



Multilingual Education in Ethiopia: Use of the Mother Tongue and Lingua Franca

Yoshiko Tonegawa

Assoc. Prof., Waseda University, Japan, ytonegawa@waseda.jp

Ethiopia is a multilingual and multiethnic country with more than 80 ethnic groups and languages. While the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front promoted mother-tongue education, it urged the use of Amharic as lingua franca. Despite more than 30 years having passed since the enactment of these policies, their impact has not been adequately discussed. This study examines language policy under Ethiopia's ethnic federalism from the perspective of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction in schools and lingua franca. To achieve this objective, a literature analysis was conducted by examining official documents and existing studies. The results revealed that while the Constitution promoted the mother tongue as the medium of instruction, Amharic, as the lingua franca, was not functioning as well as expected. As a result, multilingual and multiethnic groups were unable to communicate efficiently, increasing the potential for division and increased distrust among ethnic groups. Amharic's failure to function as a lingua franca, combined with the strengthening of ethnic identity through mother-tongue education, may have influenced the heightened sense of ethnocentrism witnessed in Ethiopia today.

Keywords: medium of instruction, lingua franca, mother tongue, Ethiopia, ethnic federalism, primary education, multilingualism

INTRODUCTION

By embodying people's values, cultures, and traditions, language becomes a symbol of their identity and allegiance (Tsui & Tollefson, 2004). It is a powerful influence in bringing diverse individuals and groups into the state system (Kelman, 1971). Kalwe (2000) indicated that political powers favor certain languages, administer the state under a single language, and impose minority languages on the majority. This political use of language policy has historically applied to Ethiopia (Trudell, 2016).

In multiethnic and multilingual countries, issues surrounding language policy, especially the medium of instruction in schools—known as the language of learning and teaching—are pedagogically and politically important and involve equity (Alidou, 2004; Kashima, 2005). In other words, the medium of instruction in schools determines which social and linguistic groups have access to political and economic opportunities and is, therefore, a key to the (re)distribution of power and (re)construction of society.

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On the contrary, language policy, including the medium of instruction in schools, could trigger political conflicts among linguistic, social, and political groups (Alidou, 2004, Kashima, 2005; Tsui & Tollefson, 2004).

Ethiopia is a multilingual and multiethnic country with more than 80 ethnic groups, over 80 languages, and 200 dialects (Hailu & Abebe, 2020). In 2022, Oromo had the largest ethnic composition (35.8%), followed by Amharic (24.1%), Somali (7.2%), Tigray (5.7%), Sidama (4.1%), Gurage (2.6%), Walaita (2.3%), Afar (2.2%), Sirte (1.3%), Kaficho (1.2%), and others (13.5%) (Central Intelligence Agency, 2023). The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) promoted mother-tongue education; however, it urged the use of Amharic as the "working language." In the more than 30 years since the establishment of policies related to education in the mother tongue and Amharic as lingua franca, their impact remains inadequately discussed and analyzed. Furthermore, unlike other African countries with colonial experience, Ethiopia retained its independence, making it difficult to select a lingua franca. Thus, noting Ethiopia's uniqueness, this study critically examines the language policies of its modern and contemporary regimes from the perspectives of the medium of instruction adopted in schools and the functioning of the lingua franca; it reveals the realities and challenges of these policies.

Literature Review: Language in a Multilingual and Multiethnic Country

Mother-tongue education

Every February, the United Nations celebrates International Mother Language Day, highlighting mother-tongue education's international value. The rights of linguistic minorities are a part of human rights (United Nations Human Rights Council [UNHRC], 2020, p. 19). According to the United Nations (2024), 40% of the global population lacks access to education in their mother tongue despite various studies underscoring its significance. Based on previous research, receiving education in one's mother tongue has four main advantages.

The first is from the pedagogical perspective. Mother-tongue education allows a faster and easier understanding of the education content (Alemu, 2019; UNESCO, 1953, 2004). According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO; 2024, p. 2), "learning in one's first language facilitates understanding and interaction, and further develops critical thinking." Decreased retention and dropout rates and higher learning achievement can be expected when children are educated in their mother tongue instead of in other languages (Heugh et al., 2007; Reddick, 2023; UNESCO, 2004).

The second is from the psychological perspective. Children can express themselves and understand what they are taught automatically or reflexively if they learn in their mother tongue. This can make children more psychologically stable (Alemu, 2019; UNESCO, 1953), which may positively influence their academic results. Including mother tongues in education also strengthens students' self-confidence and self-esteem (Hrona et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2024; UNHRC, 2020).

The third advantage is related to identity. Education in the mother tongue may strengthen one's identity as a member of a community (Alemu, 2019; Heugh et al., 2006; UNESCO, 1953). Learning in the mother tongue fosters pride in one's culture and identity (Alemu, 2019). Conversely, children may place less value on their language and cultural group if the medium of instruction in schools differs from their mother tongue (Wright & Bougie, 2007).

The fourth advantage is related to culture and language preservation. Learning in one's mother tongue revitalizes the language (UNESCO, 2024; UNHRC, 2020). Using the mother tongue as a medium of instruction in schools promotes the use of the language and preserves traditional knowledge and culture.

Based on these four perspectives, mother-tongue education has been promoted internationally. In Ethiopia, mother-tongue education was promoted in the 1990s under the ethnic federalism system, as will be discussed later.

Lingua franca

Lingua franca is the common and functional language that facilitates effective communication and interaction among different language groups in multilingual and multiethnic countries (Alemu, 2019; Heugh et al., 2007; Kopchak et al., 2022). For instance, the Indonesian language is used as the lingua franca for intra-national communication in Indonesia, where around 700 local languages are spoken (Uyun & Warasah, 2022, p. 555). As an example pertinent to Africa, Kiswahili is used as a lingua franca in Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda (Kutsukake, 2018). In many colonized African countries, the languages of the former sovereign countries, such as French and English, have been adopted as lingua franca. A country may have more than one lingua franca.

Lingua franca is important for economic and political development and cultural exchange in multilingual and multiethnic countries (Alisjahbana, 1971). Furthermore, lingua franca helps form a national identity and its use may improve relationships among various language groups and promote different cultures (Semela, 2012). In this sense, lingua franca plays various important roles. Therefore, it is also important to integrate lingua franca into the educational system. Ethiopia is an independent country without colonial experience. This uniqueness makes it difficult to adopt the experiences of other African countries, and it faces difficulties unique from other African countries.

METHOD

A critical literature review was conducted by examining Ethiopian government policies and strategies, as well as official statistics including Ethiopian constitutions, education policies, reports by the Ministry of Education (MoE), and other related official documents. Relevant studies with contradictory views are also critically examined.

Language Policy and Medium of Instruction in Schools before Ethnic Federalism

Based on the above discussion of language, this section first reviews the status of language policy and the medium of instruction in schools during Ethiopia's imperial

period after the Italian occupation, and during the Derg period—a military regime that lasted until 1991.

Imperial regime

During the imperial regime, modern education was important for enriching Ethiopian civilization (Negash, 2006). It could educate and nurture citizens who respected the emperor, the nation, and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Tekeste, 2006). The inclusion of civic and religious content in moral subjects was important during this period.

During the Italian occupation from 1935 to 1941, different languages for education were proposed. For instance, Afaan Oromo was used as the medium of instruction in some areas (Alemu, 2019; Tsuge, 2009). However, after recovering from the occupation in the 1950s, the emperor began assimilationism to foster national unity and create a monoethnic state (Abbay, 2004). In this context, Amharic, a language of the Amhara ethnic people, was identified as Ethiopia's official language, and every citizen was required to learn it (Abbay, 2005). The idea of “one nation, one language” was prevalent during this regime (Alemu, 2019, p. 42). Historically, the Amhara ethnic group was the most dominant in Ethiopia, and the last emperor of the Ethiopian Empire, Haile Selassie, was an Amhara. The use of Amharic as the official language of the empire was first stipulated in Article 125 of the Revised 1955 Constitution (Tsuge, 2009).

In the early 1960s, the medium of instruction in primary schools was Amharic, while English was the medium of instruction starting from secondary education (Abbay, 2004; Ramachandran, 2012). The imperial regime aimed for national integration and the educational system was characterized by assimilation. The preferential treatment of Amharic was intended to form a unitary state and to strengthen political and economic control by the ruling elite—the Amhara ethnic people (Abbay, 2004). As such, learning Amharic was sometimes perceived by non-Amhara ethnic people as a symbol of the power of the Amhara ethnic group. Many non-Amhara ethnic groups faced difficulties in learning Amharic, which made them a target of criticism (Abbay, 2004).

For instance, in “On the Question of Nationalities in Ethiopia,” published in a student magazine, Walleign Mekonnen Kassa, a leader of the student movement at Haile Selassie I University, called for equality in the country. He further criticized the regime that discriminated based on cultural identity and emphasized embracing diverse languages, cultures, and national identities (Alemu, 2019; Mekonnen, 1969). Based on these ideas, some non-Amhara ethnic people kept their children out of school and enrollment was lower than in most African countries (Benson et al., 2012),

Derg regime

After overthrowing the imperial regime in 1974, the Derg military regime emphasized the preachings of Marxism (Tekeste, 2006). Education was emphasized as a means of transforming the economy and lifting the country out of poverty (Tekeste, 2006). In 1987, a new Constitution was enacted, in which Article 19 stated: “[t]he state shall ensure the expansion of education and other means for enriching knowledge in order to develop a new culture and lay the foundation for socialism by enhancing citizens’

intellectual and physical development as well as their capability for work.” Article 40 required that education be free and compulsory (People’s Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1988). Thus, education was promoted and more children and youth were enrolled in schools. In 1974/75, enrollment was 1,042,900 in primary schools (1–8 years) and 81,000 in secondary schools (9–12 years). By 1990/91, enrollment increased about 3.7 times (3,926,700) in primary schools and about 5.6 times (454,000) in secondary schools (Tekeste, 2006, p. 19).

Regarding language, the Constitution stated that Ethiopia “shall ensure the equality, development and respectability of the languages of the nationalities” (Article 2.5) and that the “working language” of the nation shall be Amharic (Article 116). It further stated that Ethiopia is “a unitary state in which all nationalities live in equality” (Article 2.1) (People’s Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1988). While it was publicly acknowledged that the country’s various ethnic groups had equal rights in terms of language, Amharic remained the lingua franca (Tsuge, 2009).

Unlike the imperial regime, some attention was paid to languages other than Amharic during the Derg regime. An official language was not established (Tekeste, 2006), and the designation of Amharic as a “working language” may have been owing to some consideration of non-Amhara ethnic groups by the Derg regime, which explicitly stated “equality among Ethiopians” in its Constitution (Article 35). For instance, one of the objectives of the Ministry of Culture and Sports, established in 1977, was to promote the study and development of writing in Ethiopian languages (Alemu, 2019). In addition, literacy education campaigns in several languages were conducted for adults (Hailu & Abebe, 2020; Tsuge, 2009).

During the Derg regime, as in the imperial period, the Amhara-centered state system was criticized. For instance, although the government officially approved Afaan Oromo being written in Ethiopian script, Oromo people preferred to use their Romanized forms as a protest against the Amhara-centered government (Tsuge, 2009). Those who criticized the handling of language stated that the goal was to spread Marxism-Leninism and not to pay attention to culture and ethnicity (Alemu, 2019).

As for the medium of instruction, only Amharic was used in primary education during the Derg regime (Alemu, 2019). English was used from secondary education onward, similar to in the imperial regime (Ramachandran, 2012). Amharic was the predominant language in the judiciary, administration, and media (Hailu & Abebe, 2020). Thus, compared to the imperial period, while some diversity in integration was observed, the relationship between Amharic and the other languages remained the same (Tsuge, 2009).

Language Policy Shifts Under Ethnic Federalism

Mother tongue as the language of instruction in schools

The military government collapsed in 1991, followed by the Ethiopian Transitional Government, and in 1995 the EPRDF established a federal democratic republic country. The EPRDF introduced an ethnic federal system (Harada, 2022). In 1994, primary education was officially made compulsory. Ten-year education from primary to

secondary education was declared free of charge (MoE, 2010; UNESCO, 2015), representing a major turning point for language in education. Multilingualism was widely tolerated and the use of the mother tongue was allowed in education (Hailu & Abebe, 2020).

The Ethiopian Constitution of 1995 established the principle of ethnic self-determination and authorized the establishment of federal regions with ethnic names (Harada, 2022). Article 5 of the Constitution, “Languages,” recognized the equality of all languages and indicated that members of the federation could define their respective “working languages” (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia [FDRE], 1995). The National Education and Training Policy (ETP) enacted in 1994, which remains the basic education policy in Ethiopia, included “the right of nations/nationalities to learn in their language” (Article 2; FDRE, 1994, pp. 10–11). “Language and Education” (Article 3.5) of the ETP stated that “[c]ognizant of the pedagogical advantage of the child in learning in mother tongue and the rights of nationalities to promote the use of their languages, primary education will be given in nationality languages” (1994, p. 23), and that the language used in the region shall be used to train kindergarten and primary education teachers (FDRE, 1994). Furthermore, Article 90 of the Constitution stated that education must be provided free of religious, political, and cultural biases (FDRE, 1995), resulting in a more democratic language policy compared to the imperial and Derg regimes (Alemu, 2019).

A 2002 MoE report indicated that the past regime’s deliberate imposition of Amharic as the official medium of instruction in primary schools throughout Ethiopia was detrimental to educational development and anti-democratic (p. 13). The same report mentioned that “[i]n order to motivate students and enable them to express their views clearly and to grasp concepts properly, the teaching-learning process in primary school education is conducted in their mother tongue” (MoE, 2002, p. 30). Specifically, the importance of learning in the mother tongue is emphasized in the following points (MoE, 2002, p. 36):

- a) Language is not only a medium of instruction but also an emblem of identity.
- b) Learning in the mother tongue enables students to understand lessons easily, and prevents problems associated with language barriers.
- c) Using a language for instruction saves it from possible extinction.
- d) Learning in one’s mother tongue reinforces identity and enables its users to be proud of their culture and identity, producing capable and productive citizens.

These ideas are consistent with those presented in the literature on the importance of education in the mother tongue. More than 40 languages are currently used in primary schools as mediums of instruction (Fessha, 2022). These states have adopted the languages of their respective dominant groups as the medium of instruction for primary education: Afaan Oromo in the Oromia region, Amharic in the Amhara region, Tigrinya in the Tigray region, and Somali in the Somali region (Fessha, 2022). These languages, which are also more linguistically developed with the availability of teachers, are often used as the medium of instruction from Grade 1 up to Grade 8 to some extent.

The Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR) with the largest number of ethnic groups (approximately 56) uses some 28 languages as a medium of instruction in primary education (Fessha, 2022). Other regions, including Gambella, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Harari, have three languages each as the medium of instruction in primary education (Fessha, 2022).

Although the medium of instruction for Grades 1 through 8 is determined by the regional government and *woredas*/districts (Heugh et al., 2007), the same district may offer education in more than one language. For example, in the Oromia region, close to Addis Ababa, where both Amhara and Oromo people live, Amharic and Afaan Oromo classes have been established in the same school. Students' parents/guardians can choose which classes they want their children to attend (Alemu, 2019).

However, offering education in the mother tongue is challenging. For instance, preparing textbooks in various languages is difficult owing to the lack of specialists and the linguistic underdevelopment of some languages (Hugo & Derash, 2023). Furthermore, children in some areas learn in the language of the ethnic majority, instead of their mother tongue (MoE, 2002). Hugo and Derash (2023, p. 105) reported that teacher training and educational materials are not adequate for teaching in mother tongues.

Regardless of these challenges, since 1994, learning in the mother tongue has been recommended as the medium of instruction, especially in primary education.

Amharic as a lingua franca

Under the ethnic federal system, Amharic was expected to continue to be the lingua franca. In the Constitution, "working language" continued to be used over "official language." Article 5 of the Constitution indicates that "[m]embers of the Federation may by law determine their respective working languages," while Amharic was made the federal "working language" (FDRE, 1995). The ETP emphasizes "[t]o recognize the rights of nations/nationalities to learn in their language, while at the same time providing one language for national and another one for international communication" (Article 2; FDRE, 1994). Considering the current situation, Amharic is the language for national communication and English is the language for international communication. Article 3.5 of the ETP, "Language and Education," indicates that "Amharic shall be taught as a language of countrywide communication" (FDRE, 1994).

A 2002 MoE report mentions national communication; specifically, that it is useful for people in Ethiopia to learn at least one widely used language in addition to their mother tongues. Amharic was deemed useful because it was federally designated as a "working language" by the 1995 Constitution even as education in the mother tongue was being promoted. Moreover, Ethiopia has a large number of Amharic speakers owing to its historical background.

Schools where Amharic is not the medium of instruction teach Amharic as a subject. For instance, students often start learning Amharic from Grade 1 in the Afar and Benishangul-Gumuz Regions (Alemu, 2019), from Grade 3 in the SNNPRS, Harari, and Tigray regions (Alemu, 2019; Fessha, 2022), and from Grade 5 in the Oromia and

Gambella regions. In the Amhara region, Amharic is often offered as a subject for students who receive education in another language from Grade 3 (Fessha, 2022).

FINDINGS

Impact and reality of the language policy

As seen in the previous section, the EPRDF promoted education in the mother tongue in primary education. This section examines the impact and reality of the policies.

Impact of mother-tongue education

With their use at school, people feel proud of their mother tongues. Hugo and Derash (2023, p. 11) reported that parents showed a positive attitude toward their language and pride in their mother tongue after their language was selected as a medium of instruction at school.

Another positive impact is from the pedagogical perspective. Although there are issues with lack of teacher training and materials, mother-tongue education seems to produce positive results especially from a pedagogical perspective. In a survey comparing data on regional academic achievement in national achievement tests conducted in Ethiopia in 2000 and 2004, the average score in the four subjects covered (biology, mathematics, science, and physics) was 42.3% in areas where education was provided in the mother tongue, more than six points higher than the 36% in the areas where education was not provided in the mother tongue (Nekatibeb, 2005). In particular, in Grade 8 biology, the mean score was 10.7 points higher in regions where the mother tongue was the medium of instruction in schools (Nekatibeb, 2005). Furthermore, a quantitative study showed that Grade 7 and 8 students in schools using their mother tongue as a medium of instruction had higher mathematics test scores compared to students in ones using English (Opore-Kumi, 2024). The same study also showed that students who use English as a medium of instruction do not score any better in English tests (Opore-Kumi, 2024).

In addition, a study in Ethiopia by Ramachandran (2012) showed that mother-tongue education increased the number of years of primary schooling by 0.75 years to one year, implying that students are encouraged more by learning in their mother tongue. Furthermore, based on school-level evaluations, the quality of the teaching and learning process has significantly improved with the use of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction, and students are more motivated to learn (MoE, 2002). One quantitative study addressed the positive effects of mother-tongue instruction in primary school on later labor market outcomes via the promotion of academic achievement (Seid, 2022).

Primary school enrollment increased from 3,916,700 in 1990/91 to 8,743,265 in 2002/03, approximately 2.2 times (Tekeste, 2006, p. 19). This may be largely due to increased foreign aid to Ethiopia's education sector and international educational goals; however, mother-tongue education may also have had a positive pedagogical impact on school enrollment and learning achievement. If the MoE establishes guidelines and prepares good teacher training and educational materials for mother-tongue education, the positive pedagogical impacts will be further heightened.

Gap between policy and reality: Amharic as lingua franca

The policy expected Amharic to serve as the lingua franca to facilitate communication within Ethiopia. However, Amharic did not fulfill that function well (Alemu, 2019; Heugh et al., 2007). Those who spent their childhood and adolescence during the imperial and Derg regimes can speak Amharic because it was used in all aspects of life. However, this situation has changed after 30 years.

As mentioned earlier, Amharic is taught as a subject in primary school in Ethiopia. However, Heugh et al. (2007) found that children, especially those in rural areas, do not speak much or any Amharic although it is recognized as a lingua franca among non-native Amharic speakers. Fessha (2022) also addresses that many non-Amharic speakers experience difficulties in speaking, reading, and writing in Amharic.

In fact, many studies address the poor fluency in Amharic. For instance, Dumessa and Godesso (2013) revealed that students from the Somali and Oromia regions were unable to communicate in Amharic at a university in the Oromia region. In addition, Adamu (2013) found that many students from Gambella, Benishangul-Gumuz, Oromia, and Somali often struggled to communicate with students and staff in Amharic at a university in the Amhara region. In addition, Semela (2012) surveyed students at a public university and found that non-native Amharic students' Amharic language skills were inadequate. Policy dictates that English be used as the medium of instruction at Ethiopian colleges and universities. However, lecturers often use Amharic to support students' understanding. Semela (2012) reported that university lecturers struggled to teach students to do group work and projects because of their inadequate English and Amharic language skills.

After the mother tongue became the medium of instruction, Amharic was no longer shared among the population as lingua franca. This made it difficult to form friendships across linguistic and ethnic groups (Alemu, 2019; Semela, 2012; Tekeste, 2006). This was especially the case for Oromo and Tigray students (Semela, 2012), because Afaan Oromo and Tigrinya are linguistically developed and used as mediums of instruction up to Grade 8 in Oromia and Tigray regions.

This lack of intergroup communication may lead to group multipolarity or bipolarity, which can create distance among groups, stereotypes, and hostility (Alemu, 2019; Wright & Bougie, 2007). In the aforementioned Amharic and Afaan Oromo classes in one school, while the students could be educated in their mother tongue, the school divided them into Amhara and Oromo ethnic groups. This created a perception of two separate groups among the students and their families.

There are four major reasons why Amharic has not been able to fulfill the function of lingua franca. The first is the challenge of the Amharic education system. Tekeste (2006) stated that learning Amharic only as a subject does not allow learners to develop sufficient communicative competence. The teaching methods and materials for learning Amharic as a second language are inadequate (Heugh et al., 2007). Furthermore, Amharic teachers are often not professionally trained in Amharic instruction; they just speak better Amharic than their colleagues (Fessha, 2022). The timing of initiating

Amharic instruction has also been noted as a hindrance. For instance, in Oromia, Amharic language classes often begin in Grade 5, which some consider too late (Alemu, 2019; Heugh et al., 2007). While the ETP specifies that English be taught in the first grade of primary school, it does not specify when Amharic subjects should begin.

Second, in areas dominated by a single language and ethnic group, interaction with other ethnic groups and contact with other languages are lacking (Semela, 2012). Without opportunities to use the language, learning Amharic in school as a subject makes it difficult to acquire the skills necessary to use and communicate in Amharic.

Third, some people have a negative image of Amharic as they were forced to learn it during the imperial and Derg regimes (Alemu, 2019); thus, they associate it with domination and discrimination (Alemu, 2019). The MoE (2002, p. 13) criticized the deliberate imposition of Amharic as the official medium of instruction in primary school throughout Ethiopia as anti-democratic.

Abbay (2004) argued that the designation of Amharic as Ethiopia's "working language" symbolizes the status of the Amharic ethnic group, which he perceived as disadvantageous to the rest of the population and a potential source of ethnic conflict. Some Oromo people (especially Oromo nationalists) criticized the Afaan Oromo language as discriminatory for not being a "working language" (Alemu, 2019). Owing to this negative impression of Amharic because of past coercive policies, some parents do not motivate their children to learn it, while some learn and know Amharic but do not speak it (Alemu, 2019).

Fourth, there are students who do not want to learn Amharic because they are able to use their mother tongue in a variety of situations in daily life and at work. They do not fully appreciate that learning an additional language is an investment. One reason is simply that young people think that learning additional languages is a burden. Relatedly, people think that learning their mother tongues, especially regional working languages, is sufficient to secure employment unless they desire to obtain federal government jobs (Fessha, 2022). In addition, the demotion of Amharic as a dominant language in business and education as well as elevation of mother tongues as a medium of education lead students to consider Amharic less important (Fessha, 2022).

Language Policy during the Abiy Administration

Abiy Ahmad, who became head of the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), took over as prime minister in 2018. Abiy actively implemented reforms for peace and democratization in Ethiopia by emphasizing *Medemer* (coming together or synergy in Amharic). The Ministry of Culture and Tourism (MoCT) developed the first language policy, "Language Policy of the FDRE," in 2020. The vision stated in the policy is as follows:

To realize the creation of a democratic society wherein mutual respect, national harmony and unity prevail among the peoples of Ethiopia and the languages of its nations, nationalities and peoples are developed so as to enable the people to become beneficiaries of all-round development. (MoCT, 2020, p. 5)

This policy criticizes the fact that only one “working language” used at the national level was selected by the federal government and that the Constitution did not provide a framework in which all languages could be considered important (MoCT, 2020, p. 21). This new policy expanded the working languages at the national level to five—Amharic, Afaan Oromo, Tigrinya, Somali, and Afar. It further stated that a mechanism must be devised to allow other languages to become working languages based on available capacity and research (MoCT, 2020, p. 14). The policy seems to regard “working language” as its literal meaning, that is, the language used by public services and other administrative agencies and in official documents, rather than as a *lingua franca* to facilitate national communication.

According to the language policy, public institutions at the national and regional levels are encouraged to promote the use of at least two languages (MoCT, 2020, p. 17). Regarding education, it states that guidelines for the gradual adoption of multilingualism will be developed so that students can learn one of the working languages in addition to their mother tongue (MoCT, 2020, p. 19). However, how multilingualism will be addressed in practice is not mentioned. Despite the difficulty of practicing five working languages in the current situation, the policy does not mention a concrete plan in this regard.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study examined language policy in Ethiopia, particularly with regard to the medium of instruction in schools and *lingua franca*. The use of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction is internationally recognized for its educational benefits and importance in establishing the identity of linguistic and ethnic groups. However, during the imperial and Derg regimes, Amharic was the medium of instruction whereas other ethnic languages were ignored.

While the EPRDF administration promoted mother-tongue education, it simultaneously promoted Amharic as the “working language” in Ethiopia, making it the language of national communication or *lingua franca*, and encouraged the study of Amharic as a subject. Although the Constitution and ETP promoted the mother tongue as the medium of instruction, Amharic as a *lingua franca* did not function as well as expected. As a result, communication among other languages and ethnic groups remained insufficient. While there were problems with the educational system and environment for learning Amharic, negative impressions of Amharic fostered during the imperial and Derg regimes may have led to further resistance to learning the Amharic language. The fact that Amharic is the language of one ethnic group, the Amhara, makes this situation more difficult.

Owing to the lack of a functioning *lingua franca*, multilingual and multiethnic groups are unable to communicate with each other. Such lack of communication may increase distrust of other languages and ethnic groups. The failure of the Amharic language to function as a *lingua franca*, combined with the strengthening of ethnic identity through mother-tongue education, may have played a role in Ethiopia’s present heightened sense of ethnocentrism. To avoid such ethnocentrism, multiethnic and multicultural education that respects other linguistic and ethnic groups when teaching in the mother tongue

must be emphasized. An Indonesian study also suggests that intercultural sensitivity competencies can be instilled through educational systems (Uyun & Warsah, 2022).

As part of its ethnic reconciliation policy, the current Abiy administration established its first language policy in 2000, which established five working languages. The working languages in the policy can be interpreted as the language used in administrative institutions and official documents. The current administration may not value lingua franca as a means of national communication. Currently, there is no concrete operation of the working languages in administrative institutions. However, Afaan Oromo has been added as a new subject in schools in Addis Ababa. This may be because Abiy has a background in Oromo.

This study indicates that the mere implementation of education in the mother tongue is a divisive risk in a multilingual and multiethnic country. In other African countries with colonial experience, the lingua franca is often the language of the former sovereign countries. However, in Ethiopia, which has retained its independence, which language is appropriate as the lingua franca and how to position it, as well as the need for a lingua franca, will need continued discussion. The mediums of instruction and language education in schools and the status of Amharic may be the keys to the future of Ethiopia as a multilingual and multiethnic country. For further studies, the author will examine the mother tongue as a medium of instruction and lingua franca in the context of Ethiopia based on stakeholders' perceptions through interviews.

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