

THE UGANDA PROBLEM: A LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

Most countries in Africa are multilingual. We are told that countries such as Nigeria, the actual number of languages spoken there is not known. The estimate varies from time to time. It is a fact that multilingualism is sometimes a stumbling block for governments that are struggling to evolve unified policies. In such cases we witness the formidable role that language plays in demarcating the boundaries between "us" and "them".

In some cases tensions have been high, culminating in ethnic rivalries which have once in a while been manifested in hideous actions such as civil wars. The Biafra war in Nigeria, the Zimbabwe conflict between ZANU-PF and ZAPU and now the conflicts in Uganda are but a few examples that demonstrate how nations can be disintegrated because of what their citizens perceive to be linguistic-cultural differences. In all these cases and many others that are prevalent in Africa, the conflicts are not as a result of class differentiation. They are rather clear examples of problems that are created by ethnicity.

To ameliorate this fluid situation in language usage, it has become expedient on the part of African leaders to maintain colonial languages as a medium of wider communication. National languages of African nationalities have been neglected. However, much as they have, this stance has not enhanced the process of national integration and national aspirations. Because of the disparity in educational facilities available to the majority of their citizens, it has not always been possible to provide them with an adequate exposure to the colonial languages, the languages of the "educated".

Further still, because language policies entail time consuming and money spending undertakings, it has not been easy to evolve proper and workable policies to guide their citizens to face the future in unity. They fear that the cost for all these could be prohibitive and since the returns and gains for such types of ventures cannot be measured immediately in tangible terms, many governments in Africa have left this situation to sort out itself.

The major thesis of this brief paper is that the political problems in Uganda can be alleviated by a clear language policy that will make Kiswahili a *defacto* national language, while at the same time recognizing and supporting regional and district languages in line with the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declaration of 1953 on mother-tongue education. The paper endeavors to demonstrate that since Uganda is a member of the East African community of nations where Kiswahili is employed as a national or official language, it will be to her ultimate advantage to adopt a rigorous policy towards the use of Kiswahili in government and educational institutions.

In postulating this call, this paper further attempts to allude to some of the social gains that the use of Kiswahili has brought to both Kenya and Tanzania; that Uganda could also stand to gain on similar basis. While making these propositions, it will be observed that Kiswahili is widely used and understood in Uganda by the general populace. The factors that have contributed to some people having some misconceptions and apprehensions about its use will be highlighted. The conclusion is that, with a unilingual policy, the East African nations of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda could become a powerful force which may take leading roles in continental and global deliberations. This, in the long run, could propel Kiswahili to become a powerful language for the African continent. But before going further, perhaps it will be right here to address this paper to the phenomenon of language planning.

Language Planning

In the late sixties and the early seventies, language planning as an academic discipline and an economic phenomenon started to gain some prominence. This was more so in the third world countries which seemed to have a larger share of the problems of multilingualism. During this period, various conferences on the theme of language planning were held and the proceedings published (Fishman et. al, 1968, Fishman 1974, Rubin and Jernud 1971, and Whiteley, 1971).

From these sources one can see a justification for the extensive sociolinguistically oriented language surveys. It is shown that this, in any way, was an attempt by linguists who had been disenchanted with the non-social elements of theoretical linguistics, to relate language studies to social realities. For these new studies, the people, the users of whichever language that was under study, had to be placed at the centre of the linguistic researches that were undertaken. One of the areas that these studies addressed was that of language planning. On this, Rubin (1971:307) stated that it is similar to any other kind of planning. More specifically, he showed that it involves four approaches: fact-finding; policy-setting; implementation; and feedback.

From this observation, one notes that in a language planning process, the understanding of a particular situation is imperative. Therefore, these initial studies that were undertaken in this field were designed to highlight some of the factors that must be taken into consideration when a country attempts to evolve a national language policy. A perusal through all the above named contributions will indicate that they all underscored the central role that language plays in the day-to-day human undertakings. Where more languages are used in what is regarded as a single political entity, these papers called for a careful study to set priorities straight.

They all saw the issue of language planning being part of the general development strategies of world nations. It was argued that language planning should not be seen as an isolated undertaking. It should rather be viewed to be related to the other areas of social, economic and political pursuits.

In a more clear perspective, what this means is that, with a viable and clear language policy, with a nation whose people can communicate adequately and easily through the use of one national language, implementation of political and economic policies becomes easier and cheaper. For example, it will certainly be easier to mobilise and involve the available manpower for the implementation of economic and political programs.

For East Africa, the more one reads about the patterns of language usage as presented in these studies, the clearer it becomes that Kiswahili, a *lingua franca* of this area, had by this time transcended many spheres of linguistic usage of the people. By so doing, it has acquired qualities and characteristics that set it above the other African languages. However, at about the same time, the East African countries were pursuing different approaches to the development of Kiswahili. For Uganda, as will shortly be discussed, this actually meant the continuation of the English language while at the same time maintainin

the use of indigenous languages in mass media and education. Yet, it is also true to state that Kiswahili was very much around. What position did it hold here?

Kiswahili In Uganda

The history of Kiswahili as a *lingua franca* is well documented by Whiteley (1969). In addition to this work, Heine (1970) provides some statistical figures on the patterns of linguistic usage in Africa. From these sources and some others that have mentioned the subject of Kiswahili usage in Uganda, a summary of the situation becomes fitting.

During the early encounters between the Kabaka of Buganda and the western intruders who came here through the East African coast, Kiswahili was introduced to Uganda by the Waswahili who accompanied the early caravans. As a *lingua franca*, during the peak of the slave trade in East Africa and the establishment of German rule in Tanganyika, Kiswahili also flourished in the Kabaka territory to become the language of the emerging elite.

During the late 1920s and the early 1930s when the British rulers of East Africa wanted to evolve a clear language policy in government, religion and education, the kingdom of Buganda and hence Uganda as a single polity was treated differently. Here, instead of Kiswahili which had been supported for use in varying degrees in both Kenya and Tanganyika, Luganda, the language of what was perceived to be a powerful kingdom, was allowed to operate as a *lingua franca*. In fact it grew to become an examinable subject in secondary school examinations, holding a similar position as the one that Kiswahili held in the other two East African countries.

Because of the high degree of complacency on matters pertaining to language, many educated Ugandans did not learn Kiswahili. And although the ordinary people in the streets of Jinja, Kampala and many of the rural dwellers in Eastern and South Western Uganda together with the soldiers in the army used Kiswahili, its mastery was not complete. This was compounded by the fact that Kiswahili was of no good use for those who wanted to grow in social ladder and government service.

When independence came, with the fervent desire to form an East African federation, the urge to adopt Kiswahili as a national language for Uganda was overwhelming. However, it has been recorded that there were many opponents to this proposition. Many of these opponents were highly placed in the government hierarchy and they suspected that adopting Kiswahili as a national language would

allow soldiers and non-Baganda "less educated" people to assume reigns of power (to understand this fear one should read papers Kramarae, et. al, 1984). So during this period, there was no language policy in Uganda, except to state now and again that English would still be the medium for wider communication among people of varying linguistic backgrounds.

But it is also known that English was not controlled by the general populace. So here one witnesses a clear example of a situation where the language of the elite is forced on the masses by the power that be, who are themselves completely oblivious of the needs and desires of the ordinary people. Notwithstanding the small percentage of the competent English speakers in Uganda, the whole country was considered to be Anglophone.

This is indeed how the situation was left to be for the whole period of Obote's first government (1962-1971). But the problem of language usage was central to the other government plans. Because of this, Uganda fully supported the Ford Foundation surveys of languages that were conducted in Eastern Africa in the late sixties and early seventies. The aims of these surveys were as stated in the introduction to the first report on Uganda:

To gather and disseminate basic information on the use and teaching of languages in Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia.

To stimulate research and development in linguistics and language pedagogy in the region.

To assist in strengthening the resources of Eastern African institutions concerned with the languages, arts and sciences.

To foster closer, productive, intraregional and international relations among specialists in linguistics and related disciplines.

As part of these surveys, Scotton (1972) highlighted the pattern of language usage in Kampala. Her study came out with very interesting conclusions about the ambivalent approaches to language planning in Uganda. Nevertheless, on the position of Kiswahili in Kampala and its prospect in the whole country, she presented a very promising picture. She provided very elaborate statistics to support her arguments, especially her views that the common people in the streets of Kampala use Kiswahili extensively. We also see that in some cases especially for those who controlled the use of Kiswahili there existed a very fluid type of diglossia. In all these cases, however, Kiswahili was found to be functionally useful in communication events between

Ugandans from different nationalities as well as between Ugandans and other East Africans. Her conclusions would also seem to tally with the ones in the reports that are found in Ladefoged, et. al. (1968). In these reports, there are several elaborate statistical representations which indicate the social norms and considerations that are brought to bear on the use of language in Uganda. And although these reports are not committal on the sensitive question about the position of Kiswahili, it is clear that apart from English and Luganda, it also features high as a language that could be developed to become a national and/or official language of Uganda.

Why Kiswahili?

The available statistics on the number of languages that are spoken in Uganda puts the figure at 28. This might sound a small number when one compares it with the Nigerian estimate and the Tanzanian number of 120. Yet it is unrealistic to expect that, within the economic means available to Uganda now and in the future, all these languages can be equally developed and their use expanded. Besides this factor of affordability, there is the question of the national unity to worry about. Ugandans have indeed seen too much suffering and internal turmoil that the word *unity* has become very urgent for all of them. This unity will demand a lot of sacrifice on the part of all patriotic citizens of Uganda. And one factor that might contribute to this unity is the adoption of a viable non-threatening African language as a national language. Kiswahili has served Tanzania well, to the extent that "tribal" conflicts in that country are almost unheard of. In Kenya, Kiswahili has also been making some inroads into the political realms and educational institutions. In all these spheres, its role has been recorded to be that of a unifier.

Another consideration in favor of Kiswahili would seem to come from the fact that it is one language in Eastern Africa that has made much progress in terms of the number of its speakers and the available written materials that can be used in the campaign to spread it further. As an indigenous language of a humble people who are themselves not powerful politically and economically, Kiswahili is taken to be a language of everybody. No loyalties or sacrifices are demanded of those who acquire it and use it in their linguistic activities. The Swahili people have lent it freely to the East Africans.

If an attempt was to be made to adopt Kiswahili as a national language for Uganda, there would certainly be many problems to tackle. Some Ugandans may even go as far as associating Kiswahili with

Arabic and claim that it is not an African language *par excellence*. Others will claim that it has been marred by the many lexical items that it has borrowed from Arabic. Such people might want to associate Kiswahili with slavery. And because it is the language that the sold have used in the past and present, including those "liberators" (*wakombozi*) from Tanzania, Kiswahili has been associated with theft and human suffering in Uganda. It might be argued, therefore, that such a language cannot be given a national or official status in Uganda.

But such claims would miss the real point. The crux of the matter is that the problem has never been with Kiswahili language, but with the people who use it. The same people who might have employed this language to realize ruthless ends, can still use it to evolve a formidable culture and national unity. There is therefore an urgent need to re-examine these arguments on the basis of the relative costs and rewards that are involved in whichever position Ugandans and other East Africans take on this crucial matter.

The truth, however, is that it has been proved beyond reasonable doubt that Kiswahili has always been an African language with a Bantu basic structure. Its heavy borrowing from Arabic and other languages is indeed an inescapable fact which, however, does not make it a less African language. After all English is still English with or without numerous loan-words that it took from other foreign languages.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show that Kiswahili as a language for a wider communication in East Africa has a role to play in sustaining social cohesion in Uganda. As a united country, Uganda will be stronger than it is now. Adopting Kiswahili as its national language would also make its relationship with both Kenya and Tanzania, where Kiswahili is currently accorded higher status, a cordial one. Together the three East African nations would support and build the spread and use of Kiswahili in their countries and beyond. With one linguistic medium uniting these people of varying cultures in East Africa, the region could wield some amount of power and enjoy some degree of free human movement. This in itself would become a great asset which could maximize economic production and knowledge sharing. The cultures of the East Africans would also be shared through one linguistic medium. And in the long run, whatever would have taken place here might spread to other parts of Africa. This development would thus make Kiswahili a continental language for Africa. Since the experim

in Tanzania to use Kiswahili in all spheres of government activities and education has realized positive results, it is only proper that a call is sent to its sister countries to join it in this noble cause. To do this, however, there is need to have strong language policies; and for Uganda the time is surely now.

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TRANSFORMING STATE AND DEVELOPMENT IN UGANDA

The central question in the development of a state is how to organize the state apparatus to meet the needs of the people. This is a question that has been asked in many different ways and at many different times. In the context of the African continent, the question is particularly acute because of the legacy of colonialism and the need to build a new state apparatus that is responsive to the needs of the people.

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