

Language Issues in a Multilingual Society: The Kenyan Experience

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Abstract

In many developing countries, language issues have taken a back seat. Here in Kenya, there are more than forty local languages in use by the various ethnic communities. Whereas some politicians have campaigned for the recognition and promotion of Kiswahili as a national language, no concrete steps have been taken to make this a reality. This paper seeks to explore, first the historical background to the current state of the language situation in Kenya and, second, what steps ought to be taken in order to handle the language problem in a multilingual society like that of Kenya.

Introduction

Language planning, or the process of conscious decision-making resulting in language changes, characterises many developing nations alike (Heath, 1972, xiii).

The history of many developing countries, Kenya included, reveals that since attaining political independence, they have been preoccupied with issues that will assist them in enhancing national unity. One of the main issues that has and still does nag these countries to date is that of language choice and language planning. In many developing countries, there exists a multiplicity of languages within one national entity which pose great dangers to national unity. In Kenya, for instance, there are well over 40 different languages (vernaculars) in use among the various ethnic communities. A country with so many languages ought to undertake proper language planning that will lead to adopting a common language as a lingua franca. Heath propounds on the need for a common language as follows:

A self-respecting political body needs a common language; moreover, it is frequently asserted that linguistic unity is a prerequisite for effective mobilisation of the citizenry behind the building of a nation (Heath 1972: 200).

In Kenya, we have a three - tiered “language policy”. Each community has a language, which is used for communication purposes with people of the same community (the in-group). The national language (Kiswahili) is used to communicate with people from other speech communities while English and the other world languages, such as French, German, etc., are normally used for specialised communication. Such is the linguistic situation in Kenya today. This state of affairs has been compounded by the following factors: a) the lack of a clear, well-defined language policy; b) the lack of government’s full involvement in matters pertaining to language development, and

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c) the fact that each of the local languages has been left to develop on its own. Certain historical factors that have led to this state of affairs can be analysed in two phases: the colonial period and the post-colonial period.

In this paper, we shall examine language issues in Kenya in so far as they relate to Kiswahili and English. In section 1, we examine the language situation during the colonial period. In section 2, we shall examine the language situation in post-colonial Kenya. Section 3 summarises our observations.

The Colonial Period (1884 – 1963)

Colonial rule in Kenya dates from the 16th century when the Portuguese entrenched their rule on the Kenyan coast. Portuguese rule was confined to the coastal towns such as Mombasa, Malindi, etc. The main objective of the Portuguese was to control the route to India and the lucrative trade from the “New World”. In an apparent endeavour to control trade in the Indian Ocean, numerous wars were fought between the Portuguese and the Arabs as well as between the Portuguese and the local inhabitants of the coastal towns. The Portuguese were defeated several times and had to surrender and withdraw from the Kenyan coast. But they would return and reclaim the towns they had lost. As a result, their rule along the Kenyan coast was discontinuous. Then came the Arab colonial rulers who ruled the coastal strip from 1832 to 1964 AD. British colonial rule in Kenya began in 1884 and came to an end with the attainment of independence in 1963. We shall confine ourselves to this last period of colonial rule because, apart from the fact that it is by far the most noticeable, it also covered the entire country and its effects on language are the most pronounced.

Language is a very effective political tool, which is used to capture people ideologically. It was used very effectively by the British to colonise Africans (read Kenyans) psychologically. Sindiga (1977: 3) expounds on the colonial manoeuvres to retard the spread of Kiswahili thus:

The spread of Kiswahili was retarded by a well-worked-out plan by the British government in order to exploit her dependencies... Colonialists' emphasis on the English language was deliberately calculated to create a small group of “bourgeoisie elite” among the Africans (a group that would be used to exploit the masses).

The development and/or evolution of language use and language policy in colonial Kenya can be viewed in three different stages: a) 1884 - 1924: the missionary era, b) 1925 - 1948: the Phelps-Stokes commission and its aftermath, and c) 1949 - 1963: the era of intense glorification and Entrenchment of English.

1. 1884-1924: the missionary era

During this period, the colonial rulers were more preoccupied with economic gains that they could reap from their newly established colonies or commercial empires. Three main rival groups emerged, each with its own interests, which had to be guarded by all means. They were: a) the missionaries, b) the settler community, and c) the colonial administrators.

The missionaries were the only foreigners involved with African education. Wherever they established a mission centre, they also established schools and vocational training centres. The main aim of the missionaries was to impart education to the African so that they could assist them spread Christianity among their fellow Africans. The African, once able to read the Bible, would help the missionaries spread the 'good news' to his fellow kinsmen. The African was, however, only taught to read, write, and do basic arithmetic. Nevertheless, since the missionaries belonged to different faiths, divisions arose among them in their bid for converts. Whereas Christians were competing with Muslims for converts, the Catholics and the Protestants were divided on several issues. Each denomination had its own aims and objectives and never trusted the other. As the competition for converts continued, the rift between these groups widened.

As the missionaries expanded education in Kenya, there arose the issue of language to be used across the various ethnic communities. Whereas it was easy to conduct education in the language of the local population in a homogenous society, it became impossible to use the vernacular in heterogeneous communities, as was the case in town and white-owned farms where people from different speech communities were found. Similarly, it would be very expensive to train qualified teachers in the more than 40 Kenyan languages. Added to this was the cost of producing teaching materials in all these languages. Having realised the enormity of the problem, the missionaries wrote to the colonial administration in 1909 to seek guidance on this issue. Their request was not answered until ten years later. The colonial administration advised that the vernaculars had to be used in the lower classes (Standard 1 - 4) while English had to be used in the upper classes (Standard 5 - 8). However, in towns and areas with people of mixed origins, Kiswahili was preferred in the lower classes while English was used in the upper classes. The missionaries were the first people to publish in both the vernaculars and Kiswahili (Krapf, 1850, 1882, Steere 1870) etc.

The settlers' main preoccupation was maximum exploitation of the available resources. They viewed the Africans as "incomplete" human beings who were only expected to serve as either manual workers "*maboi*" and/or artisans in their enterprises. They never found it prudent to teach English to the Africans. In order to keep the Africans at bay, they objected to any request by either the missionaries or the Africans themselves to be taught English. They viewed the teaching of English to Africans as a grave mistake that would make them arrogant and hence lead them to start comparing themselves with the whites (the chosen and civilised race). However, due to the problem of multiethnicity, the settler community considered Kiswahili a panacea to the rampant problem of multilingualism in Kenya, at least.

The colonial administrators, like the settlers, were more preoccupied with the economic benefits that could be reaped from Kenya. They viewed Kenya as a source of raw materials for the British industries back home. The main objective of the colonial administration was to obtain people who were readily available to serve in the lower ranks of the administration as clerks. Because of this, education (especially higher education) to the Africans was of no consequence. Matters pertaining to African education never took centre stage in the colonial administrators' minds. Even when education matters were referred to them, they could not make independent decisions without proper instructions from the colonial office in London. Whenever these decisions or instructions were not forthcoming or delayed, they always abided by the wishes of the settler community here in Kenya. This was done simply because of the settlers' economic and political power not only here in Kenya, but also in London. To argue their case against the teaching of English to the Africans, they would draw on the Indian experience from which they argued that all the efforts to teach English to the Indians had failed. What would be the need to teach English to a fourth-rate African (Please note that the African was rated fourth after the European, the Indian/Arab, and the Somali). The colonialists' efforts to limit the use of English in a sense assisted the spread of Kiswahili.

During this period, African languages (vernaculars) were emphasised. Most of the missionaries emphasised ethnic identity. As a result, many of them struggled to learn the local languages spoken in their areas of operation. This led to frustrating the development and spread of the only available lingua franca - Kiswahili. Some of these missionaries degraded Kiswahili by giving it derogatory terms such as a 'foreign language' or 'bastard language'. Kiswahili was baptised a foreign language due to the fact that it has a wide range of vocabulary of Arabic origin. Some theorists viewed this as a necessary condition for considering Kiswahili a dialect of Arabic. However, the majority of the Arabic vocabulary is a result of Islamic contacts with the east coast of Africa. We do contend that the majority of Arabic loan words in Kiswahili have Islamic origins. The fact that a language has a good percentage of lexical borrowings does not make it a foreign language though. Furthermore, the majority of these Arabic loan-words have been naturalised to the extent that even the Arabs themselves might have difficulty recognising them anymore. Kiswahili has had contacts with many languages of the world. Whenever newcomers settled on the East African coast the languages of the different communities would pick elements of the other. Hence Kiswahili does have lexical elements from different languages which have had contact with it, such as Turkish, Hindi, Persian, Arabic, German and English. Whenever languages come into contact, they will inevitably influence each other. It is not the case that it was only Kiswahili that was affected by the foreign languages. Those other foreign languages also must have picked certain Kiswahili elements that were not available in their cultures. In any case, English has lexical elements from a wide cross - section of Indo - European languages. Why then is it never referred to as a bastard language? Kiswahili is truly an African language of Bantu origin, which has enriched itself by

picking lexical elements from all the world languages that have come into contact with it. These hypotheses were used in order to distance Kiswahili from the masses. However, a few of the missionaries, such as Dr. J. Krapf and E. Steere, realised the unifying strength of Kiswahili and used it appropriately in their work. Even though many hurdles were placed on the way to arrest the spread of Kiswahili, it continued to spread without much opposition from other languages up to 1924.

2. 1925-1948: the Phelps-Stokes Commission era and its aftermath

This period marks the earliest involvement by the colonial government in matters pertaining to education in general and language in particular. The Phelps-Stokes commission had been appointed to investigate education in all the British territories within the tropics; it presented its findings in 1924. This commission marks the earliest education policy from Britain in Kenya. One of its main proposals/recommendations was that vernaculars should be stressed in schools. The following years saw the vernaculars being taught with a lot of vigour resulting in the decline of the spread of English and, to a lesser extent, that of Kiswahili.

The colonial administration's chief aim was the Africanization of education using local languages. This was a ploy to deny Africans to learn either English or Kiswahili, languages that cut across ethnic boundaries. As a result, the teaching of vernaculars was intensified in African schools. Any effort to introduce English was thwarted by a shortage of qualified teachers. During this period, the role of Kiswahili in nation building was quite evident and the colonialists could no longer shut their eyes to that fact. The two world wars had helped the spread of Kiswahili far and wide in the East African region. It was during this period that efforts were made to standardise Kiswahili, thanks to the enthusiasm of the governors of the four East African countries, Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika and Zanzibar.

3. 1949-1963: the era of intense glorification and entrenchment of English

The period 1949 - 1963 witnessed the entrenchment of English on Kenyan soil by the colonialists. The 1950s, for instance, were years of cold war mounted against Kiswahili. Efforts were made to counter any forces that hindered the spread of English (in this case the use of Kiswahili). Several methods were used to ensure that English, and not the other languages, was taught. For instance,

- a) the various committee reports made during this period and even earlier all tended to pulverise Kiswahili, the only indigenous language that posed a great threat to the spread of English (see the Beecher reports of 1937 and 1949, and the report of the East African Royal Commission popularly known as the Binns report of 1955). The Beecher report of 1949, for instance, recommended a 4.4.4 education system whereby, in the first four years, students would only

learn reading, writing, and arithmetic. The Binns report, for its part, argued that teaching Kiswahili should not be encouraged because it impoverishes the teaching of vernaculars and also acts as a barrier to the spreading of English. The teaching of Kiswahili was viewed as a waste of time and effort. The proponents of this argument argued that Africans were very eager to learn English.

- b) Kiswahili was removed as a medium of instruction and an examinable subject in 1953 and 1958 respectively. Prior to 1953, one could choose to sit the Kenya African Preliminary Examination (KAPE) in either English or Kiswahili. From then onwards, Kiswahili only remained one of the examinable subjects. In 1958, Kiswahili ceased being an examinable subject. This resulted in the degradation of the language of the Kenyan masses and in the exaltation of that of the colonial master - English. From then henceforth, English not only became the de facto medium of instruction but also a compulsory subject. Failure to attain the required pass mark in English alone made a candidate fail the entire examination, the KAPE, the Kenya Junior Secondary Examination (KJSE), or the Cambridge General Certificate of Education (GCE).
- c) An African elite was established that envied and yearned for everything English, a group of faithful followers aspiring for English ways. The British colonialists were intent on building a loyal bourgeois elite in the 1950s that would take over from them at independence. Several strategies were used to achieve this end, such as rewarding them with land (see the Swynnerton plan of 1954) and finances to set up business enterprises.

Prior to 1954, all the land belonged to the clan and any member of the clan could utilise the communal land without any individual laying claim to it. The Swynnerton plan came into force at the height of the struggle for independence. A group of collaborators were rewarded with land taken away forcefully from either the Mau Mau militants or their sympathisers. Peasants were also forced to sell their pieces of land to this fancied group which had the financial ability. These are the very people who occupied the key positions at independence in 1963.

- d) Other organs were used to propagate and strengthen the use of English in and out of schools among Africans. These organs included:
 - i) the English service of the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) which was used very effectively to spread propaganda aimed at attracting people to learning English, people with a passion for the English culture;
 - ii) the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC);
 - iii) the overseas information services;
 - iv) the British Council which still awards scholarships to English teachers to study in Britain as well as providing qualified teachers to teach in our schools and universities (Whiteley, 1971: 4).

- e) a smear campaign was engaged against Kiswahili by giving it derogatory terms, such as a 'foreign' or 'slave' language. For instance, the secretary of the East African Swahili Committee (EASC) was reported in 1956 as saying that Kiswahili had none of the advantages of being able to appeal to sentiment. When all this was happening, Kenyans were being urged to learn their mother tongues. Therefore, whatever had inspired people to learn Kiswahili was secretly and slyly being removed.

Once Kiswahili was 'confirmed dead', the colonialists started giving excuses for the use of the many and varied vernaculars. However, given that there was scarcity of books and qualified teachers to teach all those languages, there arose the need to have only one language that could be used in all African schools. With Kiswahili out of the way, English was the undisputed language of choice. A new education programme, the New Primary Approach (NPA) was introduced in the late 1950s beginning with the urban areas and later spreading to the rural areas. This programme ensured that English was used as a medium of instruction right from standard 1. In 1957, the Nairobi language centre was established in order to assist Africans in polishing their English.

During the last years of colonial rule, English was viewed as a symbol of socio-economic status. People with a good command of English were offered well-paying jobs while those in employment were promoted upon passing the English test. This was meant to convince Kenyans to learn English. At Independence, English was the medium of instruction in many African schools as well as the de facto official language. Africans were being urged to learn English the good way and those who succeeded in doing that were paid handsomely.

The Post - Colonial Period: from 1963 onwards

At independence, Kenya inherited the language policy of the colonial period, a policy revolving around a bilingual and a tri-lingual system. In the case of a bilingual system, the national language, Kiswahili competes for attention with English whereas in the tri-lingual situation competition revolves around Kiswahili, English and the vernacular. It is worth noting that the 'bourgeois elite' that took the reins of power in independent Kenya had gone through the colonial system of education. It would have been futile to expect them to pursue different policies from those of their predecessors. As a result, the same policies and structures left by the colonialists remained intact long after independence.

During the colonial period, Kiswahili had served the nationalist movements by uniting the different ethnic groups. It was used to mobilise the patriotic citizens against the oppressive colonial regime. This was done after realising that a national or common language was more effective in achieving national integrity and cohesion. After independence, Kiswahili was declared the national language because of its lingua franca status.

The national language question has been a subject of serious debate in post - colonial Kenya. Several committees appointed to investigate education policies have made recommendations in favour of Kiswahili. (See the Ominde Report of 1964, the Gachathi Report of 1976, and the Mackay Report of 1981). The Gachathi Report, for instance, recommended that Kiswahili be introduced very early in the primary school curriculum and be made a compulsory subject in both primary and secondary schools. However, implementation of these recommendations was lacking all through until 1982 when the Mackay Report was adopted and the 8.4.4 system of education was launched. The Mackay report recommended the establishment of a faculty of social, cultural, and development studies with a division of African languages incorporating Kiswahili and other national languages (Mackay report, 1981:42-3). Under the 8.4.4 system of education, Kiswahili was made a compulsory subject at both primary and secondary school levels.

Since independence in 1963, Kenya has failed to devise a clear and explicit language policy. There is need for a language policy that details the role of each of the languages used here in Kenya - English, Kiswahili and the various vernaculars. Several political statements that offer hints on language policy have been made. However, all of them were made at the spur of the moment (for unity and mobilisation of the masses) in favour of Kiswahili. No concrete steps have been taken to implement these political decisions. As a result, most of the languages have been left to develop on their own, except for English which receives British assistance.

If the Kenya government were serious about language policy and/or the promotion of Kiswahili as a national language, the various recommendations and political decrees that have been issued so far would have been backed by considerable planning and funding. The language situation here in Kenya remains a trilingual one. In spite of all the accompanying problems and sacrifices that may ensue, it is necessary for all the languages involved to be given an impetus for them to develop. This can be done beginning with the official and national languages and then expanding the programme to incorporate the vernaculars. Good planning will evolve a clear language policy and also ensure that the required changes take the shortest time possible.

Linguistic diversity within a nation poses great danger to territorial integrity and national cohesion. Territorial integrity and national cohesion are necessary ingredients for the existence of the countries involved as entities within their territorial borders (Sindiga 1977:2). It has been observed, however, that politicians are never the arbiters of linguistic issues. They have never been comfortable with the emergence of the language problem.

The following proposals ought to be taken into account when drawing up a language policy for Kenya:

- a) the need to establish an independent body, possibly an academy, free of government manoeuvres, with the following responsibilities:

- i) to advise on linguistic matters on account of systematic work and scientific research based on the linguistic situation of the day. This body should never be a “permanent commission” but a body comprising professional linguists and literary critics, and
 - ii) to read and vet textbooks, especially those intended to be used in schools;
- b) the need to establish a national language centre (NLC) vested with power to co-ordinate all language matters in the country. Such a centre would have to collaborate with other language centres and/or research institutes around the world;
- c) the allocation of funds to finance research and development of Kenyan languages. It is also necessary for this programme to be incorporated in the annual budgets of this nation.

Even though the Kenyan government does not seem to be very keen on language matters, there are several groups of individuals who, through their love of language (especially Kiswahili), have organised themselves into private clubs and are doing a commendable job in promoting and advancing either the national language, Kiswahili, or other local languages: we have, for example, Jungu Kuu, CHAKITA (Chama Cha Kiswahili cha Taifa), etc. The recent passage of a bill in parliament to establish a national language council is a step in the right direction. This Bill will definitely enhance the development of Kiswahili in Kenya.

Conclusion

The success of a language policy is solely dependent upon how carefully the plan has been considered and executed. Linguistic divisions can result in political divisions, which can easily ruin a nation. It is necessary, therefore, to regard the building of linguistic unity (a national speech community) as an integral part of nation building. It is imperative to note that language is integral to a group's sense of identity and unity, and that linguists have proposed that languages may serve either separatist, prestige, or unifying functions (Heath, 1972:199).

Language planning and language policy takes place in a social context. The success and viability of a language policy in Kenya (a country with more than forty languages) will heavily depend on the commitment of the political leadership as well as the top bureaucrats and scholars in charge of implementing it. If we want to emphasise and develop Kiswahili, let us say so and let our deeds be geared toward that end too. However, as Gorman (1973:77) states, the mere statement that Kiswahili is the official language of Kenya will not decrease the use of English.

All the languages concerned, viz. English, Kiswahili and the vernaculars ought to be accorded certain opportunities, environments and contexts to enable them to prosper. The government ought to outline the contexts within which each language will be used, as is the case in parliament. Nevertheless, we ought to understand that this is an expensive venture that would require a lot of funds and sacrifice.

In this paper we have examined the language situation in Kenya. In section 1 we examined the situation in colonial Kenya and the opposing viewpoints. In section 2 we examined the situation in Post-colonial Kenya. We argued that the language situation during the two periods is quite hazy with no clear policies. We observed that Kenya does not have a well-defined language policy. We further argued that in order for Kenya to develop socially and politically, she ought to be ready to make sacrifices for this programme to succeed.

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