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CAN A THREE-TIER LANGUAGE POLICY MODEL WORK IN TANZANIA? A NEW PERSPECTIVE¹

Y.I. Rubanza

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to attempt a modest contribution to the ongoing debate for the use of Swahili as a medium of instruction in secondary and higher institutions of learning. This debate has recently resurfaced, in part as a result of a group of Swahili experts headed by the Chairman of the Tanzania Swahili Council, who paid a courtesy call to the new President of Tanzania, Benjamin Mkapa, in May 1996. It is within this context that this paper arose.

First, this paper briefly describes language usage in Tanzania today. Unlike other papers it considers not only Swahili and English but also other Ethnic Community Languages (ECLs). Second, the language aspect of Tanzanian educational policy is discussed in some detail. Third, arguments for and against the use of Swahili as a medium of instruction are discussed and counter arguments in favor of English are offered. Furthermore, the role of ECLs is discussed with suggestions as to how and at what levels they could be used. Finally, I argue in this paper for the adoption of a three-tier language policy in Tanzania. Specifically, I suggest that Swahili should be the language of education in both primary and secondary school; that English should be a compulsory subject at all levels of schooling; and that ECLs should be implemented where desirable and convenient at the lower level of primary schools.

There is a saying from Haya, a Tanzanian ECL, "*Koba oli omukibila omugati tobona buango bwa kibira.*" This may be roughly translated as: "If you are in the middle of a huge forest you cannot see how huge the forest is." We feel that for many Tanzanians, the impact of language on education is not perceived with the urgency it deserves.

¹ This paper was presented at the UCLA African Studies Center Noon Seminar Series on December 3, 1996. The audience suggested that it be published in order to promote further discussion.

However, we strongly feel that delays in resolving this issue are causing a tremendous harm to our new generation.

Tanzania has been highly praised for having solved the national language problem with the Swahilization Policy of 1967. This policy adopted Swahili as Tanzania's national and official language, and proceeded with enthusiasm to invest tremendous financial and human resources toward its development. The language puzzle, however, has never been solved. English has continued to be the language of education; while at the same time the government has avoided making any statement on the status and role of the approximately 120 ECLs in Tanzania.

While English continues to be the language of instruction at secondary and tertiary levels of education, there is a growing demand for use of Swahili. Reasons for this demand range from the extinction of the major functions associated with English, apart from being used by a minority, to the feeling of dependency that follows from the use of an alien language. In addition, Swahili and other ECLs are used widely in everyday activities of most, if not all, Tanzanians.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to highlight the trend of language use in education by showing the current language situation at large. In view of this, the paper proposes:

- (a) the switch from English to Swahili as the language of instruction at primary and secondary levels of education,
- (b) the compulsory study of English as a subject up to the university level and,
- (c) the use of ECLs in instruction for the first four years of primary school where applicable and desirable.

English Language Usage

Children in Tanzania begin learning English as a subject in standard three (the third year of primary school). Fewer than 10% of these students enter secondary school education. Upon entering secondary school, they begin using English as a medium of instruction in all subjects except Swahili. Swahili and English are then taught as compulsory subjects up to and including form four, that is, the first four years of secondary school. Thereafter, English and Swahili as subjects

are optional up to the university level, although English continues to be the language of instruction.

The use of English as a language of instruction creates several conflicts. First, because English is related to socioeconomic and to some extent political processes, and is associated with the distribution of knowledge resources, and therefore power in society, it determines access to these resources, job opportunities, power and prestige. Thus, English is, and can be, mobilized for political ends. I have mentioned elsewhere (Rubanza 1995), that only 10% of primary school graduates see the doors of secondary school and only 2% are finally admitted to the university. English therefore, becomes a means of social advancement, status and security, and thus a key to social mobility for the few. Simply stated, in the economic domain, job opportunities are based on mastery of the English language and this can be discriminatory.

The second conflict is access to its mastery, even for those few who enter the secondary and tertiary levels of education. It has been testified by many that English and other subjects taught in English are poorly taught, and therefore, poorly mastered. Mlama and Matteru (1978) have observed that students could not express themselves adequately, and indeed were unable to participate in a lesson in English at all, avoiding the eye of the teacher if a question was asked in English.

This situation, interestingly, spilled over to students who even had some proficiency in the English language, as testified by a form two student from one of the secondary school in Dar es Salaam (Rubanza mimeo). He said: "I was with my dad in Australia where I studied up to high school. Although I realize that my teacher makes a lot of mistakes in English, I do not challenge him out of fear of being punished." This indicates that the problem is not only of the students, but also of their teachers. Such a situation does not only hamper the mastery of English but also other lessons as well. Teachers of subjects other than English find it difficult to teach due to poor mastery of the language, and even those who have mastered the language find it frustrating due to the students' inability to use English. This situation makes it extremely difficult for students to conceptualize and communicate; functions that ought to be served by education.

The difficulties of the continued use of English in Tanzanian education are not only realized at the secondary school level, but also

at universities. At the University of Dar es Salaam, for example, students use Swahili while in their out of class group discussions and later write their papers in English. Most of the time, they speak Swahili to themselves outside their lecture rooms, unless speaking to a foreigner. While conducting their student government meetings one notices the frustration they face in failing to argue vividly in English, and others boldly switch to Swahili or simply shout out unconnected English sentences.

At this juncture, it is interesting to note that we also have similar testimonies from our neighbors in Kenya and Uganda. In 1987, for instance, a Linguistic Subject Conference, which brought together linguists from universities in East Africa expressed concern over the falling standards of the English language throughout East Africa (Mukama 1996). They noted that general incompetence in the grasp and use of English is getting worse day by day. This necessitated research in order to investigate the causes of the falling standards, and to eventually recommend solutions. Unfortunately, sponsorship for the research was never found. Likewise, similar concerns have been raised in other parts of Africa. In Nigeria, for example, Omamor (in Schmied 1990:8) noted:

bright students have language problems (meaning English). Their exam scripts are often gibberish. Students don't have the linguistic capacity to express what they have learnt. If people could see some of the scripts and listen to some of what passes for English at the university among students it would be difficult to sustain an argument that these scripts are written by people who live in what is called an English speaking country.

The picture presented of university students in Tanzania concur with Criper and Dodd's (1994: 15) findings that the English language abilities of university students are "substantially below that required for University English medium study. Less than 20% of the students tested were at a level where they would find it easy to read even the simpler books required for their academic studies." If university students are at

such a low level then the situation at the secondary school level, as hinted above, is worse.

The third conflict is that, students are forced to learn in a language that the majority do not, and will not, use in most of their everyday encounters. In Tanzania there are limited domains left for English. Unless a foreigner is involved, no domains strictly use English, apart from: education, upper levels of the judiciary, diplomacy, international relations, and trade. English is not used in most government offices, banks, post offices, markets, hospitals, nor even conversations with professors outside lecture rooms at university campuses.

Despite these conflicts, English is still essential for real participation in the political life of the country. For instance, although the language of Parliament is Swahili, many documents, particularly legal ones, are in English. Thus, members of Parliament who do not have a good command of English cannot fully comprehend the content of such legal papers and be able to participate in arguments, evaluate the views of the few who have command of English, and have an impact on political decision making.

The broader implication of this scenario is that citizens at large do not participate in political life of the state. They are not fully informed by their representatives nor can they participate in the making of decisions affecting their everyday lives. Such a situation might lead one to conclude that the continued use of English in Tanzania may be used for the purpose of domination, manipulation and/or discrimination as the language is used in few domains, by the minority elite, and as a medium of instruction to facilitate learning which unfortunately does not take place.

Swahili Language Usage

Swahili is a medium of instruction and a compulsory subject from the first grade to the seventh grade. Unlike English, however it is spoken by most children before entering primary schools, particularly by those residing in urban areas. As for those in rural areas, some do master Swahili easily due to its close similarity to other ECLs of Bantu origin. Bantu languages comprise approximately 98% of all ECLs spoken in Tanzania. Swahili is also spoken in other daily activities apart from being used and taught in school. For others, Swahili is the primary language spoken at home.

At the same time, all primary school teachers are competent in Swahili. They learned the language in school, and used it as a medium of instruction at both elementary and post-secondary levels (i.e. teachers' colleges) of their education. This is a language used in their daily activities.

Pedagogically, it is understood that students learn better in a language that both the student and the teacher command well. The use of Swahili as the language of instruction fits quite well into "express speech" (Britton 1990), that is, the language to which the students have the readiest access. Swahili is a language of private musings, inner reflections upon experiences that bring common sense concepts to the point of engagement with scientific concepts, and also a language used to carry out reconciliatory expression. If Swahili is adopted as a medium of instruction in secondary school education, it will not only further the level of knowledge of other subjects besides Swahili, but students will also develop their own ways of understanding and making knowledge their own (Barrett 1994).

Swahili also has an advantage over English in that it is both a language of the state and a language of the community. As a language of the state, it is associated with the greatest number of formal functions, such that what is learned in school will automatically be applied in real life. Furthermore, Swahili continues to increase not only its uses, but also its users. It is estimated that by the year 2000 the number of users of Swahili will be around 30 million (Mekacha 1993).

The status of Swahili, the problems of terminology, the costs of producing educational material, and the issue of language proficiency have been raised as major reasons against the use of Swahili as a medium of instruction in secondary schools. As discussed elsewhere, the status of Swahili has changed such that claims that Swahili does not have the same international role as English and, therefore, its adoption as a language of education would close Tanzania's full participation in the outside world no longer hold water. It is true that Swahili and English are not at par internationally, the same is also true for many other languages. Furthermore, technological advancements have been achieved in countries that do not use English as a medium of instruction in education, including: Germany, Japan, China, Korea, and the Scandinavian countries, to mention a few. These countries have not closed doors to Tanzania in trade and other technological

advancements, nor have they "not developed" because they do not use English as medium of instruction in schools.

Secondly, to address the argument that Swahili lacks the terminology to cater for science subjects, many institutions, such as the institute of Kiswahili Research, the Department of Kiswahili at the University of Dar es Salaam, and the National Swahili Council to mention a few, have worked tirelessly to develop terminology ranging from linguistics to literature, physics, chemistry and many more. In addition, we should also be aware that languages, such as Swahili, develop through use. Human beings express their experience through language, and therefore languages continuously change to accommodate developments experienced by the relevant users. (Rugemalira 1990). This has even been testified by Mwalimu Nyerere (1995) who now strongly accepts the idea of using Swahili as a medium of instruction in secondary schools and other higher institutions of learning because, he says, the language has developed from the state it was at in the early 1960s.

With the development of Swahili through use, textbooks for physics, chemistry, geography, etc. have been, and will continue to be, written or translated. Efforts to produce books and other teaching materials in Swahili for the Open University of Tanzania is an example of the use of both Swahili and English. It has been and continues to be done with enthusiasm. School materials need not be highly finished, expensive products, characteristic of highly industrialized nations. India, for instance, uses cheap but high quality book products. Certainly, materials suitable to cope with scientific, technological and philosophical inventions and innovations will emerge.

Thirdly, teachers' competence in Swahili cannot be questioned. Frankly speaking, teachers are more at ease using Swahili than they are using English. Currently, teachers find themselves at a crossroads, as they feel free to use Swahili, but they cannot because they are required by 'law' to use English, yet they cannot use English because they do not have command of the language. The same story is true with students. Yahya-Othman (1990) notes that conceptualization and communication are not being served by either language. The consequences of such a situation is that our educational system in Tanzania is leading to scientific and technological marginalization.

The Role of Ethnic Community Languages

The government has been silent as to the role and status of ECLs. The reason behind this is a fear of the so-called loyalty to divisive ethnicity at the expense of national unity. Broadly stated, the government fears that overt attention to ECLs is considered to be tantamount to encouraging an ethnic loyalty which will in turn inhibit the development of broader and stronger national unity (Mekacha 1993). As we will discuss at a later stage this is a far fetched scenario. Nonetheless, some of these ECLs are here to stay and they have a great role to play. Let us briefly mention some of these roles.

Research was undertaken by a number of scholars to establish whether all children entering standard one, especially in remote rural areas, had adequate mastery of Swahili to be able to follow instructions in the language (Mulokozi 1996). The results indicated that there were indeed some parts of the country where mastery of Swahili was limited, and that this must have affected the learning process (Chamungwana 1971; Legere 1991; Hill 1980).

Currently, no mention is made as to the role of ECLs in education. What we know for sure is that these are languages of everyday use in rural areas. Nonetheless, knowing that Tanzania has over 120 ECLs as indicated earlier, it would be unrealistic to claim that we should use all of them for instruction in lower primary schools. However, now that liberalization in Tanzania has created a climate where people are beginning to define their own goals, lead their own organizations and support those organizations for their development, without waiting for the government to do it; they should also be allowed, where appropriate and applicable, to teach or use ECLs in lower primary schools. Using these languages in primary education furthers the preservation of cultural diversity. As correctly put forward by Webb (1996:153) the recognition and promotion of cultural identity can and does facilitate nation building since it could contribute to spiritual and intellectual decolonization and the recognition of the value of humankind. Tanzanians have a national language but it is very difficult to vividly convince Tanzanians that we have a "national culture." Learning and using community languages in appropriate situations provides each member of the community with a feeling of value at being a potentially meaningful member of his/her smaller ethnic community which forms the larger Tanzanian community.

The possibility that ECLs may become extinct in the next century is another compelling reason for why these languages should be learned. It is estimated that on the global level, 90% of the 6000 or so languages currently spoken will become moribund in the next century (Krauss 1992). In Tanzania, as elsewhere, it is even difficult to know the status of all 120 ECLs in the country. Linguistic surveys have been resisted due to forbidding political constraints. The last national census, with questions concerning language in Tanzania was in 1968. As a result of the current trend of young generations not being taught or being given any motivation to learn them, sooner or later these languages will cease to exist. Batibo (1992) identified five phases which Tanzanian languages are expected to follow on their way to extinction. These phases may assist communities in making decisions as to which ECLs are to be taught or used in lower levels of education. For example, they may start with ECLs in phase 1 downwards (those languages that are the least threatened with extinction versus phase 5 languages which have been completely replaced by other languages except for their ethnonyms and some of their traditions). Languages in phases 4 and 5 may be left to linguists and other language scientists to document them by writing grammar, dictionaries, taping and or translating artistic works, or writing reading materials which are practical in reality (e.g. relating to farming, health and community development, etc.)

Opposition will definitely be raised against the use of ECLs in education or the teaching of ECLs as a subject. These objections include: the cost of producing materials, the vast number of ECLs, the possibility of creating a tendency towards tribalism, and that these languages have not been developed for technological and scientific development. As we have argued above, no one refutes the fact that education must be administered, especially in the early stages, in a language that the pupils control best. Thus, if in certain areas Swahili is not fully mastered, the community ought to be able to decide to use ECLs as the language of instruction, with Swahili taught as a subject for the first four years. This will enrich pupils who are taught to discover oneself as a worthy member of a worthy society with a respectable language that can be used with a sense of pride. This will allow pupils to contribute to their ethnic communities' development and become well integrated within their communities where they are

expected to spend most of their lives. As to the question of having too many ECLs, we should leave this to the communities concerned to decide whether they should or should not teach or use their ECLs in the curriculum. The question here should be how to utilize these languages to generate deep levels of mutual respect of different community members by encouraging speakers of these languages to learn other ECLs and learn about their speakers' habits, institutions and aspirations.

Furthermore, fears of creating tribalism are far fetched because there is no evidence to demonstrate the lack of ability to speak any of the ECLs has made people "less tribalistically-minded" than those who speak ECLs. On the contrary, the newly emerged fashion of creating associations based on ethnicity in the name of developing individual districts, regions etc. may lead to ethnic chaos and strong affiliations. Instead, we should discourage tribalistic behavior and not use of ECLs. These languages are rich in traditions and they should not be left to disappear.

Finally, the argument that ECLs are not developed and cannot lead us to scientific modernization and technological development should be acknowledged. As we said earlier, languages are capable of developing or being developed to cope with scientific, technological and philosophical inventions and innovations. At the same time, we should remember that these are languages used in rural areas where we would not expect sophisticated technology to be developed tomorrow or the day after. Speakers of these languages are expected to use them in acquiring techniques such as: reading, writing, thinking, speaking, calculating, and knowing about their environment and how to change it for their own benefit (Ansre 1979). They are indeed using ECLs to exchange ideas on how to get clean water, build a dispensary on a self-help basis, plant trees, and exchange ideas with an Agricultural Officer on how to improve their agricultural products. We do not expect, especially as of today, speakers of these ECLs to use them to discuss issues relating to sending a rocket to the moon.

Overview

From our discussion above, it is clear that there is language conflict in Tanzania. English is perceived to be "superior," and thus pupils wish to speak it. When it comes to practical problems of communication, however, they actually speak Swahili or ECLs. This is

brought to bear on pupils by the society which equated English with education and therefore success in life. This deferral or obsequiousness to English contrasts with the rapidly declining competency in English that exists in Tanzania. The continued use of English in education will not be fruitful for the majority of Tanzanian children because they are not learning English adequately, nor subjects taught in English.

We are therefore safe in revisiting our educational language policy in schools by addressing the following questions: Who gains by using English as a medium of instruction? How much English do we need? For what purpose? These questions raise the larger issue of, What is the best alternative in terms of making learning meaningful?

Need for a Change

A proposal was set for January 1984 by the Report of the Presidential Commission on Education, sometimes referred to as the Makweta Report, that Swahili would be the medium of education in secondary schools and other higher levels of education (Makweta Report 1982). It did not happen. The fundamental question still being asked is, why? Laitin's (1992) answer is that as Tanzania has relied principally on foreign donations to meet basic recurrent budget requirements, and because it has therefore remained closely tied to Europe, Tanzanians desperately want to keep these contacts alive and therefore a need to hold on to English as a resource of inestimable value. This reason leaves a lot to be desired, because as we have mentioned above, there are more non-English-speaking countries assisting Tanzania than there are English-speaking.

We think the answer lies in the attitudes of the few individuals, mainly decision makers, who equate education with English. For them, education does not take place without the use of English. Such attitudes have led some well to do Tanzanians to send their children to neighboring countries and abroad in search of an English-based education. We have also seen the opening of preschools whose medium of instruction is English and a few English-medium primary schools are also being started.

Pedagogically, language is a vehicle through which education is obtained. The use of Swahili as a medium of instruction in secondary schools, and other higher institutions of learning, is as good, if not better than the use of any other language in educating our people. As

mentioned above, using a language well-known to students makes education meaningful and enhances learning. One may even associate the great achievements of nations such as Japan, German, China, Korea, etc. to the use of their respective languages. The continued use of English, therefore, in spite of its problems may be serving some individuals' interests and not geared to learning. The question then is whose interest does this policy serve?

We may hypothesize that two groups stand to benefit from the status quo. The first group is that of the policy makers, politicians, as well as technocrats. As Barrett (1994:13) also argues, the first group to benefit might be characterized as Tanzania's bureaucratic bourgeoisie, a coalition between the nationalist politicians of the independence movement and university graduates. This recognizes both its origins in the nationalistic struggle and its ability to reproduce itself by getting the sons and daughters of well to do people to go to schools overseas such as Britain, the USA, and India. Therefore the language issue is of no importance to them.

The second group is external -- to be specific, Britain, "the home of English." Britain needs to retain its "natural" trading spheres of influence, that is, its ex-colonies. This is clearly testified in the British Council Annual Report of (1987-1988); where it is stated:

Britain's real black gold is not North Sea oil but the English language. It has long been at the root of our culture and now is fast becoming the global language of business and information. The challenge facing us is to exploit it to the full.

In exploiting it to the full, Tanzania which is one of its ex-colonies continues to be a source of raw materials and a market for manufactured goods. The more English, one may argue, the more Tanzanians will continue to look up to Britain. This is probably far-fetched, but looking at what happened recently in Tanzania makes one hold on to it particularly after Criper and Dodd's (1984) report which resulted in the establishment of the English Support Project in Tanzania. Its main objective is to improve the teaching and learning of English at the secondary school level. The underlined objective, however, is to keep English as a medium of instruction at all levels.

school.²¹ With the arrival of Western missionaries, the indigenous systems were supplanted and the expansion of the Islamic systems curtailed.

The early history of western education in Africa cannot be understood without taking into account the goals of the missionaries. There is considerable literature on the involvement of missionaries in colonization. Philip Curtin points out that Africa was viewed as an excellent frontier for soul saving and commerce.²² Charles Lyons argues that Britain became more interested in Africa in the wake of the American Revolution. He writes,

Significantly, it was during the first few decades of the nineteenth century that Britons became interested in Africa as a place for colonization, Christianization, and commercialization. The loss of the American colonies forced Britain to look elsewhere for a new outlet for goods of trade and the spirit of humanitarianism; West Africa, with its raw materials and 'pagan' peoples, seemed to be an excellent substitute.²³

Several missionary societies opened schools in West Africa early in the nineteenth century. These included the Church Missionary Society, the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, the Basel Mission and the Bremen (North German) Mission Society. The Roman Catholic and American missions (United Presbyterian Church, Southern Baptist Convention) were later entries, arriving in West Africa in the late 1840s and early 1850s. Because of the missionary influence, much of the curriculum of the schools was focused on teaching students to read the Bible. In fact, character and moral development were much

²¹ See A. Babs Fafunwa, *History of Education in Nigeria*, Eighth Edition (Ibadan: NPS Educational Publishers, 1991), pp. 1-72.

²² Philip Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780-1850* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), pp. 88-119.

²³ Charles Lyons, *To Wash an Aethiop White: British Ideas About Black African Educability 1530-1960* (NY: Teachers College Press, 1975), p. 52.

used as an international language for wider communication and technological development to be strictly learned as a subject.

Conclusion

My major concern in this paper has been to discuss the language policy developments in Tanzania, particularly to argue for a change of the medium of instruction in secondary schools and other higher institutions of learning. I have shown through discussion that Swahili is the language best-suited for the role as the medium of education. I have further shown the inadequacies of keeping English as a medium of instruction most notably, the danger of producing students who cannot conceptualize and communicate in either English nor Swahili. I have also emphasized the need of an identity through the uniqueness and greatness of traditional culture by teaching or using ECLs in the first four years of school. I hope that this proposal will generate some serious discussion and linguists will aggressively offer more to the powers that be.

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