

Promote Ghanaian languages in educational institutions

By Joseph Kofi Avunyra

THE United Nations General Assembly has declared 2019 the International Year of Indigenous Languages to raise awareness of the crucial role languages play in people's daily lives.

It is the year that nations are supposed to take steps not only to celebrate the immense contribution of their indigenous languages but also to devise strategies to promote these languages for national development.

Giving a legal backing to this declaration is the Article 39 clause 3 of the 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Ghana which enjoins the state to "foster the development of Ghanaian languages and pride in Ghanaian culture."

By this constitutional provision, the state is obliged to formulate and implement policies and programmes towards the development of Ghanaian languages and cultures. It is also incumbent on the state to ensure that its citizens feel proud of their languages and cultural heritage. However, one wonders if the state is really performing her responsibility as far as this constitutional requirement is concerned.

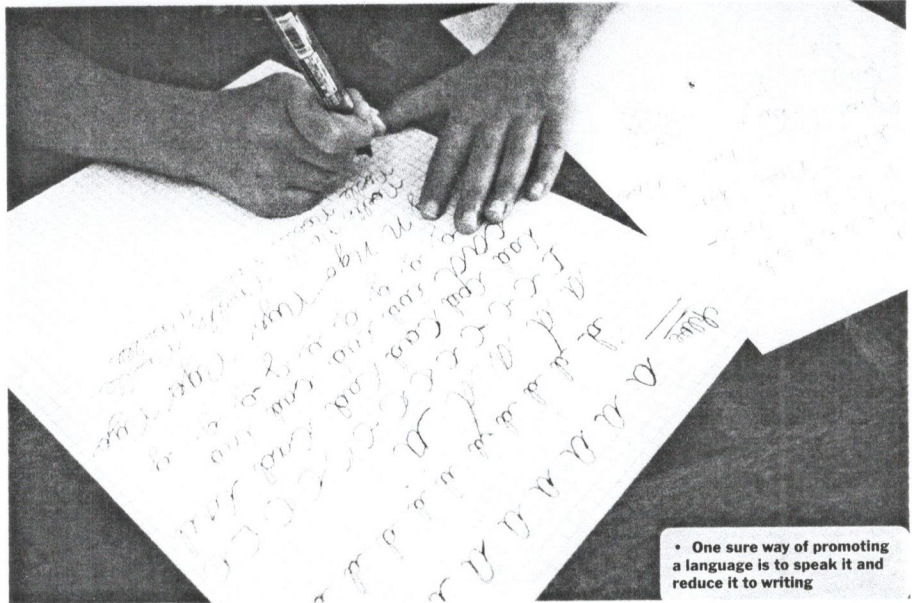
On November 17, 1999, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) proclaimed February 21 to be International Mother Language Day and it was first observed throughout the world on February 21, 2000.

This day was instituted to promote linguistic and cultural diversity, multilingualism and to highlight greater awareness of the importance of mother language education. The institution of the day was also to bring to the fore strategies nations can adopt to save their various indigenous languages and tap their immense benefits to the full.

National celebration

In Ghana, the celebration of the International Mother Language Day has not been given the due attention it deserves apparently due to lack of government commitment coupled with the poor attitude of Ghanaians towards their own mother languages.

Even though the celebration of the International Mother Language Day has been brought to the attention of Ghanaians since 2008, many people are still ignorant of the day. Some people even look down upon students studying



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Ghanaian languages in our universities. This situation does not augur well for the development of our local languages.

It is worthy to note that available statistics points to the extinction of some Ghanaian languages in the near future.

One sure way of promoting a language is to speak it and reduce it to writing. However, in Ghana many people appear to

feel shy to speak their own mother language. The Bureau of Ghana Languages, the only government department mandated to write and publish books exclusively in Ghanaian languages as a way of promoting our local languages, is unable to deliver effectively because of under-staffing, insufficient funds and logistics.

History

Since its establishment in 1951, the Bureau of Ghana Languages has been operating in the 11 Ghanaian languages so far studied in our educational institutions; namely, Akuapem Twi, Asante Twi, Dagaare, Dagbani, Dangme, Ewe, Ga, Gonja, Kasem, Mfantse and Nzema. However, the once buoyant department engaged in the development and promotion of Ghanaian languages is now a pale shadow of its former self.

The theme for this year's International Mother Language Day, "Indigenous Languages Matter for Development, Peace Building and

Reconciliation", could not have come at a better time. That peace is a sine qua non for development cannot be overemphasised and to foster sustainable development, learners must have access to education in their indigenous languages and in other languages. It is through the mastery of the first language or mother tongue that the basic skills of reading, writing and numeracy are acquired. Local languages, especially minority and indigenous, transmit cultures, values and traditional knowledge, thus playing an important role in promoting peace, unity in diversity and sustainable development.

Policies

A closer look at Ghana's language policies from the colonial era to date clearly shows frequent policy shifts as the nation has oscillated between pro-English policies and those that mandate the use of Ghanaian languages in education to a limited extent, culminating in fluctuations in the implementation of the language policies. Currently, the Ghanaian Language Policy states that Ghanaian languages should be used as a medium of instruction from kindergarten to primary three. The junior high school students are learning one Ghanaian language and the teacher trainees are also made to study one Ghanaian language under the policy. This has created a vacuum in the

senior high schools and it is making the study of Ghanaian languages difficult for most of the teacher trainees who do not study Ghanaian languages in the senior high schools. To add insult to injury, most of these teachers end up teaching the subject in our basic schools. How can these teachers be adequately equipped to ensure the success of the policy?

To reverse the trend, there is a need for a stable policy on Ghanaian language education. Ghanaian languages should be made compulsory subjects in the senior high schools through to the universities. This will undoubtedly promote our indigenous languages for sustainable development.

As we celebrate this year's International Mother Language Day, let us take the necessary steps to promote Ghanaian languages for national development.

Let us give prominence to our mother languages as we have given to some foreign languages such as English, French, etc. The government should adequately resource the Bureau of Ghana Languages to deliver on its mandate. The call goes to the Ministry of Education, Ghana

Education Service, policymakers, traditional rulers and other stakeholders to rise up to the challenge and save our mother languages from extinction.

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