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Language policy in Kenya at the crossroads

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ABSTRACT

An examination of the Development of Language Policy in Kenya demonstrates that Policies made about Language have to such extent been faced with bottlenecks. This is attributed to colonial language policies that have influenced policy decisions in the post colonial era. One watches with awe to note for example that forty years from independence Kenya is still grappling with attempts to institutionalize Kiswahili as National Language as demonstrated in the New Constitution which was promulgated as recent as 2010. This is in sharp contrast with the sister Country Tanzania which embraced the National Language concept much earlier. It is based on this understanding that this paper highlights the milestones of language policy in Kenya. The paper makes specific reference to Kiswahili, English, Mother tongues and foreign languages. The authors critically examine policies made concerning the usage of these Languages and seek to demonstrate that Language Policy in Kenya needs re-thinking.

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Introduction

Language and policy in Kenya can be best understood through an examination of its historical evolution. It has its basis in the colonial language policy following the scramble for Africa by European powers which took place towards the end of 19th century. This led to the partitioning of African nations culminating in the European colonization. Kenya became part of the British East African protectorate (Nabea, 2009). There were several issues that the British had to consider in order to facilitate their rule in the colonies. Among these were language and educational policies.

Language policy refers to all the language practices, beliefs and management decisions of a community or polity (Spolsky, 2004). Therefore Language policy determines which Languages should get status and priority in society by being labeled standard, official, local or national. According to Githiora (2008), Kenya is a multilingual and multiethnic country with an estimated Population of 40 million people who speak about 50 languages and dialects. Thus Kenya has the enviable potential to carve out a national identity using an indigenous language. However, while the leadership appears comfortable with this linguistic situation and would wish to have the status quo maintained, the linguistic situation among lay Kenyans demonstrates that not all is well on the ground. It is against this backdrop that this paper critically traces the evolution of language policy in Kenya and seeks to highlight the bottlenecks that have affected the policy. The authors also make an attempt to make the reader understand why the language policy in Kenya is at the crossroads today.

Colonial Language Policy

The colonial language policy in Kenya is important putting into consideration that it impacted greatly on post colonial language policy. Contrary to the long held perception that it was the objective of the colonial government to promote English language, the colonial Government only promoted English language to service its interests. The colonial language policy

falls into two eras. The pre-second world war and post second world war. In pre-second world war there were several players involved in the formulation of language policy. Among these were the Christian missionaries who thought that the gospel would best be spread in mother tongue and the colonial administration who had an interest in controlled teaching of English to Africans in order to obtain low cadre employees in their administration (Mazrui and Mazrui, 1998). There were also the British settlers who feared the Europeanization of Africans through English language lest they become too educated to accept the role of wage laborers.

Africans on the other hand however were motivated to learn English language as this gave them an opportunity to get employment in white collar jobs. Whereas barely a quarter of the Kenyan population could adequately use English, it remained the advantaged official language and the medium of instruction in the education system, unlike Kiswahili the co-official language (Ogechi and Ogechi 2002)

Among the first missionaries to introduce colonial education were Bishop Steere, Reverend Krapf and Father Secleux. The language issue thus the mother tongue, Kiswahili and English in the realm of education was discussed during the United Missionary Conference in Kenya in 1909. The conference adopted the use of mother tongue in the first three classes in primary school, Kiswahili in two of the middle classes in primary while English was to be used in the rest of the classes up to the university (Gorman, 1974). Missionaries also boosted local languages by according them orthography based on the Latin alphabet. Local languages were further promoted when the Zanzibar dialect of Kiswahili was standardized by the inter territorial language committee in 1930. Local languages also got a boon when the colonizers started publishing firms. While English language was the major beneficiary of this venture, Kenyans also started producing creative works in local languages. However this was done under the watchful eye of the

administration lest the works undermined colonial rule (Ngugi, 1978)

While mother tongue, Kiswahili and English were used with ease at various levels of education, the colonial administration grew apprehensive over the teaching of English to Africans shortly before the 1920s. There was a realization that English education interfered with the goal of maintaining a subordinate class of workers forcing it to review the education policy. Kenyans who had a good command of English were reluctant to do menial works. Instead they preferred to take up white collar jobs.

Following the review of the education policy, English was to be taught to the Africans guardedly in order to ensure that the majority of them never acquired secondary and university education. According to Mazrui and Mazrui (1996) this move somewhat retarded the growth and spread of English in the territory contrary to the long held view that it was the policy of the colonialist to spread English to the colonized. However it is worth noting that denying Africans to study English actually provided a stimulus for them to study it.

It is thus evident that the colonial language policy served the interests of colonizers. For example the Phelps Stokes Commission of 1984 recommended that Kiswahili be dropped in the education curriculum except in areas where it was spoken as the first language. The commission also recommended that mother tongue be taught in early primary classes while English was to be taught from upper primary up to University.

Post 2nd World War

After the Second World War there was a shift in the British colonial language policy which hurt local languages. The education department reports pointed out that it was inappropriate to teach three languages at the primary school. The reports included Beecher's 1949, Binn's 1957 and Drogheda commission of 1952. The documents recommended that English be introduced in the lower primary to be taught alongside the mother tongue and called for the dropping of Kiswahili in the curriculum except in areas where it was the mother tongue. The implementation of this policy took effect in 1953 -1955 (Gorman 1974).

The elimination of Kiswahili from the curriculum was partly aimed at forestalling its growth and spread on which Kenyans freedom struggle was coalescing (Mazrui and Mazrui 1998). In addition the boost for English at the expense of local languages occurred when the Prator-Hutasoit commission endorsed that English be the only language of instruction in all grades. This led to the new primary approach better known as the English medium approach. To implement the new curriculum, teachers were to be trained in English while their mother tongues were viewed as a premium in teaching the lower primary schools.

Post Colonial Language Policy

The practice of introducing major language policy changes through commission reports which was common during the colonial administration continued after independence. Thus several presidential and ministerial commissions on various aspects of education and manpower training were appointed since independence and their recommendations have shaped the basis of the current language policy in Kenya as espoused in the ensuing sub headings.

Kenya Education Commission Report (Ominde Report, 1964)

Soon after independence the minister of education appointed a commission headed by Professor Ominde to survey the existing educational resources of Kenya and to advise the

government on the formulation and implementation of national policies of education. The recommendations which served to establish guidelines for the language policy of the newly independent nation were greatly influenced by the popular new primary approach. The Ominde report recommended that English should become the universal medium of instruction from standard one but Kiswahili should become a compulsory subject from standard one whenever possible.

As Mbaabu (1985) remarks, though the commission recommended that Kiswahili should be taught in primary schools as a compulsory subject the fact that English was to be a medium of instruction meant that Kiswahili was relegated to a secondary role and in effect it was accorded a much lower status. In some schools Kiswahili was not even taught mainly because it was not an examinable subject at the end of primary education. The main problem for the implementation of the recommendation that Kiswahili be taught as a compulsory subject in primary schools was said to be the consequences of the colonial language policy which did not encourage the use and development of Kiswahili especially during the last decade of colonial rule.

In the opinion of the Ominde Commission, using Kiswahili as the medium of instruction in secondary schools would demand high linguistic competence from the teachers and it would be very expensive to translate textbooks and supplementary books into Kiswahili, which the commission considered a grave misuse of funds. Furthermore Kiswahili would require adaptation to unaccustomed scientific uses, before it could qualify as a vehicle for Education and study at the secondary school level.

Regarding other languages the commission made it optional that depending on the initiative of the school, a third modern language (after English and Kiswahili) such as French could be introduced. But then such classical languages could be introduced at the secondary school level. For other language such as Russian and German the commission recommended for them to be offered in particular schools subject to availability of facilities.

The Wamalwa Report (1972)

The Presidential Committee was to examine the Kenya Government training policy objectives and programs in the light of the current and foreseeable training priorities. The Wamalwa report went beyond the Trifocal situation where language policy revolved mainly around the use of Kiswahili, English and Mother tongue by addressing itself to the use of International communication particularly the use of French and German besides Kiswahili, English and Mother tongues. The Wamalwa report recognized the need for a sufficient number of Kenyans who were proficient in French and German in view of the increased activities in such sectors as tourism, International trade, and communication and in diplomacy. However the teaching of French and German were only introduced in selected schools.

The Gathathi Report (1976)

The Government set up yet another commission referred to as National Committee on Educational Objectives and Policies. The Gathathi Report of 1976 recommended that pupils should be taught in the predominant language of the catchment area in the first three years. It further recommended that English should be introduced as a subject in primary grade 1 and that in primary grade IV English should take over from the language of the catchment area as the medium of instruction. The committee stated that Kiswahili should be introduced as a compulsory subject in Primary Standard III, or when English starts being

used as a medium of instruction. This was to avoid a situation where pupils are required to learn two new languages simultaneously. However as Mbaabu (1985) contends, this meant that urban pupils start learning Kiswahili in Standard I while rural children who start using English as a medium of instruction in Standard III and IV would be required to start learning Kiswahili three to four years later than their urban counterparts. This brought about disparities in the mastery of the Kiswahili Language.

Furthermore, the Committee recommended that Kiswahili should not only be taught as a compulsory subject in primary schools, but that it should also be a subject of examination at the end of primary school cycle. This recommendation was prompted by the realization that little or no Kiswahili was being taught in many primary schools because the time allocated to it was spent in teaching other subjects, especially English and Mathematics which were subjects of examination at that level. However, even though this recommendation was made in 1976, it was not implemented until 1985 along with the newly restructured 8-4-4 system of Education.

The committee further recommended that Kiswahili should be taught as a compulsory and examinable subject in secondary schools, that it should be taught at the university level, and that efforts should be made to make sure that more Kiswahili teachers were trained. However as the number of students studying Kiswahili at the University level increased tremendously, the subject was not made compulsory in secondary schools until as recent as 1986. Shockingly it was examined as a compulsory subject at that level for the first time in 1989.

Mackay Report (1981) and the 8.4.4 System of Education

The Gathathi report was not fully implemented partly because it required training of teachers and publishing of books which take time to accomplish owing to the relatively low status of the National language Kiswahili compared to English in the education system. The next Government Commission thus found it necessary to make some recommendations affecting Kiswahili. The report of the presidential working party on the establishment of the second university in Kenya also referred to as Mackay report main mandate was to make general recommendations on the implementation of government decisions on the establishment of second university in Kenya.

The Mackay commission is also credited for its recommendation on the restructuring of the education system from the old 7-4-2-3 to the new 8-4-4 system. The commission recommended that an African language division incorporating Kiswahili and other Kenyan languages should be started in the faculty of social cultural and development studies at the university. Furthermore, Kiswahili was to be made a compulsory subject at the second university. This was set to be implemented starting with the intake of the first batch of 8.-4-4 students at the university commencing in the 1990/1991 academic year. However the double intake overstretched the facilities at the University and the policy to implement Kiswahili as a compulsory subject was faced with constraints. The recommendation to restructure the education system 8-4-4 which was made by the Mackay report was accepted by the Government in 1982. In 1984 a policy document, the 8-4-4 system of education was published and its recommendations of making Kiswahili compulsory and examinable at both primary and secondary level as advocated in Gathathi report were set to be implemented.

The Ruling Party's Plan

In 1970 the ruling party (KANU) came up with an ambitious plan to make Kiswahili the official language in Kenya. In the first phase of the implementation of the plan, all Kenyans were called upon to speak Kiswahili at all times either to fellow Kenyans or non Kenyans whether unofficially or officially, politically or socially. The government mass media was to mount a definite program in this sphere even at the expense of local vernaculars. The second phase of the implementation of the ruling Party's plan stated that the official language for all official Government duties would be Kiswahili. This decision had loopholes as the Law Courts, and institutions of higher learning would be exempted in that they would not be required to conduct their business in Kiswahili.

It is interesting to note that many years after the ruling party plan was made public, English remains the official language of government business. The proposed centers for teaching, learning and promotion of the national language or the central establishment (Institute of Kiswahili Research) are yet to be established due to manpower and financial constraints.

The Development Plans

The development plans are almost silent on the issue of language policy other than in the area of adult education. However there was an exception in the 1979 to 1983 development plan which mentioned the possibility of establishing an Institute of Kiswahili Research at the University of Nairobi. Following the publication of the development plan, the Department of Linguistics and African languages of the University of Nairobi in collaboration with the department of languages and linguistics of Kenyatta University College started drawing up plans for the institute. Sadly the funds were not provided for the establishment of the institute and subsequent development plans have not addressed this issue seriously (Mbaabu, 1985)

In the Development plan of for the period 1984 to 1988 published in 1983, Kiswahili was merely put in the same category as other mother tongues, when they were commonly referred to as National languages. The Department of culture was given the mandate to promote Kiswahili. However the capacity of the Department to promote Kiswahili was hampered as officials in the department had other administrative duties with little time for Kiswahili. This in essence made the establishment of Institute of Kiswahili Research a farfetched dream. Surprisingly, in the 1984-1988 Development plan, there is no mention of the establishment of the Institute of Kiswahili Research which the 1979-1983 Development plan had contemplated.

Language policy in pre-primary, primary Education and secondary schools

In Kenya, the central body coordinating pre-primary education is the National Centre for Early Childhood Education (NACECE). This body is in charge of District Centers for Early Childhood Education (DICECES). The core mandate of NACECE is to develop and disseminate pre-school curriculum including teacher training syllabus and guidelines to schools. Albeit running schools at the District level, DICECE develops localized curriculum material in such areas as traditional poems, stories and games. Though a noble venture, it is an expensive undertaking to implement because of the large number of mother-tongues. Besides there has been a lack of consultants in some mother tongues at the NACECE Level.

The Beecher Report of 1949 and Gathathi report of 1976 recommended the use mother tongues in standard I to III. As Benson (2004) observes, the use of familiar language to teach

children literacy is more effective than a submersion system as learners can employ psycholinguistic guessing strategies to learn how to read and write. As a result the new 8-4-4 system adopted this recommendation whereupon the Kenya Institute of Education (KIE) prepared instructional materials in 22 languages. However the use of 22 languages in a country with more than forty languages meant that many Kenyan children continued to use languages other than their own in mother tongues in literacy. A case in point is where such people grouped together such as Kalenjin, Meru, Mijikenda and Luhya could not use their mother-tongues because only one or several dialects which fall under these names were used in writing the instructional materials in those mother-tongues.

The teaching of mother tongues was not integrated in primary teacher training college curriculum. Thus trainees were not adequately prepared to teach mother-tongues when they graduate. They were expected to apply general methodologies acquired in the Professional studies course in teaching mother-tongues. Though teacher training colleges drew students from all over the country, only those students who speak the mother-tongue in use in the primary schools near where the colleges are located practiced how to speak mother-tongues.

The teaching of Kiswahili in primary schools before the introduction of 8-4-4 system was minimal compared with the teaching of other subjects. Recommendations by various commissions that Kiswahili should be given a prominent role in the curriculum, including making it an examinable subject at the end of primary should cycle, had not been implemented. Since Kiswahili was not an examinable subject, at the certificate of primary education level of education, it was ignored by students as well as the teachers who chose to concentrate on such examinable subjects as English and mathematics. As Mutahi (1978) contends, teachers had a free hand to do what they wanted during Kiswahili lesson in that they taught other subjects during Kiswahili lesson.

The greatest impact of the new language policy was felt in secondary schools. Before 1985, secondary schools were free to teach or not to teach Kiswahili. Some schools did not offer Kiswahili for any apparent reason other than the fact that they were not required by the ministry of education to offer it. Many urban and high cost schools as well as major national schools such as Alliance High school either did not offer Kiswahili or they offered it in addition to a foreign language such as French and German. Furthermore, students studying foreign languages were not allowed to study Kiswahili because foreign languages were useful in securing jobs International organizations in the country. As Mutahi (1978) puts it, students were even forbidden from speaking Kiswahili except during the Kiswahili period and could not speak the language outside the classroom.

At the university level, staff establishments in Kiswahili teaching departments at the universities have suffered as a result of the fact that Kiswahili teaching departments have also been teaching other subjects at the university level. A case in point is at Kenyatta university where the department of languages and linguistics used to teach Kiswahili, English and French until 1985 when it was split into three departments of Kiswahili and African languages, English department, and Foreign languages. When Kiswahili teaching departments combine Kiswahili with other subjects, their capacity to recruit more staff suffers because the number of professors and other staff allocated to them are equal or comparable to other departments in the university. As a result, a small faculty is expected to teach an unusually large number of students. A disproportionate amount

of time is spent on attending to student's needs, thus reducing the research capacity of the faculty.

Language Policy and the Constitution of Kenya

Kenya has had the following language policy provisions in the constitution section 34(C) requires that candidates for parliamentary elections be proficient in the English language. Section 93 (C) dealing with the linguistics criteria for eligibility for citizenship requires that a person seeking naturalization must demonstrate adequate knowledge of Swahili language. This clause has remained unchanged for many years. The first language related constitutional amendment was passed in July 1974 when section 53 was amended to change the official language of the National assembly from English to Kiswahili. Since this clause brought contradictions, it was amended in 1975 to allow for use of both English and Kiswahili as official languages of parliamentary proceedings.

Parliament passed yet another Constitutional Amendment Bill in April 1979 requiring that Parliamentary candidates be proficient in both Kiswahili and English. The Bill amended section 53, which previously required proficiency in English Language only. Specifically candidates for the General Elections of 1979 were the first to be required to do language tests in both Kiswahili and English. According to Mbaabu (1985) this constitutional amendment did not diminish the dominant role of the English language as all the Bills, amendments and financial resolutions were to be written in English and quoted in the same language.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that the current language policy has been greatly influenced by the colonial legacy. The colonial powers promoted both Kiswahili, English and to some extent mothers tongues only to some extent that it served their interests. Incidentally, the ghost of the colonial language policy has haunted subsequent language policies made in the post colonial era. This has resulted in lack of appropriate language policy reflecting a true Kenyan identity. There is a call for Kenya to disentangle from the Colonial Language influence and make independent decisions that will ensure the development of a Language policy that serve her interests.

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