

KISWAHILI RESEARCH IN KENYAN UNIVERSITIES: WHERE ARE WE NOW?

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Introduction

The Department of Linguistics and African Languages, in which Kiswahili is a central subject, was established in the Faculty of Arts at the University College of Nairobi in 1969. Since then, at least five more departments which are devoted to the teaching and study of the Kiswahili language and Literature have been established in various Kenyan universities (see below).

Most of these departments run post-graduate programmes leading to M.A. and Ph.D. degrees. As a result, considerable research activity related to both the Kiswahili language and literature has been going on. This is evident from the dissertations that have been written and that continue to be written every year (see a list of the titles in the appendix).

Although supervised research work has been going on in Kiswahili departments for many years, no attempt, to our knowledge, has been made to describe and evaluate the general direction in which the research effort is directed. The main aim of this paper, is therefore, to briefly describe and assess the research work that has been going on in these departments.

But before we discuss what has been taking place, it is perhaps imperative to understand the broad philosophy underlying the teaching and the study of Kiswahili in Kenya. The teaching of this language was, and still is, intended to achieve the following broad goals (see for instance the Ominde Commission of 1964).

- (a) To promote nationalism. Nationalism has been defined by Fishman 1972: 266) as "an integrative movement which seeks to go beyond the primordial ties of the family and locality and that forges wider bounds; a movement that stresses the inherent unity of populations that have never been aware of such unity."
- (b) To serve modernization, i.e., to function as an important tool of communication in a modern state in which there is a search for newer, more rationale, more efficient solutions to the problems of today and tomorrow.

In order to make the realization of the above goals possible, the Ominde Report on Education of 1964 recommended not only the training of Kiswahili teachers, but also that a department concerned with the teaching and study of the language at the university college of Nairobi be started in order to assist in the promotion of Kiswahili as a national language. It is against this background that the research effort on Kiswahili language and literature is predicated.

The remaining part of this paper is divided into two major parts. Part one will deal with supervised research on Kiswahili Literature while part two will deal with research on

linguistic aspects of the language. It is also important to note that the analysis contained in this paper is based on a survey of a total of 95 dissertations (mainly M.A.) from two of the oldest Kenyan Universities, namely University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University (see appendix). The theses referred to here were written between 1975 and 1996. It is our assumption that the research trends from the newly established departments (Egerton, Moi, Kikuyu and Maseno) are not radically different from the ones discussed here. To be sure, the theses referred to here are not the only ones written by Kenyans on Kiswahili. There are many more that have been written by Kenyan scholars in European and American Universities and that are to be found in the local University libraries. These are however beyond the limited scope of this paper.

Research on Kiswahili Literature

About 60% of all the dissertations that are included in this survey examine different literary aspects of Kiswahili Literature (or literature written in Kiswahili), e.g. themes, styles, characterization etc. The range of topics that have been dealt with by these dissertations is therefore diverse. While some discuss various aspects of style, which range from the use of allegory (Wafula 1989), the use of metaphor (Imbosa 1990), deviation and fore-grounding (Kazungu 1982) to the use of stylostatistical approaches in literary analysis (Kitsao 1982), others seek to describe varied themes of plays, novels, poetry, songs or other forms of oral literature.

The theoretical approaches adopted by these studies are equally varied. For example, those dealing with themes use theoretical frameworks that are wide ranging e.g., sociological, feminist oriented, anthropological and socialist realism.

A closer look at the data, however, reveals certain trends or patterns in terms of topics, theories, methodologies and the media used in the writing of these dissertations.

While only about 18% of the studies focus on style (the use of language to communicate messages), about 70% focus mainly on themes and the remaining 12% seem to give equal weight to both style and theme in the same study.

It appears that in any given work of art, a critic or a reader will always be curious to know what the work is all about and probably what it teaches; the feeling that a work of art might be morally useful or functional may encourage more people to study themes instead of style. It is also possible, given the fact that the discussion of themes in literature tends to be relatively subjective, that more students will feel encouraged to analyze themes instead of style.

Another striking trend in this survey concerns the theoretical approaches used to analyze literary works.

The survey shows that nearly 50% of the studies are based on a utilitarian approach of literature to society. Such an approach is associated with writers like Earnest Fischer (1959), who wrote *The Necessity of Art*, and David Craig (1975), who edited an anthology called *Marxists on Literature*. The main philosophy behind this approach (or approaches) is that art should be used in order to influence change in the world. This view of literature advocates the power of literature in helping to change the world. This framework was very popular in Kenya

from the 70s and 80s to the early 90s. It was a fashionable way of analyzing works of literature. It was seen as the best way of looking at the African predicament of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Works of art, be they poems, plays, songs and novels were measured against this yardstick. They were praised or despised depending on whether they showed man's reality and his ability to change his or her environment for the better. Perhaps none of the essays we have read typifies the mood of that time more than an unpublished paper written in the 1980's by Al Amin Mazrui. In this paper the writer evaluates a novel written by a Zanzibari author as follows:

S.A. Mohamed's *Dunia Mti Mkavu* (1980) so far represents the highest in the development of Swahili novels in terms of it's socio-political analysis of the dynamics and dialects of the African Society under imperialist domination. It departs radically from Mohammed's other novels... which though progressive in their social criticism are replete with feudalist meta-physical twists in their social analysis.... In essence then, *Dunia Mti Mkavu* is a literary treatise.... of it's only kind which makes it **the most progressive and therefore the most important work in Swahili literary tradition** (emphasis added)

The novel in question is deemed important because of it's social relevance. The most important question to ask ourselves, is why many students of African Literature in general and Swahili Literature in particular preoccupied themselves with the above philosophy in the analysis of literary works.

The approach was relevant to the aspirations and objectives of nation building. Since most African countries had just emerged from colonialism to neocolonialism, this kind of approach was deemed the best way out of the predicament and was popularised among students by university teachers. It is also noteworthy that these were the years of the liberalization struggle in Angola, Mozambique, and Namibia and even South Africa (of course it was also the period of the cold war and bipolar politics). It is therefore correct to say that a utilitarian view of literature captured the mood of the time; it was an ideology with which students and teachers could identify.

The pre-occupation with mainly one approach, though expedient at that time, tended to discourage other approaches to literary criticism. There is now a clear tendency to correct this imbalance by broadening the base of analysis by the use of other approaches (for example, Karama 1996, and Mule 1991).

Another notable aspect in the survey is that, while there has been considerable number of studies on novels (43%) and poetry (25%), there has been less activity on plays/drama (15%), songs (4%) and other forms of oral literature (13%). We suspect that relatively fewer studies have been done on drama because many of the Kiswahili departments in Kenya do not offer Theatre Arts as a course. Students may not feel confident to handle a subject for which they are ill-equipped. It is also plausible to speculate that some students may not find what has been published in drama attractive enough to warrant a study. This is because there are very few published Kiswahili plays in the Swahiliphone region.

It has been noted that there are very few studies on Oral Literature. This is probably due to the fact that such studies involve actual field-work with attendant costs. Whatever the reason

for this paucity of studies in Oral Literature, this clearly is an area of study that has obviously been neglected and in which one would like to see more activity.

It should be observed that over 90% of the dissertations written on Kiswahili Literature are in Kiswahili. Only a few are written in English. It is possible that some departments encourage their students to write in Kiswahili (Kiswahili Department at Kenyatta University is a case in point). But it is also likely that some students feel confident enough to handle literary topics in Kiswahili given that there now exists a reasonable accumulation of terminology that can be used for academic purposes.

It is also noteworthy that the few dissertations written in English are mainly stylistic. A student writing on stylistics may be more comfortable applying (without translation) a theory derived from a book written in English, since translating the theory to Kiswahili may be unduly cumbersome.

To conclude this section on research in Kiswahili literature, a few general observations are in order.

Given that about 50% of the dissertations are based on one theoretical approach, there is need to broaden the theoretical base in the analysis of literature (this may be done if students are exposed to a variety of theories from which they can choose). If the studies being undertaken currently are anything to go by, this diversification is already taking place. One also wishes to see more research on aspects of Kiswahili Oral Literature. There is need to collect and analyse various materials of Kiswahili Oral literature, e.g. narratives, proverbs, songs and others. There is even greater need to do comparative studies in Oral Literature between Kiswahili and other African Languages.

Research on Kiswahili Language

In this part, we shall focus our discussion on dissertations that deal with what we consider to be linguistic topics. These include phonology, syntax, socio-linguistics, pragmatics and applied linguistics, e.g. second language learning, translation and others. As implied earlier, only about 40% of all the dissertations that we considered could be said to be linguistic oriented. This simply means that more students find it easier or prefer to write on literary rather than linguistic topics. It is also possible that many students find literary topics, especially thematic ones, more relevant and readily applicable to their environment. It might also mean, and this one is a real possibility, that most students' linguistic background, owing to inadequate exposure, does not adequately prepare them for linguistic inquiry.

Just as in literature, dissertations written on Kiswahili language deal with diverse issues. Some of them deal with grammatical issues (Mukuria 1987), or patterns of language use (Furaha 1991, Onyango 1990), while others discuss second language learning (Mudhune 1994), dialectology (Bakari 1982) etc.

It should be mentioned that 17% of the linguistic studies are comparative in nature (for example, Ilongo 1983, Kimanga 1994). In such studies an aspect of Kiswahili language is compared with a similar aspect of another language in Kenya (more often than not, the

language of comparison is always the student's first language). At times a comparison is made in order to test whether a certain linguistic theory, say Functional Grammar, can describe well aspects of two languages. Such comparative studies show the central position that Kiswahili has come to occupy in the minds of those who do research.

On the whole, the state of the research on linguistic aspects of Kiswahili is not satisfactory, while there are a number of studies in phonology and morphology (about 22% and a good number in socio-linguistics (28%), there are very few of them on syntax (8%) lexicography (8%) translation (10%) and pragmatics (10%). These are some of the areas that future research should focus on.

There is also very little research on Kiswahili dialects and other "Kiswahili varieties." While there is a study that employs morphophonological criteria in the delineation of dialect boundaries (Bakari 1982), there is nothing on the use of lexicon. There is also nothing on the sociolinguistic aspects of the Kiswahili dialects and varieties. For example, are some of the dialects faced with imminent death? What is the impact of the standard dialect on the other dialects?

There are, in addition, very few systematically done studies (9%) that would benefit the teaching of Kiswahili Language. There is need for such studies. Such studies would take cognisance of the varied linguistic backgrounds of those who learn the language.

The theoretical frameworks adopted by linguistic studies are varied. These include, Structuralism, Functional Grammar, Natural Generative Grammar among others. The Natural Generative Phonology, however, seems to dominate phonology studies. Other theories are now coming into the scene, e.g. the Auto-segmental Phonology Theory, Government and Binding in Syntax and others.

Unlike in Literature where most studies have been written in Kiswahili, over 50% of all the dissertations in this category have been written in English. While it may be relatively easier to get terminology in literature, it appears difficult to translate all the complicated linguistic theories into Kiswahili. Although some commendable effort has been made in the completion of a linguistic dictionary by the Institute of Kiswahili Research in Tanzania, this 58-page dictionary cannot possibly cope with the vast amount of terminology that is involved in linguistic discourse.

Conclusion

It has been the intention of this paper to briefly describe and evaluate the developments that have been taking place with regard to supervised research in Kiswahili Language and Literature in Kenyan Universities. It has been observed that there are more literary studies than there are linguistic ones. It has also been observed that the utilitarian approach to literature dominates the literary studies. It is suggested that the diversification of research activities in the Kiswahili departments will lead to the fulfilment of the goals that had earlier been envisaged in the 1960's.

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Appendix

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