

THE ROLE OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN KENYA: A CASE FOR USING THEM AS LANGUAGES OF INSTRUCTION THROUGHOUT PRIMARY SCHOOL

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In the situation that currently prevails in Kenya, English is the prestigious language, the mastery of which is a prerequisite for social and economic advancement. Kiswahili, for its part, as the national language of Kenya and now an official language alongside English, is used for communication between people of different ethnic groups, in the courts, in the lower primary school, as well as in such areas as the market, the neighbourhood, the transport industry and work. As for the other indigenous languages of Kenya than Kiswahili, they are used in the family, the local community, lower primary school, adult literacy courses, the church, the media, and at the work place. This paper, while recognizing the huge challenges that would be involved, argues for the use of these indigenous languages as languages of instruction beyond the lower primary school, that is up to at least the end of primary school. This would ensure that they are more stable languages capable of being used more productively by the learners later in life in both their further education and their professional lives.

1. INTRODUCTION

Wardhaugh (2010: 100) observes that “In Kenya, local languages, Swahili, and English all find use and choosing the right language to use on a particular occasion can be quite a delicate matter”. For his part, Whiteley (1984: 74-5), quoted by Wardhaugh (ibid.), describes “the kind of situation that can occur between a member of the public and members of the government bureaucracy”:

A man wishing to see a government officer about renewing a licence may state his request to the girl typist in Swahili as a suitably neutral language if he does not know her. To start off in English would be unfortunate if she did not know it, and on her goodwill depends his

gaining access to authority reasonably quickly. She may reply in Swahili, if she knows it as well as he does and wishes to be cooperative; or in English, if she is busy and not anxious to be disturbed; or in the local language, if she recognises him and wishes to reduce the level of formality. If he, in return, knows little English, he may be put off at her use of it and decide to come back later; or, if he knows it well, he may demonstrate his importance by insisting on an early interview and gain his objective at the expense of the typist's goodwill. The interview with the officer will follow a similar pattern, being shaped, on the one hand, by the total repertoire mutually available, and on the other by their respective positions in relation to the issue involved.

With regard to the relative role of English, Kiswahili, and the indigenous languages of Kenya other than English, the passage above rightly suggests—as already hinted at in Wardhaugh's introduction to the quotation—that all three “categories” of languages have their place in the administration in Kenya. And it contains a couple of statements I would agree with, like referring to Kiswahili as “a suitably neutral language” or suggesting that the typist could use “the local language ... to reduce the level of formality”. However, it also contains some statements I would not agree with: for instance, I would not agree that there could have been (in 1984 and now), a girl typist working in a public office in Kenya who did not know (at least functional) English, while English has always been the language of the administration. But, what I find most misleading about the whole passage is the overall wrong impression which it gives that all three categories of languages have the same importance in a public office and that two interlocutors could switch to any one of them at will, as long as they both knew them, allowing for the level of formality. A more accurate picture is that English and Kiswahili are more prestigious than any other local language and, as such, they should be not put on the same footing—in relation to the language of administration—as the latter, especially if one is in a public office in any of the major cities.

To start with Kiswahili, it is simply one indigenous language of Kenya that stands out from the others. It has always been accorded a much higher

status than the others: first, as the national language of Kenya since independence in 1963, and, since the ratification of the new constitution in August 2010, as an official language as well. This higher status enables it to be used as a lingua franca throughout the country, as well as being used as the language of instruction in the lower classes of primary school in some urban areas and where it is considered as the “language of the catchment area”.¹

As for English, it is the language upon which social stratification is hinged and is a pre-requisite for social and economic advancement. It is also used as a filtering mechanism that negatively affects the chances of those who, despite the expansion of the school system in 1985 and the introduction of free primary education in 2003, were not able to benefit from it. The expansion of the school system meant that more children had access to education, but the fact that examinations at the end of the eight-year primary cycle are written in English means that children who are initially taught in their indigenous languages will have had less time to familiarise themselves with the English language than those who are taught in English from the very beginning. A Kenyan child growing up in a rural area where English becomes the language of instruction only from class four of primary school is clearly at a disadvantage, because he is forced to switch to a new language of instruction before he has even sufficiently developed the language he was being taught in. So, he will actually suffer a double disadvantage: on the one hand having to struggle to master the new language of instruction, and, on the other hand, having to abandon the language of his culture before he has acquired sufficient literacy in it. Yet, and here I agree with Lightbown and Spada (2006), “a good foundation in the child’s first language including the development of literacy, is a sound base to build on” (p.186). So, abandoning it too early will impact negatively

¹ “The language of the catchment area” is a phrase used in the language policy in education in Kenya which was in force since the pre-colonial times in the 1950s and continued after the country’s independence in 1963.

on their future reading and writing skills in other languages that are learnt later.

That is why I wish to argue that in Kenya indigenous languages in the lower primary school need to be used for at least eight years for children to develop enough proficiency before changing the medium of instruction to English. For, in my view, a language used for instruction for only up to class 3 of primary school is not sufficiently developed to enable an “academically beneficial form of bilingualism” Cummins and Swain (1986, p. 100). This point is further developed later in the paper, where the challenges facing the use of indigenous languages as languages of instruction are discussed as well. Before that, though, more will be said about the role of each of the three “categories” of languages in Kenya.

2. THE ROLE OF ENGLISH IN KENYA

In Kenya, English is the language of administration, international business, diplomacy, trade, and of instruction in the school system up to university (except for the first three years of primary school in the rural areas of the country). It has been the official language of Kenya since the country’s independence in 1963, with its special status guaranteed in the Constitution. For instance, according to the old Constitution of Kenya of 1983 (which was in force until the end of August 2010) in addition to Kiswahili, English was the language of the National Assembly and was to be mastered by every Member of Parliament. Furthermore, in its article 53, the 1983 Constitution stated that

Every Bill (including the memorandum accompanying a Bill), every Act of Parliament whenever enacted, all other actual or proposed legislation under the authority of an Act of Parliament, all financial resolutions and documents relating thereto, and every actual or proposed amendment of any of the foregoing, shall be written in English [...].

But even the current Constitution (which was promulgated on 27th August 2010), while recognising Kiswahili (in its article 7) as the national language

and, alongside English, as the other official language of Kenya, still gives English a more prestigious position than that of all the other languages used in Kenya. In its article 259 (2), it says this: “If there is a conflict between different language versions of this Constitution, the English language version prevails”.

This preferred position of the English language can be best understood from a historical point of view:

In a situation where dozens or even hundreds of ethnic groups coexisted within the confines of a given nation competing for economic and political power, the European language constituted a convenient tool for bridging sociolinguistic, cultural, and political antagonisms, which endangered the national unity of the young nation states. Furthermore, the political leadership of the first generation after independence was trained in Europe or North America and usually those leaders took for granted that a modern state should be run in a European language. (Heine 1990: 173)

But at the time (and even today) it was not just political leaders who seemed to hold that view; even some experts in the area of education did (or do). As an example, in Kenya, a committee of experts known as the Ominde Commission, recommended (as Oduor 2010, p.90 reminds us), “the use of English as a medium of instruction right from class 1”. There was a slight “improvement”, a dozen years later, in the recommendation of the Gachathi Report of 1976, which recommended the use of the mother tongue from class 1 to class 3”. This is effectively what the current language policy in education has been enforcing. Still according to Oduor (2010), “more support for the use of the mother tongue appeared in the Koech Report of 1999” (p. 90). But Oduor was quick to add that “According to Mbaka (2010),

nothing new was added by the Koech Report of 1999 to the existing language policy” (p. 91).²

Despite English being the socially privileged language in Kenya, it still remains a minority language, one “mastered” by only a small proportion of the total population of the country and used mostly for themes which are alien to Kenyan traditional cultures. For instance, traditional engagement ceremonies (such as weddings), circumcision ceremonies and traditional burial rites cannot be effectively conducted using English. If at all a traditional engagement ceremony is conducted in English, then this is only done to accommodate a groom or bride and their family, who may not share the same culture. For ceremonies such as circumcision and burial, using English is out of the question, because the local language forms an integral part of the ceremony.

That said, we must acknowledge that the number of speakers of English has been on a steady increase, owing to one significant event: the abolition of school fees for the entire primary school in 2003. This has led to an increase in the number of new registrations in schools, which rose “from 5.9 million in 2002 to 8.8 million (4.5 million boys and 4.3 million girls) in 2009” (Kenya Private Sector Alliance 2011, p. 21). This can only mean that the number of English speakers in Kenya has automatically increased.

The significance of this increase in numbers lies in the fact that in Kenya, English is typically, though not exclusively, learnt at school. The same can be said for Kiswahili, which, though taught formally at school as well, is picked up more from everyday communication on the street and at institutions of production (labour) and trade (market) than at school. As a consequence, while English is more often used in formal situations, Kiswahili is more often used in informal ones.

² But I personally believe that had the Koech Report (officially published in 2000, not 1999) been implemented, a more significant improvement would have started

3. THE ROLE OF KISWAHILI IN KENYA

As the second official language and the national language of Kenya, Kiswahili plays a different role from that of other indigenous languages in the country despite being spoken by a small minority of Kenyans as a first language. As both a national and official language, it is first and foremost used as a lingua franca between people of different ethnic groups. But it is also used in courts and as a language of instruction lower primary school in some cosmopolitan areas, and “in common areas such as the market, the neighbourhood, the transportation, the industry, work, etc.” (Reh 1981, p. 520).

Today, Standard Kiswahili exists alongside other non-standard varieties of it. The standard variety is acquired mainly in school as a second language. At the same time, a number of varieties of Kiswahili are spoken along the coast of Kenya and on the adjacent islands as mother tongues. But there are also various non-standard varieties of Kiswahili, used as the lingua franca in cosmopolitan areas of Kenya. As a result of this one can find, in the big towns of Kenya, people whose first language is one of these non-standard varieties of Kiswahili.

4. THE ROLE OF INDIGENOUS KENYAN LANGUAGES

Currently, the indigenous languages of Kenya remain firmly entrenched in the family and in the village and continue to play the role of a “hut language”, to borrow the phrase from Breton (1991). They are used at the village level with parents, grandparents and other relatives of the countryside; they are used for jokes and as signs of common or close identity (Breton 1991, pp. 171-172).

occurring with this new century. (See more about this point of view later in the paper, in Section 5).

In major cities such as Nairobi, cultural events offering culinary delights, music and dance from the various ethnic groups are fast becoming a popular way of reminding city dwellers of their cultural heritage and language. (Although for some of them it is just those of their parents or grandparents.) In addition, not only do a number of FM stations broadcast in the various indigenous languages (Gikuyu, Dholuo, Kikamba, Kiluhya, etc.) but they also, in collaboration with the Safaricom company—the biggest mobile phone provider in Kenya—organise road shows from one region to the next during which presenters and musicians entertain people using local languages.

Further, although the Kenyan judicial system does not officially have the position of court interpreter, indigenous languages are nevertheless widely used in the judiciary, thus necessitating the use of an unofficial interpreter. During court proceedings, an accused person, or even a witness, can use their local indigenous language to give evidence or to testify. The normal practice is then to get a court clerk who speaks the language to interpret even when the presiding judge understands the language of the witness or the accused person.

Last (and definitely not least in the rationale of this paper!), some of the indigenous languages of Kenya seem to have started asserting themselves in literature. In this connection, Webb and Kembo-Sure (2000, pp. 46-52) noted an increase in publications in Gikuyu, Dholuo and Luhya.³ However, while acknowledging those instances of use of indigenous languages, it should also be added that due to the urbanisation process, these languages have continued to be pushed further by Kiswahili and English into the areas of family and village community, as I mentioned earlier.

³ With regard to Gikuyu, the contribution of the best-known Kenyan novelist, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, cannot go unnoticed. For instance, his recent (and widely-acclaimed) novel, *The Wizard of the Crow* was first written and published in Gikuyu, as *Mũrogi wa Kagogo*, before being translated.

5. A CASE FOR USING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES THROUGHOUT PRIMARY SCHOOL

Now, while some little progress seems to have been made in the use of indigenous languages of Kenya since the country's independence, there is still a long way to go before they can be said to have asserted themselves as languages of "literature and science", as was predicted by Laitin (1991: 135) two decades ago for the Gikuyu, Dholuo and Maasai languages. If we consider just the "science" aspect, we can see that Laitin's prediction was clearly more of a wish than anything else. It can be a reality one day, but on condition that these languages, and the other indigenous ones, are strengthened. And the surest way to start doing this is to allow them to be used for teaching for longer than just the three years.

So, this paper is advocating the use of indigenous languages as languages of instruction in Kenya for basically two main reasons. The first one is that actually a non-negligible segment of Kenyans seem to want this, after all. There are two facets to this reason: one, and most importantly, the new Constitution of Kenya "wants" it, albeit rather indirectly, when it states, in its article 7.3(b), that "it shall promote the development and use of indigenous languages..."; two, we have seen how there has been a gradual shift of opinion, however timid it was, from little use of indigenous languages as languages of instruction in the 1960s, to the use of them for lower primary school in the late 1970s, to an enhanced use (though not really specified) of them towards the end of the last century and the beginning of the present one. This last segment refers to the Koech Report of 2000 mentioned previously: as one of its strategies to address challenges facing education, it recommended "promoting and supporting the use of indigenous languages and local available resources, including local languages" (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology 2001, p. 16). In connection to this, I would predict that the promotion of indigenous languages would make matters easier for the devolved form of government now provided for in the new Constitution of Kenya, to the extent that the

newly formed counties could very well rely on the local indigenous languages to carry out everyday government business.⁴

As for the second reason, it stems from expert points of view in the literature on bilingual education. Let us start with what Lightbown and Spada (2006: 186) say:

[P]rograms promoting the development of the first language at home and at school may be more important for long term success in the second language than an early start in the second language itself.

Inspired by this expert opinion, I would argue that, if the language of school is different from that of the community, failure in school is inevitable for the majority of Kenyan children in the rural areas. This is because not only are their daily activities handled in two different languages, but also because their learning strategies at school are reduced to memorisation, which means that learning takes place in isolation from daily life.

From the learning-centred point of view of the preceding paragraph, let us now refer to a use-centred one borrowed from Trudgill (2000: 198):

[W]e should not underestimate the degree of alienation that occurs in situations where people are denied the dignity of having respect accorded to their vernacular speech. Nor should we underestimate the advantages of having a population able to express itself fluently and clearly in its own vernacular...

It should be made clear from the outset that the vernacular that Trudgill is talking about is a dialect (a native dialect, to be exact) in the context where it was not chosen as the standard dialect of the same language.

⁴ From a more anecdotal point of view, it is likely that public offices at county level will be – and in my opinion they should be – more tolerant of other indigenous languages (than Kiswahili) than are offices e.g. in Nairobi, where notices have been posted up warning the staff against using “tribal” languages in the office. After all, there are psychological and sociolinguistic reasons why people need to

Nonetheless, a parallel between such a bidialectal situation and the bilingual one we have been talking about in the case of Kenya is still quite relevant: to see this, just replace the phrase “vernacular speech” (in the first sentence of the quotation) and the word “vernacular” (in the second sentence) by “indigenous language” and see what you will get. If we take the latter option, we will get this: “Nor should we underestimate the advantages of having a population able to express itself fluently and clearly in its own indigenous language”. Of course in Kenya people express themselves fluently and clearly in their indigenous languages, but only orally. Only using them as languages of instruction for some considerable time would enable their speakers to be able to use them fluently and clearly in writing as well. There is no other way for languages which, we should remember, according to the current educational policy are abandoned even as school subjects as soon as they are no longer used for instruction—where they are, of course!

6. THE CHALLENGES FACING THE USE OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN EDUCATION

We may well advocate the use of indigenous languages as languages of instruction. At the same time, though, we should not lose sight of the huge challenges that this use would be faced with. These have to do with facts like the following: the lack of teaching materials, the lack of trained teachers, and the fact that there are “too many” of such languages for the purposes of teaching in them.

Although the idea of using indigenous languages in class has over the years been strongly advocated by UNESCO, by very important personalities like the former UN Secretary General, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar (see de Cuéllar et al. 1996, p. 182), and by many educationists, most teachers in

use them even in the office. So, using them need not be seen as a threat to national harmony.

Kenya are trained to teach just English. Moreover, teaching materials for English are more carefully prepared than those for teaching in various indigenous languages. This is done under the supervision of tutors and advisers and with a continuous range of training courses for teachers. The same commitment is lacking in the development of teaching materials in the various indigenous languages. According to Gachukia (1970: 24), as early as 1970 there were teaching materials available in 14 indigenous languages, but their further development did not keep pace with the development of teaching materials in English. Currently, there are individual projects that are producing teaching materials for indigenous languages and which are gaining popularity amongst their users (e.g. the Tharaka language project).

The lack of reading materials like newspapers, magazines and books in the various indigenous languages can also be de-motivating, because such materials are a very important support for teaching. The biggest obstacle, however, seems to be the high costs of publishing and printing textbooks. Compared to the development and publication of books in English, the development and publication of books in other languages is associated with a lot of time and work and is deemed not to be economically viable for a comparatively smaller number of users. Indeed, as Wolff (2010) points out, “negative reactions towards official multilingualism, and particularly in education, are often based on numerical considerations maintaining that to invest in minority languages is not cost-effective because these languages only have small numbers of speakers” (p. 6).

Another limiting factor in the use of indigenous languages as languages of instruction is the total discrepancy between the language training that the teachers receive and the school materials they use. These are conceptualized for teaching English and are paraphrased during teaching in the indigenous language by teachers. This results in children in schools where indigenous languages are used as languages of instruction being disadvantaged because their teachers cannot communicate effectively in them and “resort to a lot of code switching and code mixing” (Oduor 2010, p. 94).

Then there is also a discrepancy between the choice of the language of instruction and the language of examinations. All examinations (except for language-based ones such as those in Kiswahili, French, and German) are written in English. This lack of consistency between the choice of language of instruction and the language of writing examinations has resulted in the total abandonment of the indigenous languages as languages of instruction in the lower classes of primary school in many regions of Kenya, as teachers believe that their pupils will be disadvantaged if they continue using them. Yet, as I suggested earlier, a sustained use of the indigenous language until proficiency is achieved both orally and in writing would ensure that these pupils will achieve a higher performance in subsequent classes and will be able to effectively communicate in these languages.

It is in connection to the use of indigenous languages as languages of instruction that Bokamba (1991) and Breton (1991) saw a close link between the use of French in the initial classes and the high losses in the education systems of West African countries. A comparison by both authors of school statistics of West African countries (mainly French-speaking) and East African countries (mostly English-speaking) showed a link between the number of repeaters at each stage, the number of enrolments and the percentage of illiterate people and instruction in the indigenous language in the early classes and school success. The predominantly English-speaking East African countries with mother tongue/indigenous language instruction in the primary grades had a smaller number of repeaters, higher enrolments and a lower percentage of illiterates. Countries like Tanzania, Somalia and Ethiopia, where African languages are official as well as languages of instruction, were reported to have a lower percentage of illiterate people, repeaters and higher enrolments than countries such as Kenya and Uganda, where the official language and language of instruction is English after the initial years of schooling.

In this connection, the Kenya Government Sessional Paper No. 1 of 2005 refers to some alarming figures:

Over the last one decade the cumulative dropout rate in primary education has been as high as 37 percent; and the repetition rate has been 14 percent between standards 1 and 7. The survival rate at the primary level has also been low, at 40 percent; and although at the secondary level the survival rate has been better at 84 percent, the overall performance remains low considering that the [Gross Enrolment Rate] for the secondary level is 22 percent. (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology 2005, p. 4)

Even though this passage makes no mention at all of the use or non-use of indigenous languages, the statistics that it reports could well be used to support the argument that the language of instruction plays a significant role in determining drop-out, repetition and survival rates at the primary school level.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued for the use of indigenous languages beyond the 3 years in lower primary school. The benefit of literacy in any language cannot be denied. If indeed the current survival rate at primary level is as low as 40% in Kenya, this means that the majority of school children will never be sufficiently proficient enough in English to use it productively in their adult and professional life. It is this majority that this paper is speaking for. They should be given the opportunity to become fully literate in their local indigenous language, so that, should they drop out of the school system, they would at least be literate in the language of their home environment and have the “linguistic, practical and intellectual skills that would allow them to become better farmers, gardeners, herdsmen, craftsmen, small scale traders, etc.” (Wolff 2010, p. 7). Moreover, allowing them to use their language during the entire primary school would help to counter the cultural loss resulting from using English. It would help preserve Kenya’s rich oral tradition. And including the indigenous languages in the school context would counter the psychological nightmare which some

students have to endure when they are forced to learn in a language they do not understand.

Since, I as have already said, another reason for promoting the use of indigenous languages during the entire primary school cycle is that the new Constitution of Kenya seeks to promote them, if government business at county level was carried out in these languages, then people who were fluent in them would not only find employment locally, but they would at the same time be able to contribute to the development of their languages as teachers, translators and court interpreters, etc.

The current language policy in Kenya is an acceptable compromise (that is a synthesis of the two languages of communication, viz. English and Kiswahili) only for those living in urban areas and those who can continue with formal education. Especially in the cities, one cannot help not using two or more languages since cities are always a meeting point for people who need some lingua franca. But for those who will remain in their local environment, the indigenous language will remain the most important language for all their daily activities. For some authors, though, indigenous languages should be used even at university level. This, they argue, would empower these languages and thus enable them to “become adequate means of communication for all purposes, including modern science and technology” (Wolff 2010, p.8). Admittedly, though, Wolff’s point of view takes the debate beyond the scope of this paper.

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