
EQUAL RECOGNITION OF ALL ETHIOPIAN
LANGUAGES: SOME OBSERVATIONS
CONCERNING THE BROADCAST MEDIA

Aberra Degefa*

INTRODUCTION

The fundamental role played by the media in terms of the exercise of freedom of expression is incontestable. The media plays significant role in enabling people to be properly informed about what is occurring in their country and beyond. Free media allows members of a society to form free public opinion and thus resulting in having well-informed citizens. Free media is a necessary feature of democratic states.

The right of everyone to seek, receive and impart information is the central point of any discussion about media, including broadcast media. This right has been affirmed under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). According to this Article, everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression which shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.¹

* Senior Lecturer of Law, Addis Ababa University, Faculty of Law, LLB (1987), AAU, Post-Graduate Diploma (2000), ISS, The Hague, LL.M (2005), AAU, Faculty of Law.

¹ *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, Dec.19, 1966, Art.19, para.2, 999.U.N.T.S. 171(entered to force Mar.1976) [hereafter ICCPR]

The media in general are channels through which millions of communications and exchanges of ideas are made between human beings. In modern information age, the media are valuable agents in society that as they are very useful in shaping public opinion.² Owing to this, the media has become an indispensable public service, which everyone wants to have access to and enjoy its benefits. It has become an important gateway to acquiring new knowledge and disseminating the same.

What is more, media plays a crucial role in the preservation and presentation of cultural values and the specificity of ethnic, linguistic or cultural groups. In actual fact, today, media has become a powerful tool through which effective influence can be made on the pattern of thinking and attitudes of the general public both constructively and destructively. In particular, the role of the broadcasting media in shaping the opinions, behaviors, and ways of life of the viewers and listeners has become considerable.

In this regard, since it gives the users the power to convey and to receive information of all kinds through all media, language is power.³ In fact, language is considered as a supreme achievement of a unique human

² Domitille Duplat, *Freedom of the Press, Responsibility of Media*, PAULINES PUBLICATIONS AFRICA, Nairobi, 2003, p.19.

³ Abraham Damoz, "Language, Identity, and Peace in Ethiopia and the Hon of Africa", 4th International Conference on the Horn of Africa, 1990, p. 70.

collective genius.⁴ It is a fundamental constitutive element of personal identity.⁵ Identity would entail the existence of diverse ethnic, religious or linguistic groups in a country. As a distinguishing mark of a person, language is an essential attribute of an individual's and a group's identity. Hence, language is not merely a communication tool for the speakers; it is also an embodiment of their collective identity.

In view of the fact that language is not only an expression of collective identity but also a storehouse of the cultural values and history of a language community, language issues and the associated rights of the speakers of a language has turned out to be one of the critical issues these days. In terms of economic opportunity and success, language plays a central role since the "use of one language in a State will mainly advantage individuals who have greater fluency in this official or dominant tongue".⁶ In short, the question of language is not merely

⁴ Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, Penguin, London, 1994. p. 232.

⁵ Robert Dunbar, "Minority Language Rights in International Law", *50 International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, (2001) 90, at 94.

The existence of a common language is considered as one of the criteria of belonging to a national group and thus reflects the national identity of a group, See Hussein M. Adam, *Language, National Consciousness and Identity: The Somali Experience, Nationalism and self-Determination in the Horn of Africa*, Ithaca Press, London, 1983, p.26.

⁶ Fernand De Varennes, Fernand De Varennes, "Ethnic Conflicts and Language in Eastern Europe and Central Asian States: Can Human Rights Help Prevent Them?" *5 International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, No.2 (1997), pp. 135-174, at 138.

a socio-political matter; it is an integral part of fundamental human rights.⁷

In a given language community, language is a marker of attachment which gives rise to feeling of belongingness to the community.⁸ Basically, language serves as an instrument of unity between the speakers though it may as well serve as a marker of distinction between those who speak different languages.

This article attempts to look at the extent to which the Ethiopian broadcasting media has accommodated the needs of the different language communities of the country. In view of the fact that Ethiopia is a multinational and multilingual state, an appropriate accommodation of linguistic population is necessary. Based on the Ethiopian multilingual setting, this article attempts to examine how the existing Ethiopian broadcasting media has been patterned with a view to demonstrating the extent of its accessibility to the different linguistic groups of the country. In multiethnic and multilingual states like Ethiopia, the rights of linguistic groups and the extent of the rights accorded to linguistic minorities in the field of the media is an important issue that requires appropriate consideration.

II. MEDIA AND LINGUISTIC RIGHTS CORRELATION

2.1. The Status of Linguistic Rights under International Law

⁷ Fernand De Varenes, Cited, Supra Note 6, at 135.

⁸ Fernand De Varenes, supra Note 6, at 138.

In a country like Ethiopia, which is highly multilingual, the important role media can play by way of shaping and consolidating the identity of the diverse linguistic groups would be great. In modern human society, the media plays the leading role in informing, educating and entertaining the public. In particular, media in a given language would give the speakers an access to global knowledge.

Essentially, linguistic rights are "one type of human right and as such one intricately interlocking element in a set of inalienable, universal norms for just enjoyment of one's civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights".⁹ Hence, linguistic human rights form an integral part of everyone's fundamental freedom of expression, which includes the right to receive, seek and impart information and ideas in a language and media of his/her choice without interference and regardless of frontiers.¹⁰ The human rights of linguistic groups primarily aim at the protection of the existence of the different linguistic communities. The group has the right to maintain its identity and be protected against forced assimilation. The holders of linguistic rights are those "speakers of dominated languages, who individually and collectively experience linguistic 'wrongs', marginalization, and ultimately the extinction of the languages".¹¹

⁹ Robert Phillipson and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, "*Linguistic Rights and Wrongs*", in *Applied Linguistics*, Vol.16 No. 4, Oxford University Press, December 1995, PP.483-504, at 483.

¹⁰ Article 19(2) of the ICCPR, *Supra* Note 1.

¹¹ Robert Phillipson and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, *Supra* Note 9, *ibid*.

In this article, it appears appropriate to establish first the correlation between the media and linguistic rights. According to Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."¹²The equality and dignity with which all human beings are endowed would obviously extend to those persons belonging to linguistic groups. Respect for a person's dignity has direct connection with respect for the person's identity and consequently with a person's language. In fact, the extent to which a certain State gives protection to human rights including linguistic rights is one of the most important indicators of democratic governance.

As provided under Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), persons belonging to national minorities including linguistic minorities have the rights to speak their own language and to use that language in communicating with members of their linguistic groups.¹³ Hence, the rights of national minorities including linguistic minorities are part and parcel of the fundamental rights and freedoms of all human beings. Since all human beings are entitled to enjoy their fundamental human rights without any

¹² *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR), General Assembly Resolution 217 A (III) of 10 December 1948. Human Rights, A Compilation of International Instruments, United Nations, New York, 1988, at 2.

¹³ Article 27 of the *International Covenant on Civil, Political Rights* (ICCPR), Adopted by General Assembly resolution 2200 A (XXI) of 16 December 1966, entered into force, 23 March 1976, *Supra Note 1*, at 28.

discrimination, persons belonging to linguistic groups have the right to equality and the right to equal protection of the law.¹⁴ Basically, language rights aims at the speakers of the language rather than at the language itself.¹⁵ In other words, the beneficiaries of linguistic rights are those persons who belong to the language community and who speak the language. As a rule, persons belonging to a given language community in a state have the right to participate effectively in cultural, religious, social, economic, and public life without any discrimination. In the context of linguistic rights, discrimination would occur "when differential treatment on the ground of language is unfavorable for some individuals or create a preference for others."¹⁶

The promotion and protection of the rights of persons belonging to linguistic minorities in media area would contribute a great deal towards the political and social stability and peace. As citizens, the diverse linguistic groups in a given country are entitled to know about their country in their respective mother tongues. They are equally entitled to information on issues relating to his/her country and that of the world at large. Moreover, the recognition and protection of linguistic rights would help to enrich the cultural heritage of a society as a whole in the states in which such persons belonging to linguistic

¹⁴ See Articles 2(2), and Article 26 of the ICCPR, *supra* note 1.

¹⁵ Christina Bratt Paulston, "Language Policies and Language Rights", *26 Annual Review of Anthropology* (1997), pp. 73-85, at 76.

¹⁶ Fernand de Varennes, *Language, Minorities and Human Rights*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, The Hague, 1996, p.107.

groups exist. But if linguistic groups are deprived of their linguistic human rights, it may lead to conflicts.¹⁷

Obviously, in the context of multilingual society, the target audience of the media would be all the diverse linguistic groups living in the country. In such society, media in one exclusive language can offer only values and views of the native speakers of that particular language. From the perspective of human rights and democratic values, any media in a multilingual society is expected to accommodate the needs of the different linguistic groups existing in the society. In fact, one essential feature of a democratic state is adequate accommodation of the needs and interests of all its members, "including members of linguistic communities, which may demand measures concerning the use of their language."¹⁸

According to Article 25 of the ICCPR, in those States in which different linguistic groups exist, states are expected to ensure that persons belonging to linguistic minorities enjoy and exercise fully and effectively all human rights and fundamental freedoms without discrimination. Such States are obliged to recognize and legally guarantee the cultivation of culture and traditions and for the use of the mother tongue in media. To this end, the relevant international human rights instruments

¹⁷ ICCPR, Supra Note 1, *ibid.* See also the UDHR, supra note 12, Preamble, Para. 3.

¹⁸ Fernand De Varennes, "*Ethnic Conflicts and Language in Eastern European and central Asian States: Can Human Rights Help Prevent Them?*" Supra Note 6, at 137.

oblige states to take the necessary constitutional, legislative and administrative measures so as to respect and ensure the rights of persons belonging to linguistic minorities, in particular their right to develop their language and enjoy their own culture.¹⁹

In order to facilitate the effective participation of language communities in the various activities of a multilingual state; linguistic diversity has to be preserved at all the necessary levels of government. The effective participation of those persons belonging to the different linguistic groups at the required levels would help in sustaining diversity and thus contribute to the stability of the society. What is more, such effective participation would entail equitable representation of the different linguistic groups in the legislative, administrative and advisory bodies of government.

The media plays a major role in the realization of the rights of persons belonging to linguistic groups regarding the accessing and dissemination of data of public interest as well as the rights concerning the preservation of their identity. Through the media, the language communities in multilingual society will have access to worldwide communication. According to the principles laid down in the *Guidelines on the Use of Minority languages in the Broadcast Media*, [a] ll persons, including persons belonging to national minorities, have the right to maintain and develop their

¹⁹ ICCPR, Art. 27 cum Art. 2, supra note 1.

identity, including *through the use of their languages in and through broadcast media* (with emphasis).²⁰

In making the media accessible to linguistic groups, the concerned State would guarantee to all its citizens equal opportunity in making use of public resources on the basis of equality and consequently this would enable members of the society to enjoy their fundamental rights and freedoms. Linguistic groups have the right to have their language used by public media to the degree that it is justified and reasonable in light of the number of speakers of a minority language by applying the sliding-scale approach.²¹

Based on this rule, in recognition of the larger number of individuals involved, the upper end of the scale would relatively have more generous rights than those at the bottom of the scale with smaller number of individuals will have relatively less generous rights.²² As demonstrated by States' experiences, attempts made to create uniformity in terms of language had caused "resistance from segments of the population with a different language and culture"²³ Only through the recognition and effective protection of minorities' can multilingual States integrate all minorities as an essential component of peaceful, democratic and pluralist societies

²⁰ *Guidelines on the use of Minority Languages in the Broadcast Media*, Office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities, October 2003, at. 8. Available online www.osce.org/hcnm/

²¹ Fernand De Varennes, *Language, Minorities and Human Rights*, Supra Note 16, p.100

²² Ibid.

²³ Fernand de Varennes, *Ethnic Conflicts*, Supra Note 6, p. 135.

and thus ensure harmony and stability within the concerned States and eventually between States at global level.

In the main, such protection would require more than the identification of the different types of minority groups and their various needs and aspirations. It would also require the adoption of the most appropriate devices for the effective participation of the different linguistic groups. In order to do that, appropriate language policies and multicultural and intercultural education are required for effective participation. Members of the groups should be involved at the local, national and international levels in the formulation, adoption, and implementation and monitoring of standards and policies affecting them. In a word, the various ethnic, linguistic and religious communities should have equal access to public services including media service.

2.2. State Practices

There are some countries that are known for their successful linguistic arrangements. These countries have managed to establish well-balanced linguistic arrangements that worked for the most part because they are well suited and found out to be appropriate in light of the States' particular situations.²⁴ Switzerland for example broadcasts ten radio stations (three in German, three in French, three in Italian and one in Rhaeto-Romance) as well as full television station and a complementary television station for each linguistic region.²⁵

²⁴ Fernand De Varennes, "*Ethnic Conflicts and Language*", *Supra* Note 6, at 146.

²⁵ A Report submitted by Switzerland pursuant to Article 25 Paragraph 1 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of

In so doing, Switzerland has made the necessary efforts to ensure that programs are made accessible in the largest possible number of languages by the broadcast media. In this respect, states apply the principle of proportionality or the sliding scale principle approach. According to this principle, a state should grant more services in a given language as the number of beneficiaries increases.²⁶ Hence, the number of potential users, viewers or listeners is one of the important factors taken into consideration in the determination of which language to broadcast on the media.

In Canada, official bilingualism is an established rule at the federal level, while large numbers of community radio stations are available.²⁷ In the Netherlands, the public broadcasting system reflects the diversity of all the groups composing the nation.²⁸ In Slovakia, the media laws include provisions for minority access and permit minority language broadcasting.²⁹

Minorities, ACFC/SR (2001) 2 received 16 May 2001. Available Online

<http://www.humanrights.coe.int/Minorities/Eng/FrameworkConvention/StateReports/2001/switzerland/switzerland.htm>.

²⁶ Fernand de Varennes, *Language, Minorities and Human Rights*, Supra Note 16, p.100.

²⁷ Public Broadcasting, available online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/public_broadcasting. Accessed 10/31/2006.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ *Minorities and the Media in Central and Eastern Europe*, A Skills Exchange Workshop, held 4 -7 February 1999, Bratislava, Slovakia, MRG International, London.

The duties of the state include facilitating the reception of radio and television programs in the languages of the various language groups in the country. This task can be carried out through broadcasting of nationwide or regional levels in line with the requirements of the concerned people. Access to and distribution of data and information of public interest must be provided for everybody.

III. LANGUAGES AND THE BROADCAST MEDIA IN ETHIOPIA

3.1. An Overview of Linguistic Make-up of Ethiopia

In view of the fact that Ethiopia is a multilingual society, the media in general, and the radio and television in particular have to take into account the linguistic diversity of the people of the country. Based on the results of the census made in 1994 the total population of the country was 53,132,276.³⁰ By and large, the numerical, political and economical powers of the speakers of the major competing languages have to be taken into account.

But the question is, in view of the fact that Ethiopia is a multilingual society, what are some of the positive measures taken in Ethiopia by way of combating, the

³⁰ *The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia*, Office of Population and Housing Census Commission, Central Statistical Authority, Addis Ababa, November 1998. See also *The 1999 World Almanac And Book of Facts*, which gives 58,390,351 as the total population of Ethiopia. Although the expected 2004 population Census has failed, the present population of Ethiopia is estimated to be over 70 million.

various forms of discrimination against linguistic groups that had existed in the past? To what extent has the Ethiopian broadcast media reflected the multilingual nature of the society? The nature of a media in a multilingual state has to be dictated by the nature of the society it serves. In order to determine the extent to which the broadcast media has accommodated or failed to accommodate the different language groups, the general overview of the major ethno-linguistic groups of Ethiopia based on *Population and Housing Census of 1994* would be appropriate.

Table I: Numerical Size of the Major Linguistic Groups³¹

Ethnic Group	Population	% Of Total Population
Amhara	16,007,933	30.13
Oromo	17,080,318	32.15
Tigray	3,284,568	6.18
Somali	3,160,540	5.95
Guragie	2,290,274	4.31
Sidama	1,842,314	3.47
Afar	979,367,000	1.84

³¹ Ibid. p. 44.

3.2.The General Profile of the Broadcast Media In Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, broadcast media in the languages of several nations and nationalities, is not proportional to their numerical size. The broadcasts in the Ethiopian Television and Radio do not have adequate minority-language component. This can be observed from the following table showing the current Ethiopian Radio National Broadcast time allocation.

Table II: A. Radio Ethiopia and the Profile of Airtime Allocation³²

Language Used in Broadcasting	Time Allocated Daily	Total Time Allocated Weekly	% of Total hrs	Remark
Amharic	9 hrs	67 hrs	65	10 hrs on Saturdays and 13 hrs on Sundays
Afaan Oromo	2 hrs	13 hrs	12.6	3 hrs on Saturdays

³² Information obtained from Ethiopian Radio Office.

Tigrinya	1 hr	9hrs	8.7	2 hrs on Saturdays
Somali	1hr	7hrs	6.79	
Afar	1hr	7hrs	6.79	

Total 103 100

At the national level, the time allocated to Amharic from Monday to Friday is 9 hours daily. The time allocated on Saturdays and Sundays is 10 hours and 12 hours respectively. The total time allocated to Amharic language weekly is 67 hours which accounts for about 65 percent of the total airtime allocated to indigenous languages.³³ The corresponding airtime allocated to Afaan Oromo is 2 hours everyday, except Saturday where one more hour is added which makes the total airtime 13 hours weekly which accounts for 12.6 percent of the total airtime. The program in Tigrinya is, from Monday to Sunday, 1 hour daily except Saturday where one additional hour is given. This makes the total hour given 7 in a week.

In Ethiopia, in addition to the main Radio Ethiopia, there are other Radio transmissions,

³³ One can compare the weekly air time allocated to French, Arabic, and English are 7, 14 and 10.30 hrs respectively with that given to some indigenous languages..

like Radio Fana, and a few FM radios mainly operating in and around Addis Ababa, all of which broadcast exclusively in Amharic. Let us have a brief look at the time allocated to different languages by Radio Fana.

Table III. B. Radio Fana and Its Airtime Allocation³⁴

Language	Time Allocated Daily (Monday-Friday)	Total Time Allocated Weekly	Remarks
Amharic	4hrs	34 hrs*	7 hrs daily on Saturdays and Sundays
Afaan Oromo	4 hrs (Monday-Friday)	34 hrs	7 hrs daily on Saturdays and Sundays
Somali	1:30	6 hrs	0:30 minutes on Saturdays
Afar	1 hr daily	6hrs	0:30 minutes on Saturdays and Sundays

³⁴ Radio Fana Office.

* Radio Fana broadcasts 40 additional hours in Amharic weekly on medium wave.

The airtime allocation made by Radio Fana seems to be more fair than that of Radio Ethiopia, but still it has not broken with the old tradition of making broadcasts in those languages traditionally broadcasted by Radio Ethiopia, namely Amharic, Afaan Oromo, Afar and Somali.³⁵ It has not included other languages like Guragie, Sidama, Wolaita and several others.

Radio Ethiopia, is owned, financed and controlled by the Federal State. Where any media is controlled, operated or financed by the government, the time and resource allocation has to be in harmony with the relative demographic weight of the different linguistic groups. Of the total of close to eighty languages in Ethiopia, Radio Ethiopia and Radio Fana broadcast in 4 indigenous languages, namely, Amharic, Afar, Oromo, Tigray, and Somali. This would mean that the public broadcast does not reach the greater part of the Ethiopian population not speaking these languages.

In nearly all parts of the country, broadcasts are made in Amharic, but when broadcasting is made to the non-speakers of Amharic or any of the indigenous languages mentioned earlier, due to language barrier, the non-speakers of the said languages will not have access to the information, ideas, views and experiences

³⁵ Radio Fana does not have Tigrigna Program. There is Radio Woyane, which broadcasts from Tigray Region exclusively in Tigrigna.

broadcasted by the media. On the reverse, people who understand Amharic and the stated languages will have access to global or local information via the broadcast media and thus will enjoy their freedom of access to information.

Moreover, it is a gateway to global knowledge wealth and it is also a tool for the cultivation of the cultures and mother tongues of the different linguistic groups. Broadcasting has to mainly aim at the preservation and enhancing of the multicultural heritage of Ethiopia. To this effect, the government is required to take all the necessary measures to ensure that the media performing public services broadcasts programs in the languages spoken by Ethiopian people without any discrimination. As things stand now, in many parts of the country, there are no local or regional radios, which generally reflect the views of the local community and inform the public about the several activities going on in the country or in the remote parts of the world. As a result, the significant parts of the population of the country are denied access to information.

Even in those cases where broadcasting is made in some of the indigenous languages, the scheduling may be unfavorable. A wrong broadcasting time may result in lower rate of viewers or listeners. Information of public interest should be broadcasted at times favorable to a given linguistic group.³⁶ For the existence of a sustainable and successful media service, the particular circumstances of the speakers are important factors. In

³⁶ Where the speakers of a certain language are predominantly farmers, broadcast during working hours may not help the speakers or the viewers much.

due course, to preserve a flourishing linguistic community media, skilled and professional journalists, editors, and other staff are needed. Certainly, a durable educational system in a particular system is very crucial for the existence and effective performance of a language community media.

Regarding television broadcast, in terms of the numbers of languages used and the channel the situation is much disturbing than that of Radio broadcast. For a country of over 65 million with over 70 indigenous languages, there is only one television with one channel for the whole country.³⁷ In relation to television broadcast, the new broadcast law has not contemplated the issue of guarantying the rights of different linguistic group.³⁸ The realization of all citizens' rights to freedom of expression and the right to information is an integral part of the measures taken to promote equality before the law and implement the rule of law.

CONCLUSION

From the forgoing discussions, it can be observed that the existing broadcasting arrangement does not seem to accommodate the significant number of Ethiopian languages in its broadcast media. There are no clear airtime allocation criteria in the existing broadcasting system. There is a lack of clear policy or legislation for

³⁷ There is one channel used for a limited time for Addis Ababa and its surroundings in Amharic.

³⁸ See Articles 6, 17-27. Proclamation No.178/1999, Proclamation to Provide for the Systematic Management of Broadcasting, Federal Negarit Gazeta, 5th Year, No.62, 29th June, 1999, Addis Ababa.

allocation of media airtime Even where small numbers of languages are used in the broadcast media; the time allocated is not proportional to the numerical sizes of the different linguistic communities. In short the linguistic make up of the country is not reflected in the broadcast arrangement.

As a result of this, a considerable number of Ethiopian people are excluded from enjoying their freedom of access to information. Their right of access to public media and information has been curtailed. They have no ways of knowing the activities in their regions and other events concerning the different linguistic groups of the country. Regarding the timing of the broadcasts, as to whether or not the viewers/listeners were consulted prior to allocation of the time to each of the programmes or scheduling, no records are available.

In Ethiopia, everyone's right of access to information of public interest has been guaranteed by the FDRE Constitution.³⁹ This right of the public to receive information of public interest can be ensured only when the media is capable of operating as a real "public watchdog" For all these, there is a need for effective legal and institutional framework which ensures unshakable multilingual policy. As a multilingual Federal State, having several television stations with different channels both at the Federal and Regional levels is imperative. In the apportioning of airtime and resources, the proportionality formula or the sliding-scale principle

³⁹ Article 29(2) and (3) of the FDRE Constitution, Proclamation No. 1/1995, Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Federal Negarit Gazeta, 1st Year No.1, 21st August, 1995, Addis Ababa.

which takes into account the numerical size of a linguistic group in relation to the total population has to be adopted. In pluralistic society like Ethiopia, multilingualism should be guaranteed in terms of the range of available television and radio stations, avoiding monopolistic control by the state. But as things stand now, if the Federal Government continues to retain the monopoly of information through publicly owned media, the rights of Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia to self determination which has been guaranteed by the FDRE Constitution will be undermined.