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 the is not known. The estimate varies from time to time. It is a fact th multilingualism is sometimes a stumbling block for governments that a struggling to evolve unified policies. In such cases we witness tl formidable role that language plays in demarcating the boundari between "us" and "them".

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

To ameliorate this fluid situation in language usage, it h become expedient on the part of African leaders to maintain coloni languages as a medium of wider communication. National languages African nationalities have been neglected. However, much as th have, this stance has not enhanced the process of national integrati and national aspirations. Because of the disparity in education facilities available to the majority of their citizens, it has not always be possible to provide them with an adequate exposure to the coloni 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 extensi sociolinguistically oriented language surveys. It is shown that this, in way, was an attempt by linguists who had been disenchanted with tl non-social elements of theoretical linguistics, to relate language studi to social realities. For these new studies, the people, the users whichever language that was under study, had to be placed at the cent of the linguistic researches that were undertaken. One of the areas th these studies addressed was that of language planning. On this, Rub (1971:307) stated that it is similar to any other kind of planning. Mo specifically, he showed that it involves four approaches: fact-findin policy-setting; implementation; and feedback.

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

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

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

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

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 via language policy in Uganda, except to state now and again that Engl would still be the medium for wider communication among people fr varying linguistic backgrounds.

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

This is indeed how the situation was left to be for the wh period of Obote's first government (1962-1971). But the problem language usage was central to the other government plans. Because this, Uganda fully supported the Ford Foundation surveys of langua that were conducted in Eastern Africa in the late sixties and ea seventies. The aims of these surveys were as stated in the introduct 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.
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> 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 patte of language usage in Kampala. Her study came out with v interesting conclusions about the ambivalent approaches to langua planning in Uganda. Nevertheless, on the position of Kiswahili Kampala and its prospect in the whole country, she presented a v promising picture. She provided very elaborate statistics to support l arguments, especially her views that the common people in the streets Kampala use Kiswahili extensively. We also see that in some cas especially for those who controlled the use of Kiswahili there existe very fluid type of diglossia. In all these cases, however, Kiswahili w found to be functionally useful in communication events betwe

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 alot 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 al 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 th has borrowed from Arabic. Such people might want to assoc Kiswahili with slavery. And because it is the language that the sold have used in the past and present, including those "liberat (*wakombozi)* from Tanzania, Kiswahili has been associated with te and human suffering in Uganda. It might be argued, therefore, such a language cannot be given a national or official status in country.

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

The truth, however, is that it has been proved beyond reasona doubt that Kiswahili has always been an African language with a Ba basic structure. Its heavy borrowing from Arabic and other language indeed an inescapable fact which, however, does not make it a les 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 languag a wider communication in East Africa has a role to play in sustain social cohesion in Uganda. As a united country, Uganda will stronger than it is now. Adopting Kiswahili as its national langu would also make its relationship with both Kenya and Tanzania, wh Kiswahili is currently accorded higher status, a cordial one. Togeth the three East African nations would support and build the spread use of Kiswahili in their countries and beyond. With one lingui medium uniting these people of varying cultures in East Africa, t region could wield some amount of power and enjoy some degree free human movement. This in itself would become a great asset wh could maximize economic production and knowledge sharing. T cultures of the East Africans would also be shared through one lingui medium. And in the long run, whatever would have taken place h might spread to other parts of Africa. This development would t 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.