A way forward: language policies in enhancing bi-regional cooperation in science and technology

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CAAST-Net accepts occasional papers from external contributors. The following represents the personal views of David Hallberg, from the Department of Computer and Systems Sciences at Stockholm University in Sweden, who was an invited guest at the CAAST-Net stakeholders’ conference in Kenya last year.

This paper illustrates potential ways to take account of the use of languages in international conferences and in transnational cooperation, and may be fruitful for readers delving into efforts to promote global cooperation.

It communicates research notes and documents from CAAST-Net’s stakeholders’ conference, entitled ‘Africa-Europe Cooperation in Science and Technology: Status and Way Forward’, on the 10th to 11th November 2009. The conference was held in Mombasa, a coastal town in Kenya.

The meeting was held to enhance bi-regional cooperation in science and technology (S&T) through an examination of the nature and the role of cooperation processes.

The conference was organised by the Kenyan Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology (MoHEST) in cooperation with the International Bureau of the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF).

Building relationships through languages

It is worth noting here that in Kenya, while English is the official medium of instruction in schools, Swahili is widely used, especially in lower primary school (Hungi, 2009), and there are more than 40 tribal languages (Sida 2009; Kenya.go.ke 2010; CIA 2009).

Despite this, the only accepted working languages at the Kenyan conference are the colonial languages of English and French. Not even Swahili, the lingua franca of all of East Africa, is included.

It is true that the process of globalisation has caused the English language to become the lingua franca for scientific communication internationally (Altbach, 2007).

So the fact that little in CAAST-Net’s strategies or policies refers to different languages is not in itself unusual.

However, two critical factors for CAAST-Net’s relationship-building efforts to succeed are an educated population who can use knowledge effectively and a dynamic information and communication infrastructure in order to facilitate the processing of information and enhancing productivity.

Both of these issues rely on language.

According to CAAST-Net, promoting global partnerships and international cooperation in order to share and learn from the experiences of partners, building national expertise, and enhancing knowledge generation capacity are all ways of achieving these goals.

This cannot happen without understanding – which relates again to the effective use of language.

CAAST-Net should therefore strive to identify and develop multicultural joint initiatives – including the use of different languages – as a way forward.

This can perhaps be seen in some of the debates among delegates on the major barriers to ICT-driven transnational collaboration on issues of S&T and education.

One of the key speakers, Daan du Toit from the South African mission to the European Union, stressed at the Mombasa meeting that “a dialogue should be a real dialogue.”

Another speaker, Minnattallah Boutros from the University of Würzburg, Germany, made the suggestion that communication – the major tool for human interaction is a problem. Not sharing the same language is an important consideration.

A related, problem is interdisciplinary communication, when different participants may use the same language but not share the same vocabulary. Who, in such a case, takes priority?

Boutros also said: “Communication is the tool – and the biggest challenge. Traditional and local knowledge must be involved in a dialogue.”

To bridge communication cleavages and other divides, to have a dialogue, the same speaker notes other important factors: respect, trust and responsibility, curiosity, fun and time.

But many of the comments on communication may in fact refer to the use of language.

There are of course other barriers to relationship building mentioned by the speakers, such as the shortage of local researchers, limited research infrastructure, and the isolation of geographical distances.

During different group sessions, solutions to bridge those barriers are discussed.

“Cooperation between African and European nations has to be mutually beneficial...strong cooperation at local, national, and regional level between research institutions as a prerequisite for international cooperation,” said the CAAST-Net coordinator, Andrew Cherry, who is based at the Association of Commonwealth Universities, UK.

However, group sessions did not identify language issues as a specific barrier. It may be that the issue of language needs to be revisited.

After the conference, a summary report with recommendations and conclusions was sent to all delegates.

This report concludes that national S&T strategies should embrace international and, in particular, regional cooperation.

In this respect, it may be worth noting that many regions have a non-colonial lingua franca, whether it is Swahili in the East African Community or Zulu in the Southern African Development Community.

Nevertheless, the word “language” is not mentioned even a single time in the report.

Language, policy and culture

“Language rights are things which people have strenuously struggled for, sometimes even to the point of sacrificing their lives.” [Chen, 1998, p. 46]

Chen (1998, p.49) presents different perspectives on language rights. Language rights can be considered individually (being informed in one’s own language) or collectively (to ensure the survival of a group’s language and to transmit the language to future generations). Chen also examines the role of a particular language within publicly-funded services such as education, publications, broadcast media, and so on.

To understand language rights, Chen (1998, p. 48) introduces three instances of violation of such rights.

1) An organisation may use a language unfamiliar to the overwhelming majority of the population, disregarding access to adequate translation and interpretation services, which may cause major issues in reading and understanding rights and policies.
2) An organisation may recognise only its own language or that of the capital city, so that delegates who are not proficient in that language are disadvantaged in their dealings and communications. This includes not being given the opportunity to receive education and information in one's mother tongue, being compelled to use a colonially imposed language.

3) An organisation may adopt a policy of assimilation, attempting to establish a homogeneous culture and uniform language. The educational and social policies may be such that the languages of minority linguistic groups are pushed to extinction or just made available as a transitional measure with a view to eventual linguistic and cultural assimilation of the minority group.

Chen’s article on the philosophy of language rights also has a moral function: multilingualism is a fact of life in modern states.

Language diversity is an expression of human culture's diversity. However, diversities based on language may result in barriers to communication, social and political cleavages, and conflicts. So, how to approach the issue of multilingualism?

As one example, the Indian educational system uses a trilingual system, known as the Three Language Formula (TLF), set out in the 1950s and revised in the 1960s.

The TLF recognised the mother language (often a tribal language), the official language, and another language that served as lingua franca. TLF and its re-formulated versions have been put into practice in various countries (Mukhopadhyay et al, 2004).

The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) states that this formula is not a “magical” solution, and is open to criticism and debate over whether it represents the failure of state policy or is in fact representative of a dynamic linguistic policy which reconciles tradition and modernity in conjunction with institutional and civic responsibilities (UNESCO, 2008, p. 19-21).

Regardless, the TFL is not obligatory. This means that organisations to at least some extent are free to choose how to apply the TFL. As a result, there is an argument over whether organisations need to consider using other languages in their operations.

Conclusions

Previous studies and theories have revealed different accounts of language.

The CAAST-Net conference recognises two languages, English and French.

The use of English in this context can be explained by the fact that it has become globally accepted, even if it is not the mother tongue of most of the delegates, whether from Europe or Africa.

Communicating in French, in a conference held in Kenya, is nevertheless not an obvious choice.

Certainly French is an influential language, especially in Central Africa, and is used by regional groupings such as the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) and the Communauté Economique des Etats de l'Afrique Centrale (CEEAEC, also known as the Economic Community of Central African States, or EECAS).

It is important that delegates from Francophone Africa can participate in debates.

But Swahili is such a major language in East Africa, that I would argue that an event in Kenya should prioritise its use.

It is true that the African Union (AU) functions in only four languages: English, French, Portuguese and Arabic.

But the EU – which supports CAAST-Net - makes sure that representatives from member states can make themselves understood in their 23 native languages (Europa, 2007).

It could therefore be questioned why this does not apply to the EU’s transnational work through organisations such as CAAST-Net, in order to ensure that the organisation’s vision reaches not just a minority but the better part of the population.

Better and cheaper means of communication have increased transnational cooperation, allowing cooperation at a distance (World Bank, 2007).

These transnational collaborations and bilateral relations are based on the belief that such approaches may increase a nation’s intellectual capital (Dlodlo, 2009).

However, for transnational work that strives to enhance a nation’s or region’s educational levels, it is vital to consider local culture and languages (Ojiifor, 2009).

References


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He has also researched e-learning projects in Sri Lanka and telecentres in Cameroon, as well as research on IT and the elderly in Sweden. He has a background in IT, culture and art, with studies in education and linguistics.

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