

Impact of Electronic Media Discourse on Indigenous Languages in Ethiopia: The Case of Amharic Language

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Abstract

This is a study on the uses, forms and contents of electronic media discourse in various contexts and its impact on Amharic language. It is a commonly known fact that languages change. Most of the factors bringing about language change are unplanned and uncontrolled. Some changes are, however, planned. For example, when a government decrees that one language should be used for certain functions, that is a conscious change in the course of a language. Similarly, when the mass media deliberately chooses to use and promote a certain language that can also be considered to be a deliberate intervention in language matters that can affect the fortunes of a language. Purposeful intervention in language matters such as enactment of laws, reward systems, and the like may not necessarily affect the fortunes of language. However, unintentional and informal interventions bring about huge change. One of such changes is instigated by social media which is the most influential source of language change in the modern world. Social media is clearly having an impact on language. The words we use every day influence the language we use. Since so much of the written language we see is now on the screens of our computers, tablets, and smart phones, language cannot escape changing because of these interactions. Amharic is not an exception to this revolutionary incident. Data were collected from different 26 television and radio programs, e-discourse 163 mobile texts, 247 face-book posts, and blogs, 164 posts on social Medias. From the introduction of new words to new meanings for old words to changes in the way we communicate, social media is making its presence felt.

Keywords: e-discourse, media discourse, indigenous knowledge, Amharic

Introduction

This study focuses on impact of media e-discourse on Amharic language. Amharic is a Semitic language spoken in North Central Ethiopia by the Amhara people. It is the second most widely spoken Semitic language in the world, after Arabic language, and the official working language of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Thus, it is used nationwide as a lingua franca. Amharic is also the official or working language of several of the regional states within the federal system, including the Amhara Region and the multi-ethnic Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Regional State, among others. It has been the working language of the government, the military, and of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church throughout medieval and modern times.

In the current age of information, media is making a huge impact on individuals, groups, the country and the world in general (Sana et al, 2013). It is known that languages changes. Most of the factors bringing about language change are unplanned (Wardhaugh 1987: 2). The changes that are introduced to languages are obvious. Some changes are planned. For instance, when a government decrees that one language should be used for certain functions, that is a conscious change in the course of a language. In the same way, when the mass media deliberately chooses to use and promote a certain language, that can also be considered to be a deliberate intervention in language matters that can affect the language. such are deliberate intervention in language matters such as enactment of laws, reward systems, and the like may not necessarily affect the fortunes of language (Wardhaugh 1987:6).

A common language can promote unity. In an increasingly multi-ethnic country like Ethiopia, a concerted effort needs to be made, not merely to accept or tolerate cultural heterogeneity but to appreciate and affirm it while always maintaining a sense of essential unity among people of various ethnicities (Musau, 1999).

One way of minimizing differences and achieving unity and national consciousness in

African countries generally would be the promotion of nationhood (Musau, 1999). It is possible to accomplish this through promotion of local languages. The use of foreign languages in the Ethiopian media does not, therefore, make the participation in communication by the majority of the people possible.

The media is impacting our languages. Media practice that does not utilize a common local language is likely to impact negatively on mass mobilization and modernization efforts. There is need to regulate the media in Ethiopian people so that it can serve better the broad societal goals and aspirations. This study is aimed to investigate the role of media to mediate language change on Amharic.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is to investigate the impact of the media e-discourse on Amharic language.

Methodology of the Study

Data were collected from mobile texts, facebook, radio and Tv discourses, internet communication, social media, and mobile communication were used as source of data. Considering the general theoretical and methodological advances in the study of discourse communication, the data were analyzed using method of discourse analysis.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse “refers to socially shared habits of thought, perception, and behaviour reflected in numerous texts belonging to different genres” (Scollon and Scollon, 2001:538). According to Gumperz (1997:40), “discourse consists of more than the sum of component utterances.” This means there is more to discourse than to the linguistic repertoire of the discrete elements. In CDA, discourse is language use in speech and writing which is a form of ‘social practice’ (Wodak, 2002:7). Discourse means anything from history, narratives, text, talk, a speech, topic-related conversations; stretching the meaning of discourse from a genre to a register and to a code and language (Wodak and Meyer, 2009:3).

Ethnography of communication is evidenced in recorded and transcribed talk and text as a tradition of discourse analysis. “A central theme in applied linguistic discussion since the 1980s has been the nature of discourse” (McDonough, 2002:42). Research in language in use established that differences in the speech of the community is reflected in their discourse (Bynon, 1977:199). Mesthrie (2009:441) asserts, “All sociolinguistic studies see language as dynamic and are concerned to document patterns of variation and change.”

The linguistic variations of the speech code were described in the previous section to show that there is a change. Though we cannot claim that all linguistic variations are associated with social change, as Bynon (1977) claims, any social change assumes the existence of a linguistic variation. Mesthrie further says,

Sociolinguists have shown that variation and change in language go hand in hand. Change within a speech community are preceded by linguistic variation... on the other hand, if a change occurs in one speech community and not in another, such change is the cause of variation between the two communities (Mesthrie, 2009:110).

(“Successful”) discourses may be enacted in new ways of acting and interacting (including new genres), inculcated in ways of being or identities (including new styles), materialized in new technologies, physical environments etc. Wider social change may originate in the imaginaries projected in discourses (Fairclough, 2005:67).

To access the social and linguistic change, we need to attend to people’s casual and non-casual talk. “For communication researchers, then, discourse analysis is the close study of talk (or text) in context” (Tracy, 2001:734). Talks are rarely described by linguists. However, explanation about them by linguists could be of great help to understand and describe how language is used by a certain speech group. As Tracy (2001:738) further claims, “Talk is not just a phenomenon to be scientifically described and explained, it is moral and practical action taken by one person toward others. Talk not only can be evaluated, but should be.” In the present study, talk is interchangeably used as discourse because as Johnstone (2000:103) stated discourse is ‘language in use’.

Discourse analysis is a general term for systematic analysis of written texts, spoken records, signed language. As Johnstone (2008:3) further claims, “Calling what we do ‘discourse analysis’ rather than ‘language analysis’ underscores the fact that we are not centrally focused on language as an abstract system.” The focus of this section is not the abstract system which is described in chapter five.

Discourse is shaped by many factors such as culture, language, participant, history, and purpose (Johnstone, 2000:124-6). Unlike traditional linguistics, discourse analysts focus on language use ‘beyond the sentence boundary’ by ‘naturally occurring’ talks or signs, and not made-up examples. This is known as corpus linguistics. The corpus or the language data that are authentic and real languages used by the speakers are collected and analyzed with a purpose of understanding how humans communicate verbally (Wichmann, 2007:74). But here, unlike the section on genre that exclusively uses the marked and non-casual speech events, the casual and non-marked speech events (know as talks) are used.

To make the description and analysis of the language use in the social context of the speech group complete, the underlying principles of the design of the language that trigger it to be the way it is are illustrated in this section. This explains why the language is modified to be this way and the purposes the language serve. Therefore, this section goes beyond description. It will critically analyze the established beliefs, values and principles behind the language use. To critically analyze the variety’s governing principles, the norms, values, beliefs, and cultural practices are subject of consideration.

CDA and Critical Ethnography are the analytic approaches in this section for the analysis of principles of language use. The established beliefs and values as instituted through discourse as social practice are explained. The whole purpose of creating an in-group code is justified by the functions it serves which the language from which the variety purposely deviates cannot. Using CDA and Critical Ethnography, sources of power, dominance, inequality and bias as reflected in the discourse of the speech group are analyzed. How the

language of the speech group is used to reconstruct, maintain, legitimize and challenge power, discrimination and inequality in the community discourse and practice are investigated. Linguistics research, Dell Hymes (1964) insists, should be directed to explanation of language use of people, -their social structure, and going further beyond to the question of liberation than just description of the theoretical linguistic repertoire.

“CDA analyzes how linguistic choices in texts are used to maintain and create social inequalities” (Davies, 2007:161). Discourse shapes and reshapes the thought and practice of the speech community who owns it. It is a replicator, re-constructer and preserver of social change. Discourse facilitates specific changes. Wodak (2002) insists that social changes are changes in discourse. To see how discourse shapes beliefs, thinking, imagination, vision, power, status and other values, some thematically selected discourses are critically analyzed in this part of the study. Van Dijk’s says: crack

Language use, discourse, verbal interaction, and communication belong to the micro level of social order. Power, dominance, and inequality between social groups are typically terms that belong to a macro level of analysis. This means that CDA has to theoretically bridge the well-known ‘gap’ between micro and macro approaches... A central notion in most critical work on discourse is that of power, and more specifically the social power of groups or institutions (Van Dijk, 2001:354).

According to Van Dijk (1985:76), macrostructure is “the level at which we describe the topics or themes of a text.” It focuses on the themes of the discourse. The underlying beliefs and values are the foundations of the communication behavior of people. As Bennett and Slater (2008:17) state cultural rules bear the same position as laws. There are many cultural practices that design the communication system of the speech community. The communication pattern of the target society sustains reality in its own way. The culture is adapted from different far-off systems that have been explained in great detail elsewhere. Haberman (1967 in Wodak, 2005) stated that three concepts are inseparable in CDA: power, history and ideology.

The changes that are instituted by discourse are critically analyzed to show how power and inequality are reconstructed and legitimized with reference to the history and ideology of the target group. The analysis of power are postulated considering the history and ideology of the people. As Haberman (1967, in Wodak, 2005) indicated, history and ideology of people justify their language use.

The cultural practices reveal the underlying beliefs and values of the community including their communication norms. There are many beliefs and values in Wollo that hugely affects the communication system. The people consider both religions as different means to the same end. Both are considered by many as doing the right thing in different ways. This is the basic belief that is the foundation of the peaceful coexistence.

The discourse-analytical approach used is Fairclough’s three-dimensional conception of discourse: (1) having established the specific contents or topics of a specific discourse, (2) the discursive strategies (including argumentation strategies), and (3), the linguistic means (as types) and the specific, context-dependent linguistic realizations (as tokens) are studied (Fairclough, 1992 in Wodak, 2005:3). Fairclough’s inter-related three-dimensional discourse analysis for conceiving and analyzing discourse entails three kinds of analysis: (1) text analysis (description), (2) processing analysis (interpretation), and (3) social analysis (explanation) (Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000: 447). What is useful about this approach is because it provides manifold viewpoints of analytic access (Henderson, 2005:1). Such an approach opens up possibilities for making sense of data from diverse angles (Henderson, 2005:5).

This entails that the meaning of a word is derived not only from the words but also from the social context where the word is used. Since there are no restrictions on the scope of analysis in CDA, researchers can deliberately seeks out texts that matter and choose texts that potentially have actual consequences in the lives of the people they study especially those having cultural or political aspects (Huckin, 2011: 2). In what follows, some selected discourses are discussed with focus on sources of power, dominance, inequality, how language is used to reconstruct, maintain, legitimize and challenge power, inequality and discrimination in the community discourse.

Result of the Study

Impact of Social media on Amharic language

Any medium of communication focuses on certain ideas, ways of thinking, and outlooks. Media can go a long way to facilitating changing language. Any medium, Postman argues, determines the structure of discourse by demanding of the messenger certain kinds of content, as well as favoring certain traits of personality, exposition, and intelligence. In societies dominated by print, the demands on the communicator are of logical linear thought, with ideas building upon one another in logical sequence and order. In such cultures, ideas are debated and discussed, even in oral debate, consistent with the rules of logic in a thorough, comprehensive manner.

The words that surround us every day influence the words we use. Much of the written language we see is now on the screens of our computers, tablets, and smart phones, language now evolves partly through our interaction with technology. And because the language we use to communicate with each other tends to be more malleable than formal writing, the combination of informal, personal communication and the mass

audience afforded by social media is a recipe for rapid change.

From the introduction of new words to new meanings for old words to changes in the way we communicate, social media is making its presence felt.

Too much Borrowing from English

Keldhn 'like' adregelhalehu.

'Like' becha men yadergal, 'share' madreg new wanaw

(Demb 5 sitcom TV Drama on EBS, Hidar 25, night at 3:30)

New words and meanings

Facebook has also done more than most platforms to offer up new meanings for common words such as friend, like, status, wall, page, and profile. Social media is making it easier than ever to contribute to the evolution of language.

Influence of pop-culture on local languages

In the mass and social media, the Ethiopian people promote their language. Indigenous ethnic languages are highly respected in Ethiopia. In this multi-verse, language is functionally linked to the popular media forms - radio, TV, and the press. The languages of the developed countries especially English is influencing local cultures. Local people criticize it. However, there seems to be no way out of it in the current media-dependent way of life adopted by the world people. On the one hand, Popular culture allows large heterogeneous masses of people to identify collectively. On the other hand, the local cultural values, such as the local languages, are left out and are subjected to death.

Foreign Cultures with foreign languages being promoted in Ethiopia

There are many foreign cultures promoted by the social media which are making it difficult for the domestic cultures to survive and persist. The people are adopting foreign culture in many aspects of life such as dressing, sports, entertainment, fashion, film and so on. For example, in many Ethiopian films, males adopt the culture of asking for marriage by getting down on the knee and saying 'will you marry me?' The TV, Radio, press, the social media promotes foreign cultures like 'valentine day', 'April the fool', 'thanks giving', 'mothers' day' and many others.

The Role of Media in Promoting Ethiopian Indigenous Languages

This research assesses the threat posed to Ethiopian national language by foreign cultural values through manipulation of the e-discourse. Media in indigenous languages characterizes a people-oriented communication approach to programs of national development and the preservation of socio-cultural values, ensuring in the process cultural self-determination. Local Ethiopian media should be restructured to reflect the socio-cultural dimension of the country; its people; and their culture, language, and education.

Conclusions

In the current information system, there is no escape from the influence of the media in every sphere of our lives. Language is at the centre of it. In Ethiopia, the indigenous languages are promoted by the media – both by the mass media owned by the government and private as well as the social media of the cyberspace. However, the struggle to make sure the local languages values survive in the realm is not easy. There are many foreign cultures adopted by our society. It is becoming very difficult for our indigenous cultural practices to show themselves.

Ethiopian languages are being influenced by the E-discourse used using different electronics Medias. Since the media is owned by the developed countries, contents of the pop culture are dominated by their own items in their own languages. To elevate our own indigenous languages, there is a lot to be done by the developing countries. Although Ethiopian languages are being promoted by the media; more efforts are required before our cultural values are swallowed by the pop culture of the West who owned the media at large.

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