bosmajian (1990: 195), 'there is a close nexus between language and self-perception, self-awareness, self-identity, and self-esteem. Just as our thoughts affect our language, so does our language affect our thoughts and eventually our actions and behaviour'. Further, he quotes Edward Sapir as observing that we are all 'at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression' in our society. The 'real world', Sapir goes on to say, 'is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group ... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation'.

When the negative label regarding black is not up-front, it is subtle. In the election of a Pope, the black smoke signifies that no decision has been reached. White smoke, on the other hand, signifies that a Pope has been elected. So we emerge from a possible state of confusion and indecision to one of clarity and purpose. We witnessed this in April 2005 during the election of Pope Benedict XVI.

### **The Canonical Acceptance of Colonial Language: A Review**

Language, no doubt, plays a decisive role in the kind of identity a people enjoys. Thoughts and perception are conditioned by language. As already shown, the demeaning connotations attached to black reveal the way the black man is perceived, seen in the colonial language. Here, we must confront two tasks. First, does the colonial language really tell us what is happening? That is, is the image of the African as painted in the colonial language an unprejudiced representation of the black man and his continent? Second, are the pejorative words associated with black merely accidental or are they purposive?

Beginning with the first task, let us cast our mind back, briefly, to some of the synonyms of black in the colonial language—evil, bad, and dirty. What is (are) the justification(s) for this (these) qualification(s)? Is it based on the genetic make-up of the black man—a kind of ‘original’ sin defying all forms of ‘salvation’? Is it a socio-cultural heritage resisting all attempts at acculturation? Is it a continental continuous flu dismissing all cures? Is it a severe Acute Reserved Alone for Africa Syndrome? Is it something hidden in the follicle of the African? Or is it, possibly, a brand on his skin?

At the philosophical core of colonialism is the need to provide a good-bad, superior-inferior, strong-weak contrast that will justify the ‘saviour’-‘savage’ distinction portrayed in the attitude of the coloniser towards the colonised. To guarantee the success of this enterprise, the culture, the intellectual capacity and, indeed, the personality of the black man was reduced to the level of that of ‘dumb cattle’. The derogative labels attached to the black man in the colonial language are aimed at psychic destruction—a device to disjoin him from his reality and mangle his identity. It is important to recognise that we live and function in an environment saturated, conditioned and shaped by the perception of the black man in colonial language.

In spite of the propaganda of the colonial language in reference to the black man—or, in fact, because of it—science (indeed, any known discipline) is yet to prove that the black man is inferior to any race in any area of human endeavour due to the fact of his blackness. As a matter of fact,

Africans have gone on to distinguish themselves in all areas of human endeavour since the end of colonialism. What can be conceded—which is in no way a crime—is that Africans at a certain point of socio-cultural evolution followed a different pattern of development.

To evaluate the accidental or purposive intent of the pejorative words attached to the black man in colonial language let us again take some sample of words associated with the white man and black man. To be sure, both *The Chambers Dictionary* and *The Oxford Dictionary* tell us that the white man is a member of the white race; a man of honourable character or someone assumed to deal fairly with others. We already know that white has synonyms such as favourable, honourable, reliable, innocent. While *The Oxford English Dictionary* goes on to define a black man as a man having a black or very dark skin; an evil spirit, the evil one, the devil, *The Chambers Dictionary* allows us to draw the inference from the listings we have of black—obscure, angry, grotesque, horrible and so on. Besides, other words such as black hearted—‘having an evil disposition’; black sheep—‘a disreputable member of a family or group’, help to make this inference very clear. Even an exalted word like ‘Pope’ when conjoined with black becomes a disparaging reference to ‘the head of the Jesuits’.

To appreciate the teleological direction of these words let us submit to a couple of reflections. Let us meditate on our disposition towards the devil. Our acceptance of the devil as the author of all wrongdoings has nothing to do with our personal knowledge or experience of him, rather, it is the function of the language in which he is portrayed. From childhood we are indoctrinated to see the devil as the evil one, enemy of mankind, liar, wicked one. When he is brought into a song it is something like ‘down, down Satan’; ‘the Devil has fallen inside the gutter, let us march on him’ or ‘Devil go and hide, there is no room for you in my life’. One of the definitions of the black man according to *The Oxford English Dictionary* is the devil. One cannot fail to recognise how such an association works for the personality of the black man.

Again let us reflect on what our response would be if on meeting two people Mr A. and Mr B. we were assured that Mr A. is a reliable, upright and honest man who deals fairly with others. And that Mr B. is a bad-tempered, malignant, horrible man who has an evil disposition. What would be our human disposition towards these two people? Of the two, who are we most likely to want to associate with whether on a friendship or business basis? Except for a consummate masochist, the answer is obvious. Even the body language that communicates such pejorative words distances us

from whomever the words refer to. One certainly cannot say a word like 'horrible' or 'malignant' as one would say 'honourable' or 'favourable'. The one goes with a facial disgust; the other is expressed with facial delight. On a psychological level, pejorative words do not refresh the spirit; rather they oppress, constrict, dampen, agitate and destroy it. It is difficult to accept that the *high calibre* of professionals—lexicographers, psycholinguists, editors, among others—that collaborate in the assigning of meanings to words in the colonial language (and by extension in the production of words that debase and pre-label the black man) do not understand the psychology of language, the emotive meaning that words convey either by negative or positive overtones or connotations, the extent to which language shapes thought and its role in mediating perception and on psyche and attitude, and especially, the role of linguistic imbalances in creating real-life inequalities, inequities and ultimately in deterring development for a people.

### **Between Promotion and Deterrence**

So how does language promote or deter development? We noted earlier that the task of building, transforming and moving a society forward is solely in the hands of the people. Equally, we have established that words depending on their cognitive and emotive meanings can be employed to achieve a bad or good end. As such the need to institutionalise the importance of people in the development process cannot be achieved in a situation where people are labelled and tagged with pejorative qualifiers. What we often refer to as the 'colonial mentality'—the lack of self-esteem, servile attitude to life, and undue readiness to accept dependence on charity in place of hope, possibilities, self-conviction and self-reliance—has its root in the pejorative labels attached to our human resources. Some examples will help anchor this point.

More expatriates are working in Africa than was the case in the 1960s when many of the African countries started gaining independence. The real catch, however, is that while highly qualified Africans export themselves to the rest of the world for the least fee, Africa imports foreigners with second-rate qualifications for the price of the best (even in cases where there are better qualified Africans willing to do the job).

The ramification of this can be seen on the domestic-market strategy of import substitution associated with many African countries. The mentality that language has conferred on us that we are not good enough equally makes us distrust our products as not good enough. Instead of aiming at an export-oriented development strategy we are only too satisfied with

imported products. And when we manage to produce, we affix a foreign label so as to confer the products with prestige and acceptability. Most shoes and bags in Nigeria are made in Aba, the commercial nerve-centre of Abia state. However, the labels on these products are almost always that of a foreign non-African country. As a result, most people who would not ordinarily buy them if they were advertised as made in Aba products end up buying them once they are seen as 'foreign' products. So, even, when Africa produces for Africa it does so under a foreign label.

It is, therefore, apparent that continental reputation plays a critical role in continental development. If a people are represented in a way that portrays them as untrustworthy, then, they cannot be assigned with critical responsibilities. Africa's reputation is a very important part of its assets, and must be taken seriously. In rethinking African development, close attention must be paid to how language affects development. This will act as the basis for other alternatives to be sustained.

### **Balancing Act**

Our discussion so far has been leading to some cardinal considerations. Should we continue to accept the canonised pejorative words attached to the black man in the colonial language? Should we continue to accept definitions that distort the reality of the black man even before he begins to act? Really, should we continue to accept pejorative modifiers that help to deter African development?

- A child is socialised in the most complete sense—learns to talk and think in words and through that process acquires the whole system of beliefs and the culture of his environment—through language.
- Colonialism has left, perhaps, a permanent legacy in which the colonial language serves as a 'language of wider communication' in most African countries. It is adopted as the language of government, administration and the press (although native languages are also minimally used), the language for instruction and formal learning; and, even, the main medium of communication among literate Africans to the extent of promoting a *sad* emerging trend whereby young generation of Africans, especially those growing up in urban centres and who have literate parents, know only the colonial language.
- To allow words that distort the identity of the African is to willingly condemn the future of African children and, even, mortgage the liberty of non-African children in the pursuit of what is true in human relationships.
- To retain such debasing words is an affirmation, even if disguised, of the continuance of colonialism with its distinct polarisation of the world into two categories—superior 'civilised' beings and inferior 'primitive' sub-humans.

- The global reordering taking place in African societies will not be sustained without a review of pejorative modifiers attached to the people of Africa and their actions.
- In this day of man's highest striving towards comprehensive development—equality in race relationships, globalisation, equal opportunities, humane civilisation and greater liberty for all races—there is no excuse for language to be elevated to the advantage of some people and debased to the disadvantage of others. There is no need to employ language as a weapon of stigmatisation.

The issue is neither a call for the replacement of colonial language with an African language nor a move to dismiss the colonial language as solely doing a disservice to the black man. To begin with, the problem is more fundamental than any mere replacement can achieve. The world has moved to a point where it is no longer possible, or even desirable, for continents, or even countries and states, to live an isolated existence. One strong fact of globalisation is that greater integration is taking place in the arena of communication. So long as Africans maintain contact with the West, the reception they will be accorded in public space will continue to be determined to a large extent by the identity they are given in the colonial language. So, even if it becomes possible to dethrone the colonial language in Africa's internal life, it will still leave intact the distorted identity of the black man in colonial language. As long as this problem persists, Africans will continue to be confined to the 'shore' in any global affair.

Further, the truth of the matter is that the much desired unity—indeed, any meaningful co-operation among Africans, even, within a state—among African nations can only be achieved to the extent to which Africans can communicate among themselves. For now, the colonial language, rather than the more than a thousand languages in Africa, facilitates this co-operation. It is very doubtful that the privileged position the colonial language has come to occupy in our continent will ever wane. If anything, indications point to the contrary. Emmanuel Kwofie (1972) notes that the adoption of English and French as official national languages in West Africa has moved them from their old status as an imposed 'foreign' language to a new status as a second language. He further predicts that 'both languages have great chances of becoming mother tongues, especially since educated opinion considers it advantageous for children to use the official language in family life even to the exclusion of indigenous languages'. This (sad) trend, as already noted, is in progress. In 1994, Adekunle Adeniran observed that 'African peoples have learnt the languages of their respective former colonial masters and adopted them as vehicles of all formal and official transactions and even of private interactions'. *The Oxford Companion*

to the English Language (1996) puts the contemporary situation of English as the official language of sixteen African countries.

Besides, for today, the language of science is the colonial language. If African countries are to advance technologically and, by extension, economically they need the colonial language. Most notable scientific publications are in the colonial language. Apart from facilitating communication in Africa's multilingual society, the colonial language has enabled scientific and technological exchange—and, indeed, other activities, commerce, politics, religious and socio-cultural understanding among others—to take place and potentials to be harnessed among Africans and between Africa and the West.

This interaction, however, brings us back to our focal concern—the need to review the canonical acceptance of the colonial language. Given the portrayal of the black man in the colonial language, a portrayal aimed at a constant reminder of the superiority-inferiority, good-bad contrast between the black man and his white counterpart, there cannot be equal opportunity for both in global affairs. The *a priori* concept works for both in opposite dimensions. One has to undergo a *character-clearance* surgery to assure whoever he is relating with that his evil disposition has been, if not completely, excised, at least, reasonably anaesthetised. The other is accepted on *face value* because it is already known before hand that he is innocent and would deal fairly with others. The only way to right this imbalance is to purge the colonial language of existing lexical items that pre-label, debase and psychologically damage the African.

Why should the word 'black' not stand for outstanding, fortunate, strong-breed, cheerful, friendly, hospitable and happy? Why should its derivative 'blacken' not represent 'to become outstanding'? Why should compound words like 'black sheep' not denote 'most outstanding member of a family or group', 'blackmail'—'letter or event that marks the turning point in life', 'black hand'—'a noble society or positive influence', 'black hearted'—'having a hospitable disposition', and 'black spot'—'a distinctive record'. These suggestions are, of course, not offered for the sake of argument. Before doubting their suitability all we need to do is to reflect on them and we will appreciate how they represent the black people.

This should not be seen as an impossible task. Heraclitus, that ancient Greek philosopher of note, reminds us that the only permanent thing in life is change. In this, language is not left out. Indeed, language is continuously evolving to reflect and correspond to changes. Just to show that names matter, mass firings by large corporations and government are now called 'downsizing' or 'rightsizing'. The Nazi phraseology for the stench and



horror of extermination camps was The Final Solution. To make a tax increase palatable it is called revenue enhancements or user fees. When an employee is labelled a subcontractor the benefits due to him or her disappears. After each fuel increase in Nigeria, the government tries to appease the people by talking of palliative measures. In the Bible, Isaiah [62: 4] reports that to rebuild the image of Jerusalem before all the nations, the Lord gave her a 'new name'. No longer shall men call Jerusalem 'forsaken' or the land 'desolate'. Instead Jerusalem was renamed God's 'Beloved' and her land a 'Home'. The Feminist movement has led to gender sensitivity in the use of all-inclusive words that emphasise masculinity. Feminist equivalent words and non-gender specific alternatives have found their way into the dictionary. To remedy the imbalance that exists between referring to a man as Mr which does not identify his marital status and referring to a woman as either Mrs or Miss which reveals her marital identity, the title Ms is currently being adopted to avoid distinguishing between the married and the unmarried woman. Feminists are today contesting pronominal neutralisation that usually works in favour of the masculine gender, with appreciable results. In the case of a sexually mixed group, some writers these days adopt a feminine pronoun (and it is accepted) as against the usual choice in favour of the masculine pronoun.

The Editors of the New Edition of *The Chambers Dictionary* (1998: 'Preface', p. ix) tell us that 'new editions of dictionaries are benchmarks of language change ... The world has moved on since the appearance of the previous edition, and the language has moved with it'. This change is easily noticeable in the areas of privatisation of industry, the development of the European community into a union, huge advances in technology, social advances in the position of women, an intensified awareness of the importance of the environment and the dangers that threaten it and the beginning of a new millennium, among others. New words and meanings that reflect these phenomena are now part of our word system. Words like browser, cybercafé, data glove, hypermedia reflect the incorporation of the computer into our word system. Indeed, the meaning of the word 'browse' was reviewed to give it a more positive meaning. While the Chambers 1990 edition defines browse as 'to read desultorily', the 1998 new edition defines it as 'to read or look round a shop in a casual or haphazard way'. Certainly, this later definition is more positive than the former since both editions define desultory as 'jumping from one thing to another, without rational or logical connection; rambling; hasty; loose'. The plausible reason for this review is the connection between browser and computer and the healthy perception the computer enjoys.

Although the black man was reintegrated into the world system as a human being deserving of equal dignity with the white man, the negative labelling derived from the colonial era has not changed. Ossie Davis (1976), on a superficial examination of *Roget's Thesaurus of the English Language*, discovered that the word 'black' has one hundred and twenty synonyms, sixty of which are distinctly unfavourable, and none of them even mildly positive. This clearly belies the dynamic nature of language. But more importantly, it exposes a deliberate prejudice against the black man. Except, perhaps, when it comes to the black man the only permanent thing in life ceases to be change but permanence itself.

This is not another white versus black struggle. It is a conscientisation of a virulent element that is destroying and hampering development and the creation of positive relationships among people irrespective of race and gender. Under this banner of conscientisation, the complete utilisation of our modern civilisational resources is possible.

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