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IMBALANCES IN THE MODERNIZATION  
AND PROMOTION OF  
THE SWAHILI LANGUAGE IN EAST AFRICA:  
THE CASE OF KENYA AND TANZANIA

by Sheila Ryanga

Introduction

An organized, directed but hastened modernization and expansion of terminology in any given language entails practical problems towards its realizations. This is evident in two ways: 1) in the development of scientific and technical terms; 2) in the methods used to stabilize the developed terms and to secure their acceptability and eventual adoption into the lexical inventory of the language.

In Kenya mass innovations have given rise to heated discussions between linguists and some individuals whose first language is Kiswahili, like Sheikh Nabhany, whose efforts in lexical expansion are known in Kenya. Nabhany compiled the terminology he came up with in a manuscript entitled "*Kandi ya Kiswahili.*" Such collections, coupled with the productions of BAKITA,<sup>1</sup> have drawn the focus of the public concern onto the issue of lexical expansion and the promotion of Kiswahili. Until now, workshops and conferences organized between Tanzania and Kenya have focussed on the technicalities of lexical innovations, the advantages of modernizing Kiswahili, the possibilities of coordinating efforts in the East African countries, and the socio-political obstacles towards the achievement of the desired goals. Nothing substantial about three other significant aspects inherent to the problem has been said: namely, the tools for systematically distributing the newly developed terms, ways of experimenting with the usage and acceptability of the terms among the users of the language, and the cooperation between the promoters to eradicate the discrepancies in their products.

This paper is motivated by concern regarding the existing imbalances between the process of modernizing and expanding Kiswahili technical terminology and those aspects which contribute to the lack of effecting a reasonable impact of the new technical terms upon the masses with regard to their usage and acceptability.

General Survey

It has been about twenty-five years since Tanzania first began to work on the expansion of Kiswahili terminology so as to enable the language to accommodate scientific concepts. Later, Kenya joined the

modernizing process, but still it is quite difficult to point to a fixed an invariant kind of technical terminology that can be properly said to be the standardized form or a more acceptable form. Indeed, a significant number of technical terms have been coined and produced for use indicating some achievements in the endeavor. However, there remain obvious discrepancies in the use of these new coinages. It is such discrepancies that make Kiswahili seem, to its critics, to lack eloquence.

The use of Kiswahili in technical subjects has raised some questions regarding its lack of appropriate technical terminology and therefore its competence. But one thing has recently been made clear. The technical, scientific, and literal terms generated so far and the increasing efforts towards their promotion are proving many people wrong who previously held negative ideas. By the beginning of 1984 there were about 8,951 technical terms (Maina, 1984). The subjects covered included administration (1080), biology (349), chemistry (195), domestic science (1949), geography (629), politics (223), trade and commerce (943), parliament (274), technology (276), library and debate (112), research (139), hospital administration (88), agriculture (257), photography (73), psychology (272), agronomy (574), and literature (244).<sup>2</sup> It is the plan of BAKITA to have about 1000 terms for each subject to facilitate the translation of books for secondary school and higher education by the year 2000.

The above program is well-planned, but a flaw is indicated when these developed terms ooze out without proper control, spreading without a systematic plan of introducing them to the public which uses the language and which, to some extent, needs some information concerning what is happening to the language. As it is, language does not exist independently of its speakers, and if linguistic changes have to take place, they must reflect the speakers' innovations that are established as new norms by the speakers' acceptance. The importance of this cannot be underestimated since every individual word is unique in its etymology and its meaning and behavior, including its collocations.

Presently, some first-language speakers of Kiswahili and some of those who learned it as a second language have relative problems, for instance, in understanding the radio news bulletin in Kiswahili as transmitted from the Kenya Broadcasting Service. The developed lexicon, whose meanings are still obscure and ambiguous, sounds strange and confusing to the listeners, yet they are used with persistence. The following are a few examples:

*ufisadi*  
*dhana*  
*sera*

*zahanati*  
*muhadhiri*  
*mfumo*

*kara kana*  
*tathmini*  
*shule za upili*  
*mtaala*

*uzandiki*  
*urasimu*  
*itikadi*  
*dhati*

What such words are thought to be depends mostly on the acceptance, by some academic and influential people, of a common core of linguistic conventions. Presently, for the most part, their meanings remain uncertain for the majority of people. This unfortunately creates miscomprehension and miscommunication in the use of the newly-developed words. However, it is a situation which has not yet been investigated.

Three problems arise from the described situation above: 1) lack of confidence among the users of the language; 2) development of a negative attitude towards the new terminology; and 3) a temporary, but marked, communication breakdown between the users of the new terms and their recipients. Thus the need of a local language to be used in a greater variety of functions and elaborations of function is threatened.

The problem of ambiguity in the use of floating terminology is also experienced in schools and colleges in the teaching of Kiswahili. For our purpose here, we will give an example of the problems in teaching the grammatical components of the language. There are various uses of different words denoting similar concepts, while teachers and educational writers choose to use in their textbooks the words that they feel confident about. For instance, note the use of the variations in A, in preference to those in group B (Mbaabu 1983):

A	B
<i>Kiarifa/kitenzi</i>	<i>Kitendo</i>
<i>Kifanano</i>	<i>Kiigo</i>
<i>Kiishiria/ishara</i>	<i>Kiashirio</i>
<i>Kihusishi/mwao</i>	<i>Kihusiano</i>
<i>Kielezi/Kijalizo/Kisifa</i>	<i>Kielezo</i>

It is, of course, understandable that in any language there should be some tolerance of optional variability in the use of its vocabulary. Nevertheless, as Leith (1983) notes, a standardized language is one which has minimal variations of forms and maximum variation of function. Kiswahili is not an exception. The question is which words should be accepted as the standardized forms, and with what rationale.

One of the major issues here may be the haste with which the promoters have embarked upon their work. As with the case of Tanzania, where the conscious and deliberate effort of modernization began in 1965 (and is still leading in this venture), just two years after

Mwalimu Julius Nyerere introduced the use of Kiswahili in parliament in 1962,<sup>3</sup> the haste of the promoters has been apparent in their effort to do away with use of English. It was then government policy that Kiswahili be the national and official, as well as the educational medium. We might nevertheless mention here that the decision to use Kiswahili as a medium of instruction in primary education was not synonymous with the decision to use it as a national language. The latter was implemented earlier while the former was endorsed in 1961. At that early stage, English was still to be used as an international language and also as a medium of instruction in secondary schools and at the university level (later Kiswahili was to infiltrate secondary education as a medium of instruction).

This haste is not empirically linked to the realities of such a language program, that is, a technical use of a language simultaneous with its experimental elevation. Fodor cautions that conscious language modernization may last for a relatively long time. He gives an example of the Hungarian language reform which lasted from the last quarter of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century.

The efforts of modernizing are geared towards giving the language a major role in the various fields of development. The essence is to make Kiswahili substantive in expressing and explaining scientific and technological ideas among other educational subjects without shortcomings. The program is in its nature a gradual program, but one which should ultimately lift Kiswahili to an equal footing with other developed languages. In view of this, the modernization project should not be regarded as a rebellion against the current use of foreign languages. It is indeed a misconception to develop the language hastily with the intention of doing away with the foreign languages. Given the present circumstances, these foreign languages in Africa, as in most of the other Third World countries, will continue to be utilized, mainly as working languages rather than as symbols of prestige.

The prospect of developing a common African language and elevating its status to that of an international language is classic and patriotic. It aims at raising the continent's linguistic esteem world-wide. It is logical and necessary to have one's own continental language which can be used appropriately, as situations demand, among peoples of the same race—a race divided not only by different colonial backgrounds, ideological influences, and national boundaries but also by tribal affiliations and linguistic segmentation. A common African language for Africa south of the Sahara is essentially imperative, particularly at this stage in its history, for the conservation of the continent's identity and for the development of healthy relations and partnerships among African states, thereby molding Africa's influence in the modern world.

The Indians in India, Pakistanis in Pakistan, and the Bangladeshis in Bangladesh have Urdu as a common language, apart from their local languages, as well as English. In the case of the Arabs (generally defined as all the people whose mother-tongue is Arabic, and who claim their roots to lie within the Arab lands [Bernard G. Weiss and Arnold H. Green 1987]), it is the combination of the vernacular use of the Arabic dialects together with the consequent deep-rootedness of the Arabic literary culture that gives the Arab lands<sup>4</sup> their character and creates a special link between the inhabitants of these lands. This link is not only linguistic and cultural but, to some extent, also psychological. The Africans can indeed have one common and unifying language across their borders. Presently, only Kiswahili can bring this realization into fulfillment and bring about the articulation of a new sense of African identity throughout the Black African region. As a lingua franca for East Africa and other adjacent countries, Kiswahili has already proved itself as a formidable African force (Khamai, 1974). Its common, core vocabulary with other Bantu-based languages, ability to absorb foreign vocabulary, and non-tribal nature, elevates it to the highest position in terms of acceptability to all its users who have for a long while been victimized by many dividing forces in the continent. Such a possibility of the role of Kiswahili should be considered among the long-term goals of those institutions and associations handling the reforms and the promotion procedures of the language.

To point out that foreign languages will continue to be used in the Third World countries, particularly in the area of education, is not to assert that these countries have been imperialized beyond redemption. The question of whether an African language can be developed enough to be used as a medium of instruction in education is merely academic. As far as can be seen, the crippling elements in the attempt to effectively develop the language are financial shortages, lack of appropriate language policy, cooperation and agreement [among the different institutions] in upholding the proposed role of the language throughout the countries of its use, and lack of a properly-formulated framework for modernizing as well as a well-defined authority for moderation purposes. The modernizers must also be realistic and practical in their short-term goals, careful not to elevate the language to a level beyond its own competency due to hurried programs. In fact, such a pseudo-competence stage of Kiswahili had, at a certain point, been arrived at in Tanzania in the 1970s, causing people to question the practicability of the whole idea. For instance, after ten years of conscious effort to promote Kiswahili in Tanzania, Khamasi (1974) observed that:

...the constant reminders in the form of circulars and directives in Government offices as well as parastatals concerning the use

of Kiswahili, for internal communication, raises a number of queries, namely, the popularity of the decision among Government and parastatal officers (p.290).

Such an approach raised the entire question of their attitudes to the language and their competence to operate the language at such formal levels, and the efficiency of the language in carrying out such an important task. The situation has definitely changed in the past thirteen years, but this has still to be evident in the stabilization of the newly developed terms and actual use, not only in Tanzania but in other places as well.

An international language, whatever it is, has its own merits. Partly for organizational convenience and partly for some other socioeconomic, political, and cultural reasons, people choose to use one of the more widely-spread languages with which they are more closely connected historically, economically, or geographically (Khamis 1974). It is comprehensible then that we should find developed nations like Russia, advanced scientifically and technologically, with their own language as a medium of instruction, still seeking to learn English, as well as the French, the Chinese, and the Japanese. The use of their own languages limits them within defined boundaries.

Take the example of the Arabs, whose use of Arabic as a medium of instructions up to the university level began in 1920 (Syria was the first Arab country to use Arabic in its higher institutions of learning). Presently, they are discovering that some knowledge of the English language can be an asset to them in their international relations. It is only recently that the United Arab Emirates has introduced English as a subject in the government schools, just like any other subject in the curriculum. The use of English as a tool for international communication does not mean it is rated higher than the respective local languages. It is definitely not so among the Arabs. In Africa, this may have been the case historically, but now it is viewed simply as necessary for international survival because of its use all over the world, probably due to the linguistic aggressiveness of the British and the Americans. Therefore, foreign languages at this juncture can only be regarded as supplemental to the linguistic repertoire at our disposal.

### Feedback Landmarks

When the promotion goals and objectives have been set, and their implementation is on its way, it becomes necessary to adopt certain functional landmarks for receiving feedback on the effectiveness and acceptability of the products that have been produced. On this basis then, an effective means towards the lexical expansion, modernization and promotion of a language can be judged by the following:

- a. how well the expansion and modernization results meet the need for the technical terms in the various fields of development;
- b. how well the new terms offer solutions to the communication media by a controlled distribution and use of the coinages, thus eradicating conflicts and ambiguity in usage;
- c. the emergence of an established uniformity in the standardized form of the technical lexicon throughout the region in which the language is spoken;
- d. regular consultation among promoters, plus the co-ordination of their activities, thereby minimizing the discrepancies in the final productions;
- e. the recognition by the masses of the new role of the language, their acceptance and adoption of the new terms which enables them to naturalize them in the lexical inventory of their language;
- f. how the people in different countries where Kiswahili is spoken receive the modernized language not only as a lingua franca but also as the official working language within their nations as well as across boundaries.

### The Imbalances

The imbalances which are here viewed as obstacles to the promotion of Kiswahili center on the tools of distributing the newly developed terms and the incongruence between the modernizing parties. Financial issues and policy matters have been discussed in detail in earlier papers and will not be given prominence here.

It is true that an important instrument for fostering autonomy of views concerning a language is its standardization, which does not tolerate much variability. Thus the production of dictionaries, manuals, and grammars is a sign of stressing those other lexical varieties that are most different from those of any given autonomous, threatening contrast language (Fishman, 1972). The norms of formal usage of the technical vocabulary recently coined are traditionally codified in discs, grammars, and handbooks of usage, and usually inculcated by prescription through educational systems. This codification is done to legitimize the norms to which actual usage may conform to a greater or lesser extent.

Nevertheless, the acceptability and adoption of the new terms can hardly take place until the masses have been exposed to the terminologies through other public means than books and manuals.



Presently, there is no public awareness of these publications containing the new terminologies, for, as Khamisi lamented, not many people seem to be aware of the existence of such a document, referring to a periodic handout of the new coins by UKUTA (an independent body which brings together Kiswahili writers and poets whose main objective is to preserve and encourage the development of Kiswahili poetry, particularly its form and diction. Its full name is *Usanifu wa Kiswahili na Ushairi Tanzania*). Thus this traditional method of documenting the coinages is evidently restrictive and wanton. It is mostly those in the educational systems who will refer to books and dictionaries. What about the millions outside the classrooms, including those in professional employment? If, on the other hand, such words are made public in a systematic way, many would have heard and discussed them among themselves, becoming familiarized and ultimately psychologically "tuned" to accepting them into their daily language without a deliberate conscious effort. As it is, the impromptu and haphazard occurrence of these technical terms everywhere instigates psychologically antagonistic feelings from language "puritans," thus resulting in rebellious attitudes toward modernization and preference for preserving the forms which are already known.

In the following section we propose some mass media methods for helping the public come into contact with the terminologies. The proposition is that a public consciousness of the promoted forms through mass media such as the radio, television, newspapers, and even theaters and films can influence and promote public awareness of the technical terms, thereby upholding their status. Furthermore, the influence of mass media would have a powerful effect in reducing diversity in usage as well, creating an understanding among the users thus persuading people to adopt the innovations. This would be a firm foundation for promoting the language.

### The Newspapers

Newspapers can be one of the best tools for creating public awareness through a systematic distribution of the terminology in the various fields. Haim Blanc (1968) proposed this method as an empirical tool, which Ben Yehuda utilized during the period of reformation of the Hebrew language. Ben Yehuda published somewhat regularly in the daily papers, his new coinages from his individual efforts of modernizing the language for public consumption. The readers were people who ultimately used the language, so involving them that way secured their confidence from the outset. Through such exposure, it was easy for Ben Yehuda to get feedback from the mass concerning the effectiveness and usability of his productions. Thus newspapers as a tool and method of distribution are invaluable as

manner in which innovations eventually become widely adopted by the people. The method assists modernizers not only to compile a final experimental list of lexical inventory, but also to eradicate hostile attitudes elicited from the public when the terminologies are imposed on them suddenly. Such an exposure and involvement of the people and a systematic method of getting feedback are lacking in the process of modernizing Kiswahili.

### Radio and Television

Like the newspapers, radio can be of immense value, particularly if the project of elevating the language could be classified under educational programs. There is a Kiswahili program on the radio in Kenya titled "*Ubingwa wa lugha*" which is aimed at promoting the language by discussing the meanings and usages of given words for the benefit of the masses. The discussion is conducted by university lecturers from the language departments, but it also includes non-academic staff who speak Kiswahili as a first language. While the aims of the program are good, the actual end result is of little consequence for listeners. The participants begin by expounding the different meanings of the given words and their usages in simple sentences, but soon they get immersed in the technicality of analyzing the origins of the words. Such a detailed analysis may be of interest to language students but is of virtually no use to the listeners whose interest does not go beyond knowing the meanings and correct use of the new terms. Furthermore, the words discussed in the program do not come from a common source of standardized terms but from different modernizing sources, a situation which only adds to the existing confusion caused by the practice of different innovations floating around unchecked. This poses an obstacle to those who want to use Kiswahili in its new role.

Television could offer interesting educational programs such as forums for introducing and discussing the coinages, using word lists which would be made available to the public, teaching through pictures and advertisements. Like newspapers, television could be used for purposes of screening new technical terms and making them familiar.

### Other Tools

Theatrical performances could be another interesting, viable way of propagating the use of the new technical terminology. Conducting short plays on different subjects and situations and using the relevant technical vocabulary in the performances is one way. In one example, skits for doctor-patient contact and relations introduces hospital vocabulary. The same can be done for scientific or political terms to

familiarize the public with new coinages and usages while at the same time providing entertainment.

Institutions and the associations in charge of promotion could organize public educational meetings regarding different subjects; such meetings include forums and symposiums where public discussions are possible. All of these, combined with relevant educational materials could be catalysts in the modernization process. Unfortunately however, none of these methods has been utilized or even tried out.

### The Modernizing Agents

Several institutions and associations have attached themselves to the modernizing project. In Tanzania there are BAKITA, UKUTA,<sup>5</sup> and The Institute of Kiswahili Research situated at the University of Dar es Salaam. In Kenya the efforts come from individuals such as Sheikh Nabhany. To date, the Kenya Kiswahili Association does not deal with the mechanics of modernization despite its effort to advocate the use of Kiswahili in schools as well as in public through competitions of different kinds.

However, there are a number of vested interests and behavior patterns within the modernizing agents both in Kenya and Tanzania. Both countries have indigenous groups of people whose mother tongue is Kiswahili (these are the Waswahili whose tribal and dialectal groupings stretch from Mogadishu through Kenya's coast line down to Tanzania, including some islands in the Indian Ocean, like the Ngazija or Comoro Islands). Gorman (1970) estimated that Kiswahili was then spoken as a first language in Kenya by not less than 60,000 persons, a figure which may have since increased.

Zealous to produce adequate words for the educational program in Tanzania, BAKITA found itself at odds with concerned persons in Kenya regarding the methods of implementing the lexical expansion and the utilization of other African, European, or Arabic languages before exhausting the traditional Kiswahili dialects. The main issue revolved around the perpetuation of the newly developed technical terms by KAKULU (*Kamati ya Kusanifu Lugha*), superimposed terms as the "standardized forms," while they reflected basically the interests and activities of groups within Tanzania only. This created unfavorable attitudes and made it difficult for Kenyans to acquire a genuine appreciation of the work done, despite its immeasurable value. Individuals like Nabhany maintain that it would be more logical to exhaust all the existing Kiswahili dialects first before reverting to deriving words from other Bantu and non-African languages. He acknowledges the potential of the dialects, particularly from the archaic literary tradition of Kiswahili and its associations. Using his theory of

utilizing Kiswahili dialects in conjunction with the morphological techniques of Kiswahili grammar, he came up with coinages such as the following:<sup>6</sup>

<u>Coinage</u>	<u>English Equivalent</u>
<i>Runinga</i>	Television
<i>Ndaki</i>	University
<i>Rununu</i>	Telephone
<i>Charazio</i>	Typewriter
<i>Mwengoyaluyoyozi</i>	Air-conditioning
<i>Mangati</i>	Mirage

Such coinages, coupled with those from BAKITA, does not only leave the majority of the people confused as to which terms to apply but also makes language promotion even more precarious. It is such different promotion bodies that are, to some extent, responsible for some setbacks. For instance, they make rules for the lexical expansion, then these rules change in the course of time. Such changes are apparently responsible partly for some of the miscommunications that do frequently occur, as alluded to earlier in this paper. If the coinages are not validated and legitimized by an acceptable authority, then the technical aspect of Kiswahili would soon be mutually incomprehensible not only between different countries but within national boundaries as well.

There is evidence, however, from the beginning of the 1980s, that these incongruencies can be overcome provided priority is given to their systematic correction with clear objectives of establishing a genuine partnership (among the different groups). Conferences have been held in Kenya and Tanzania regarding their approaches to the whole question of modernizing and promoting Kiswahili with the effect of coordinating the activities so far done separately.

The governments have a major role to play, apart from the reformist groups, in righting these imbalances and closing the loopholes. To achieve this, there must be a major re-orientation in the attitudes of the member countries towards the new role Kiswahili is supposed to play. More support could be sought from financial institutions, both government and private, as well as from such international agencies as UNESCO (which is already contributing substantially by financing conferences and the translation of some educational material into Kiswahili). The scope and growth of technical Kiswahili vocabulary would be without bounds if all these efforts were channelled.

In order to get the coordination of the activities and cooperation between promoters and to involve the government as well as private institutions, there has to be proper planning and a common motive. There must be an examination of the operational systems and their vested interests, and conflicts which constrain creativity must be resolved. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that

- a) there be good understanding of the needs and goals of promoting Kiswahili by all participants;
- b) the priorities for the promotion be defined precisely, whether Tanzania's concern is to fulfil its national language policy or to benefit the whole Kiswahili speaking region;
- c) there be greater understanding of the necessity for united efforts with the possible establishment of national language centers, primarily for modernizing and promoting activities;
- d) there be established a regional center to receive feedback and to coordinate and moderate the production of the national center before the final release of the new terminology;
- e) the final lists of the terminology from the regional center be made available to the national centers, then to the relevant institutions, deliberately drawing the attention of the masses through the tools discussed above, in addition to using dictionaries, manuals and other educational materials.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that the expansion of terminology and its promotion is a process that is always present in the modernization of a language which is being elevated. Moreover, the opportunities in Kenya for advantageous cooperation with Tanzania regarding the formulation of technical terminology are many, except for the lack of a comprehensive framework and suitable programs to exploit those opportunities. There is a need for standardizing the new technical terminology so that there can be no conflicting variations in the values of the words. Such a procedure enhances reliability and confidence in usage. Ultimately, the idea is to enable every user of the technical terms to understand them in the same way with the least possible misunderstanding but with maximum efficiency. This calls for the involvement of the other countries where Kiswahili is spoken. It calls for the study of the consequences of promotion efforts in terms of the target populations as well as for evaluation of the responses to them.

program and the products that have so far been made available by the various institutions and associations.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>BAKITA is an acronym for "*Baraza la Kiswahili Tanzania*." It coordinates the work of most institutions and associations involved in the modernization and promotion of Kiswahili, with the exception of UKUTA, which is somewhat autonomous.

<sup>2</sup>Maina (1984) gave indications that there was a move to use Kiswahili for higher education upto the university level.

<sup>3</sup>Almost all internal correspondences were done in Kiswahili as early as the late 60s.

<sup>4</sup>The Arab lands comprise all the countries in the Arab league. They are Tunisia, Egypt, Mauritania, Algeria, and Libya in North Africa; Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Iraq in the Gulf; North and South Yemen in the Southern Arabian Peninsula; Syria and Lebanon in the north Near East. Somalia, Djibouti and the Sudan are not included in this category.

<sup>5</sup>UKUTA is an acronym for "*Usanifu wa Kiswahili ra Ushairi Tanzania*." It is an autonomous body which brings together Kiswahili writers, and its main objective is to preserve as well as encourage Kiswahili poetry, particularly its traditional prosodic forms and styles.

<sup>6</sup>In his manuscript "*Kandi ya Kiswahili*."

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