

The Place of an Applied Linguist in Actualising the Big Four Agenda

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Abstract

The Big Four Agenda, hereafter BFA, is a four-point agenda initiated by His Excellency President Uhuru Kenyatta, the President of Kenya, which outlines his focus in his final Presidential term. The BFA is geared towards improving the living standards of all Kenyans regardless of their social status; grow the economy and leave a long-lasting legacy. The items in the BFA are; manufacturing, food security, affordable housing and universal healthcare. The skills and expertise of all professionals and the government are essential in the actualisation of the Big Four Agenda. All Kenyans should be proactively involved in realising the vision of the president and his government. Applied linguists may think that they are just spectators in the four-point Agenda, but that is not the case. It is important to note that language is a roadmap in the realisation of national development. An applied linguist, therefore, has a role to play since there maybe linguistics problems that if not solved, may hinder the actualisation of the BFA. This means that applied linguists are part of the solution to both local and the global challenges which may stand in the way of actualising the Big Four Agenda. This paper strives to shed some light on the role of the applied linguist in the actualisation of the BFA. Secondly, the article highlights some areas that an applied linguist may research on, which are directly tied to the realisation of the Big Four Agenda. Further, the article compounds the crucial skills that a current (21st Century) applied linguist should have to participate in the realisation of the Big Four Agenda actively. It is hoped that this paper will impact to a large extent on Linguists who may be harbouring the notion that they are just spectators in the ongoing conversation on how best and timely the Big Four Agenda can be made a reality.

Keywords: The Big Four Agenda, applied linguist, actualise, Final Presidential term, 21st applied linguist, Kenyans

1.0 Background Information

Applied linguistics as a discipline is often said to be concerned with solving or at least resolving social problems involving language. Many scholars, writers and researchers have alluded that the urge should drive applied linguists to find solutions to the societal linguistic issues. McCarthy (2001) notes that applied linguistics is essentially a problem-driven discipline rather than a

theory-driven one. This observation implies that the discipline should offer practical solutions to the problems which are faced by business people and professionals whose work involves language. According to him applied linguistics should provide insights and ways forward in resolving contextualised language-related issues. Brumfit (1991:46) points out that applied linguistics should offer solutions to real-world problems in which language is a central issue. Further, Widdowson (1998, 2000, 2004, 2005) advances that applied linguistics is a mediating field or domain of theoretical plane of linguistics and language. He implies that knowledge on the one hand and its applications to problems that arise in several real-world settings. Accordingly, an applied linguist should strive to use the acquired knowledge to solve these problems. Further, research points out that applied linguistics can deal with complex and multi-faceted issues. From the ongoing discussion, it is clear that wherever there are linguistic problems, applied linguistic expertise is required.

Currently, Kenyans are looking forward to the realisation of the BFA. Writers and scholars have had their voice on how best the BFA can be realised. Gichuga (2019) notes that the big four Agenda needs more participants for fast-tracking. According to him, the general public and the upper house (parliament) and lower house (Senate) should strive to support the Big four Agenda. Bankelele (2018) points out that every speech should be channelled towards the realisation of the BFA. Ndemo (2018) gives some insights into how the BFA can be implemented without increasing the tax. He opines that the actualisation of manufacturing and food security requires the goodwill and policy support of the national and county governments. He further notes that 'Biometrically identifying Kenyans can achieve universal Healthcare' while the removal of the middlemen can realise food security. Kamene, B. Ombisi B, Andabwa, T. Mutinda, F. and Ibrahim, A (2019) note that students' role in enabling the government to achieve the Big Four Agenda is to participate in Public Policymaking debates and discussions to come up with different options. As an applied linguist, I wish to be part of the ongoing debate by being part of actualising the BFA. It is important to note that as scholars and researchers, applied linguists should not only be spectators but should be part of the team that will facilitate the actualisation of the BFA.

2.0 The Role of an applied Linguist

Applied linguists may think that they are just spectators in the four-point Agenda, but that is not the case. Language is a roadmap in the realisation of national development. An applied linguist, therefore, has a role to play since there maybe linguistics problems that if not solved, may hinder the actualisation of the BFA. This revelation means that applied linguists are part of the solution to both local and the global linguistic challenges which may stand in the way of actualising the Big Four Agenda.

The section of this paper highlights what an applied linguist can do to be part of the professionals who are involved in the realisation of the big four agenda. The role of an applied linguist would be;

To advocate for the use of an inclusive language, especially when leaders are commenting on BFA in terms of making speeches or statements. This inclusivity can be achieved by the use of the first person subjective plural 'we' and first person objective 'us'. By doing so, all Kenyans will feel part and parcel of the group which would be in the forefront in implementing the BFA. Again, inclusivity can be achieved by using gender-neutral pronouns. Earlier it has been noted that all Kenyans should be involved.

Applied linguists should agitate for the use of gender-sensitive language when issues around BFA are being discussed or commented. Initially, the word ‘man’ was used to refer to both male and female, but today people must think more carefully in as far as how they apply to express gender to convey their ideas clearly and accurately to their readers or listeners. The gender inclusivity can be achieved by use gendered nouns, alternating genders and pronouns, use of s/he or use of the pronouns we or they. It is important to note that gender-based discrimination starts with language for regular use of gender-biased terminology influences attitudes and expectations and could relegate women to the background or support the stereotyped view of women and roles that many plays. Both males and females have a role to play, and therefore, none should be left out in the discourse around the actualisation of the big four agenda.

Applied linguists should advocate for the use of language that pacifies all the communities in Kenya. Language can brew conflicts, especially when one community feels threatened by another. Article 33(2) subsection d of the constitution states that the right to freedom of expression which does not extend to the advocacy of hatred that constitutes ethnic incitement, the vilification of others or cause harm or is based on any ground of discrimination gender. Further, the National Cohesion and integration commission defines hate speech as ‘use of threatening, abusive or insulting words or behavior, displaying of any written, publishing or distribution of written material, presentation or directing the performance of the public performance of a play, distributing, showing or playing a recording or providing or leading a programme that involves the use of abusive language. The threats are packaged in different forms and play a crucial role in resolving such issues which may bring both the disharmony. The BFA cannot be actualised if there are two warring sides.

Applied linguists can also be consultants to different professionals who in one way or another are involved in the actualisation of the BFA. The applied linguist role in this sense would be to voice out their contributions based on their interpretation of the given situation. The consultee is now free to weigh on his own all the contributions provided by the applied linguist and make a decision on the best way out. In achieving the BFA, an applied linguist can be consulted by a site engineer who has noted language barriers between the engineers and the casuals who are involved in constructing houses in Mavoko, Machakos County as proposed in this Agenda. The applied linguist may have different contribution such as; hiring interpreters who are well versed with the languages involved or even introducing the use of sign language. At this point, the site engineer will now consider the two options and decide on the best option.

Again, an applied linguist may take a significant role as an advisor to the cabinet secretaries of the different sectors which are directly involved in the realisation of the BFA. The applied linguist can play this role behind the scenes. Cook (2009) notes that the European Hugo Baetens Beardsmore’s work on bilingualism largely shapes the dimension of bilingualism taken in Europe though he has had little impact on public debate or decision-making for most language problems. This example portrays that an applied linguist can impact on resolving related linguistic issues without necessarily publicising his or her role. Therefore, applied linguists should take centre stage in contributing their expertise to the ongoing debate of how best to realise the BFA.

2.0 Skills of the 21ST Century Applied Linguist

An applied linguist in the 21st century should possess the following necessary skills for him or her to remain relevant in the field of applied linguistics and also contribute accordingly in the realisation of the BFA.

First and foremost, the 21st applied linguists should have collaborative skills; that is, they should be in a position to collaborate with others. This means that they should be in a place to work in teams. There are times when the applied linguist will be required to work closely with an economist, an agriculturist, a doctor, a lawyer or even a statistician. In case of issues about healthcare, an applied linguist will need to collaborate with other professionals such as psychologists, the doctors, ICT technical teams, clinical sociologists among others to carry out collaborative research to clearly understand the problems and how best to resolve the issues.

The collaboration skills will enable the applied linguist to work productively on a team and integrate individual expertise and ideas into a coherent solution. This way, it means that there will be strong work relations with others. Grabe (2010) advances that the 21st century applied linguist will direct more attention to issues of motivation, attitudes and affective since all these potentially influence a lot of language-based problems. This skill is essential for an applied linguist who would wish to partner with other professionals and experts in actualising the BFA. Most linguistic issues are multi-faceted, and therefore, they require multidisciplinary approaches to solve them.

Further, applied linguistics will remain interdisciplinary, and therefore, an applied linguist should be knowledgeable in other disciplines which in one way or another inform the issues of interest. This stance is vital since 'the resolution of language-based problems in the real world is a complex, dynamic and complicated process. In this regard, for applied linguists to offer any substantial solutions to the linguistic issues which may hinder the realisation of BFA, there are aspects of other disciplines which should be of interest an applied linguist. Clinical linguistics, for example, is the application of linguistic concepts, theories and methods in clinical situations. In this example for an applied linguist to contribute immensely to realisation of the universal healthcare, he or she should know the issues of disorders which may hinder proper communication and even policies governing the patient-doctor relationship, patient confidentiality among others. All these issues could be impediments to harnessing of universal healthcare, which is among the BFA.

Forensic linguistics, which is the application of linguistics knowledge, methods and insights in the context of law is another subfield of Linguistics whose principles can be significant in the actualising of the BFA. For the realisation of the BFA, all Kenyans should be at peace. In case of any warring communities, an applied linguist can come in handy to interpret the language of the law, could question the interrogation process and also analyse the written statements. This process can be done to ensure that peace prevails by resolving the issues justly.

Again, the applied linguist should be in a position to integrate technology (ICT) in addressing the language-related concern in society. This is facilitated by coming up with new ideas and also displaying an understanding through interpreting, analysing, synthesising or evaluating situations. The 21st applied linguist should incorporate ICT in their research as a way of supporting knowledge construction. ICT, in this case, includes a full range of available digital tools. These include both hardware (e.g. tablets, computers, e-reader, Smartphone) and software

(including engineering applications, internet browser and multimedia development). ICT is an essential tool for it promotes and supports a wide range of 21st-century skills. An applied linguist should, therefore, integrate ICT in addressing language-related concerns in society. Stuart (2013), notes that ICT facilitates the analysis of millions of words automatically and enhances efficiency and accuracy. This fact underscores the fact that armed with the necessary ICT skills; an applied linguist can analyse data from a large corpus with ease, accuracy and efficiency. With the ICT skills, an applied linguist will be in a position to monitor the notions that Kenyans have towards the BFA. This may, in turn, inform research areas that applied linguists can undertake to assist in the actualisation of the same.

Moreover, the 21st century applied linguist should possess excellent written communication skills. This skill is of considerable significance to the applied linguist for he/she will be involved in research and should make the findings known. The research work is generally in the form of a thesis or project. This situation calls for the linguist to be in a position to present the findings understandably so that the beneficiaries of the research get them accordingly. If the applied linguist lacks this skill, then it will be difficult for him/her to disseminate the research findings as expected.

Further, any scholar should be in a position to participate in knowledge extension and creation. An applied linguist is also a scholar in the world of academia; this is harnessed by undertaking research. This assertion means that a scholar should participate in problem-solving by using data or situations from the real world. Therefore, an applied linguist should be able to conduct research and learn about issues and concepts. The study should be aimed at solving real societal problems and also extending knowledge.

Additionally, the 21st century applied linguist should possess critical thinking skills. The essential skills will enable him/her to be sceptical. The fundamental skills are vital in undertaking a literature review. The literature review is itself a critical look at the existing research that is significant to the work that the investigation is carrying out. The essential skills enable the researcher to see the link between what they are doing and what others have done. The critical skills will also allow the linguist to assess the strengths and weaknesses of existing research. This way, the applied linguistics researcher can create a niche in their area of interest. The critical thinking skills will enable the applied linguist to choose which of the four areas highlighted in the BFA can research on and impact positively to the realisation of the big four points.

3.0 Areas of interest for an applied linguist per item of the BFA

The Big Four Agenda is grounded on food security, affordable housing, manufacturing and universal healthcare. His Excellency Uhuru Kenyatta articulated the BFA during Jamhuri Day's celebrations on 12th December 2017.

3.1 Food security

The Global Food Security index, hereafter GFSI, of 2018 ranked Kenya position 77 out of 119 countries. According to GFSI, Kenya is still food insecure for it has dangerous levels of hunger experienced in different parts of the country. Chepkwony (2018) notes that the 2018 ranking by GFSI is a challenge to the government, given that food security is among the issues in the BFA. To achieve food security and proper nutrition for all Kenyans, the government targets to increase

the production of maize from 40 million 90 kg bags annually to 61 million bags by 2022, rice around 125,000 metric tonnes currently to 400,000 metric tonnes by 2022 and potatoes from the current 1.6 million tonnes to about 2.5 million by 2022. The government plans to achieve food security by providing fertiliser, crop insurance, crop diversification, mechanisation of agricultural development and fall armyworm mitigation. An applied linguist could translate the master plan that shows how the government intends to achieve this item of BFA into a language that can be understood by all since the issues to be addressed are designed to benefit all. The farmers are vital in ensuring that Kenya is food secure. The language that is used for packaging this information should be understandable to the farmers. An applied linguist can translate the instructions on how to use the inputs, more so the fertilisers and the necessary chemicals that can mitigate the armyworm. Once the farmers get and interpret the instructions accurately, the outputs will increase, holding all the other variants constant.

3.2 Universal healthcare

The Principal Secretary in charge of research Prof. Hamadi Boga noted that the conversation between policymakers and researchers is very crucial so that research is sustained and policy informs the study and vice versa. The government intends to achieve 100 per cent health coverage for every Kenyan. Universal health coverage is essential in addressing our additional challenges and will go a long way in making the core principal of the Vision 2030 Agenda; that is, the realisation of a society where “no one is left behind”. To realise this, the government intends to review the rules governing private insurances to bring the cost of cover within the reach of every Kenyan. “Universal” means all are factored on board regardless of their social-educational status.

An applied linguist can fast track the realisation of universal healthcare as dictated in the BFA by following closely on the discourse that goes between the medical practitioner and the service seeker. Sometimes, the medic and the patient may not be of the same linguistic orientation. Effective communication between the service provider and the patient is critical for proper diagnosis and treatment. Any linguistic barrier may lead to misdiagnosis and lack of appropriate prescription. Again the prescription should be in a language that the patient can easily understand for healthcare to be meaningful to him/her.

An applied linguist should get concerned to question how effective communication is achieved if the health practitioner and patient do not share that same language. If for instance, the way to facilitate effective communication is to involve an interpreter, how is confidentiality maintained? Again how is the interpretation made to ensure the health practitioner effectively communicates? Other areas of interest would be; to find out how the Cuban doctors are overcoming the language barriers encountered, especially when interacting with the locals who are not competent in English.

3.3 Affordable housing

The government aims at constructing 500,000 homes in five lots in the next four years. This plan would be achieved by bringing County governments on board and empowering housing associations. Provision of affordable housing is in line with article 43 of Chapter four of the Constitution, which states that ‘every person has a right to accessible and adequate housing to reasonable standards of sanitation. This article assures every person in Kenya the right to appropriate and available housing and equitable standards of sanitation. For us, as a country to

achieve affordable housing, construction companies will be brought on board. For the companies to work efficiently, to reduce risks, to make full disclosure in terms of communication and strengthen long-lasting relations, the information should flow freely. An applied linguist can investigate the communication barriers in the construction sites and means of resolving them.

Again, there are times when the professionals (engineers, among others) know, but they lack a proper way of communicating. An applied linguist can work closely with such experts and help them package the knowledge in an understandable way some construction companies may have internationally faced, and there might be a language barrier. To resolve these challenge interpreters will be required to come on board. In such a time, there are applied linguists who have mastery of translation and interpretation. Further, an applied linguist can carry out a study on problems of reading and how such issues can be resolved. Another area which could be of interest to an applied linguist is the interpersonal communication among the experts and workers at the site and whether that could be a hindrance to completing the housing projects accordingly.

Further, an applied linguist can partner with the other stakeholders in coming up with a housing policy which would make the Kenyans support the Agenda. Many Kenyans are not aware of how the government intends to achieve affordable housing. In the same way, an applied linguist would be very instrumental in ensuring that the housing policy is in languages that all Kenyans understand. This situation would call for the translation of such a plan into other languages. Again, the translation will need to be done in such a way that meaning is not compromised. To achieve proper communication, professional translators will be required. This scenario squarely calls for an applied linguist for interpretation and translation is a field in applied linguistics.

3.4 Enhance manufacturing

On this Agenda, the government aims to raise the share of the manufacturing sector from nine to fifteen per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2022. This development will facilitate the creation of 1.3 million manufacturing jobs by 2022. This Agenda is aligned to four sub-sectors, which include the blue economy, leather and textiles industries and Agro-processing. Again, political stability and harmonious labour relations are the bedrock in boosting the manufacturing industries. This item is linked to Sustainable Development goal number nine, which is on building resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation. Any innovation of a new product has to be done in the language. An applied linguist could research how the manufacturers use a word to reach out to as many potential consumers as possible.

Again scientists should partner with applied linguists, especially when they make discoveries to use language effectively to communicate with them. It is important to note that vocabulary can grow with growth in science and technology. In enhancing manufacturing, there is value addition component, especially of agricultural produce. The farmers need to be talked to in a convincing language to fully embrace adding value to their products before selling them off. Again, the user manuals that come with manufactured products should be done in a style that the users or consumers easily can understand. Applied linguists can focus into the afore issues and do a critical discourse analysis of the conversations those who are mandated to get to the farmers and explain the government's intentions in as far as enhanced manufacturing is concerned how effective it's done.

Conclusion

All Kenyans, regardless of their social class, educational level, age, sex, tribe, political affiliation and religious ideologies, should be brought on board to fast track the realisation of the BFA. For the achievement of the BFA at the scheduled time, necessary policies should be put in place and communicated accordingly to the involved policy actors and stakeholders. Proper media should be used to reach all the concerned for the prompt delivery of information and action. All professionals should come together and devise ways of realising the BFA for all have a role to play. The applied linguists are still part of the debate since their voice and expertise is fundamental in the realisation of the BFA. The applied linguists can do this by collaborating with scholars and researchers from other disciplines to come up with realistic solutions for the problems which may hinder the prompt realisation of the BFA. Thus, applied linguists are part and parcel of the solution to any linguistic issues which may derail the process of actualising of the BFA.

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