

## From Social History to Attitudes towards Use of Kiswahili in Kenya

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### Abstract

*Allport's all important definition of attitudes suggests that they emanate from experience and hence the importance of social history in attitude formation. On the part of social history, Kiswahili had an inauspicious diffusion from the Kenyan Coast to the interior. During the colonial period, there were several commissions, reports and memoranda concerning the question of language in education. Whereas in those reports, the position of the use of mother tongue and English was secure, that of Kiswahili was obscure. Socially, it was developed to be a subordinate lingua franca. After independence, the policy on Kiswahili has been vague, ambiguous, arbitrary, marked by avoidance and also one that is declared without implementation. Emanating from social history, therefore, Kenyans have favourable attitudes towards use of Kiswahili in informal domains, but negative attitudes towards use of Kiswahili in power domains as evidenced in varied discourses.*

**Keywords:** Attitudes, informal domains, power domains, social history, varied discourses.

### Introduction

The diffusion of Kiswahili in inland Kenya was inauspicious compared to Tanganyika and Zanzibar. Whereas in Tanzania, such groups as the Yao and the Nyamwezi, who were major players in trade, assimilated to the coastal culture and had an impact on the spread of Kiswahili in the Tanzanian mainland, in Kenya, the Kamba who were the major contact between the coast and the interior did not assimilate much to the coastal culture. The land between the coast and the interior that the Kambas traversed was mainly uninhabited because of aridity. Further, the Kamba did not need Kiswahili to communicate with their inland neighbours-Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru groups who speak languages that are intelligible to them (Mbaabu, 1996: 47).

Further, when Seyyid Said moved his capital from Muscat (Oman) to Zanzibar, Zanzibar became a more powerful hub of trade than Mombasa in Kenya. Hence, the Sultan of Zanzibar was a stronger sponsor of trade than was the case of trade that emanated from Mombasa. This accounts for the spread of Zanzibar Kiswahili in mainland Tanzania, Congo, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Madagascar (Chimerah, 1998:82). Also, the hostility of groups such as the Maasai (though grossly exaggerated) (Gorman, 1974: 400) and the non-co-operation to trade from the coast by big groups such as the Kikuyu and the Nandi did not augur well for the spread of Kiswahili in the interior of Kenya. Other factors that checked the rapid spread of Kiswahili in the interior of Kenya were the sporadic warfare between the Borana and the Galla in the interior of Kenya in the 1830s and the protracted resistance of the Mazrui family (the ruling class at Mombasa) to the claims of the Sultan of Zanzibar.

Whiteley (1971) also observes that although the northern coast of Kenya is the cradle of Kiswahili, literary tradition did not move so much out of the coast because islamicization of the Kenyan interior was low key as compared to the islamicization of inland Tanzania. Mbaabu (1996: 50) notes that the 1899 shifting of railway headquarters from Mombasa and the moving of the headquarters of the protectorate from Mombasa to Nairobi in 1907, diminished the coastal influence, compared to Tanzania where a coastal town was the capital for much longer time. However, the shifting of the railway headquarters notwithstanding, Christian missionaries saw the railway as a hand of God to reach far and wide into the interior and safely from the coast (Marshad, 1993: 10). Still on the railway, the

Indian artisans who helped in the building of the railway opened up shops in the interior and in this way, they spread Kiswahili.

Rulers such as Shiundu in the mainland, and his son Mumia of the Wanga Kingdom in Western Kenya, entered into alliances with the coastal people and up till now, the effects of this contact are felt; the strong islamicization of the Mumias area of Western Kenya. Gorman (1974:401) notes that by the 1860s, traders from Pangani had reached the lake region (Lake Victoria) and the area around Mount Elgon (Western frontier in Western Kenya). Another route, from Taveta near the coast of Kenya to Ngong near Nairobi, had been developed. In comparison with Tanzania, however, Kenya had fewer caravans starting from the coast. Most caravan routes started from Zanzibar and the adjacent mainland to the interior of Tanzania, Congo, Uganda as well as northern Kenya (Mbaabu, 1996:46).

### **The Missionary Factor**

In contrast with Tanzania that was initially under the German rule, it has been pointed out that the missionary factor was more remarkable in areas that were under the British sphere of influence (Gorman, 1974: 405). Krapf (Church Missionary Society member, CMS), the forerunner of missionary activities in Kenya relevant to Kiswahili, saw the advantage of using Kiswahili because of two reasons: its widespread position in use; and its rich lexicon on religious matters. However, he detested the Arabic script on two grounds; the Arabic script could lead to islamicization and it was limited in expressing a Bantu language. He therefore chose to write in the Roman script instead of the Arabic script. On Kiswahili, Krapf wrote *Outline of Elements of Swahili language with special Reference to the Kinika Dialect* (1850) and a *Dictionary of Swahili language* (1882).

It has been observed (Gorman, 1974: 404) that the successors of Krapf and Steere were not very enthusiastic on using Kiswahili for the following reasons:

- Many believed that their mission was to translate the Bible into vernacular languages and thereby give the translated material to students to read in their schools;
- Some adhered to the Dr. David Livingstone principle that Africa can only be converted by Africans and hence the use of vernacular language aspect;
- That the language best known and best understood by the child on entry to school was the best medium of instruction, hence the vernacular language aspect;
- Others avoided the lingua franca (Kiswahili) on the grounds that it could not reach the innermost thoughts of those undergoing conversion to Christianity; and
- Some saw Kiswahili as associated with Islam and hence the question of a rival religion.

Be that as it may, such Christian institutions as the Christian Institution for freed slaves, a CMS institute at Frere town near Mombasa and the Holy Ghost Christian village at Bagamoyo in Tanzania, had a positive impact on Kiswahili because the students in these institutions came from diverse backgrounds that necessitated the use of Kiswahili. In the Frere town curriculum, students were required to memorise 100 texts from the Bible in Kiswahili (Furley & Watson, 1978, as cited in Mbaabu, 1996: 43).

### **Language Policy in Education during the Colonial Period**

In 1925, the Phelps-Stokes Commission advised that differences between missionaries, administrators and settlers on education issues should be reconciled. The Commission also advised that the department of education should outline its policy. The Commission proposed that indigenous languages were to be used in initial stages of education system and English was to be used for higher echelons of education. Taking note of pervasive multilingualism relative to the indigenous languages, the Commission proposed that Kiswahili, Dholuo, Kikuyu and Luhya should be used. This Commission placed Kiswahili (the lingua franca) alongside the other vernacular languages. Kiswahili was however to remain ahead of all the

other indigenous languages in education. In the years that lay ahead, the language question was summarised in the Education Department Report of 1928. The place of the vernacular language and English in the education system was clear: the vernacular was to be used in the first stages of education and English was to be used in the higher stages. The question was on where Kiswahili was to be brought in and what role it was to play (Gorman, 1974: 416).

This was to remain an important question in many Commissions and Reports that dealt with the question of language; that is, the language of instruction and language as a subject during the colonial era and even today. Commissions, Reports and the like that dealt with language in Kenya (during the colonial period) can be categorised into two groups-the regional/national and the ones emanating from Metropolis in Britain. In table one below, we give a summary of the noteworthy Committees, Reports or Memoranda that were issued on the language question during the colonial period.

**Table 1: Commissions, Reports and Memoranda on Language in Colonial Kenya**

<b>Regional/National Reports, Committees and Memoranda</b>	<b>Metropolitan Reports, Committees and Memoranda</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Report of East African Commission, 1925.</li> <li>• Meeting of Tanganyika's Governor, 1925.</li> <li>• First Conference of Governors of East African Dependencies, 1926.</li> <li>• Mombasa Conference, 1928.</li> <li>• East and Central Africa Education Directors Conference in Dar es Salaam, 1929.</li> <li>• The Commission of Closer Union of the Dependencies in Eastern and Central Africa Report, 1929.</li> <li>• The Commission of Higher Education in East Africa, 1937.</li> <li>• The Beecher Committee, 1942.</li> <li>• The Beecher Report, 1949 1950.</li> <li>• The Binns Report, 1951.</li> <li>• The East African Royal Commission Report, 1953-1955.</li> <li>• New Primary Approach, 1957.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advisory Committee on Native Education, 1923.</li> <li>• The Memorandum on Education Policy in British tropical Africa, 1925.</li> <li>• Memorandum on Place of the Vernacular in Native Education, 1927.</li> <li>• Memorandum on Education of African Community, 1935.</li> <li>• The Report on Mass Education in African Society, 1943.</li> <li>• Memorandum on Language in African School Education, 1943.</li> <li>• Education in Citizenship Africa, 1948.</li> </ul>

Source: Onyango (2003)

The numerous commissions, reports and memoranda testify that the question of language in education in colonial Kenya was problematic. A critical look at these commissions, reports and memoranda can be summarised as follows; that at initial stages of education, the place of vernacular languages was secure. Also specified was the position of English in the higher levels of the education system. What was not certain was when Kiswahili was to come in.

It is also important to note that there was change of policy after the Second World War. The Beecher Report of 1942 and 1950, the Binns Report of 1951 and the Royal Commission of 1953-1955, for instance, all recommended the diminishing use of Kiswahili. In fact from 1953, Kiswahili was eliminated in the list of examinable subjects in Kenya

African Preliminary Examination. By 1957, New Primary Approach was introduced which meant that a child encountered English on the very first day it attended school.

### **After Independence**

After independence, a number of Commissions were formed to address the question of language in education. A critical look at the Kiswahili language policy after independence reveals the following characteristics; avoidance, vagueness, arbitrariness, fluctuation of policy and declaration without implementation. The first one was the Ominde Commission of 1964. Although it recognised the importance of Kiswahili for national unity, it actually eulogised English as an important medium of instruction. The Wamalwa Report of 1972 recognised the importance of Kiswahili in government training institutes. This was implemented but admittedly, this was a limited domain of language use. Further, in 1970, KANU the ruling party said that all Kenyans will speak Kiswahili at all times. This was a vague order that was also tinged with avoidance because in terms of implementing this order, no one could be held accountable. Furthermore, it was difficult to implement this.

In 1975, President Kenyatta arbitrarily declared that Kiswahili was to be the sole language of parliamentary debates. No fact finding was done. No goals were established and no outcomes were predicted. In fact this Kiswahili only policy for parliamentary debates fluctuated after 1979 following the death of President Kenyatta in 1978 Gachathi report of 1976 had good recommendations for Kiswahili: that Kiswahili should be a compulsory and examinable subject at both the primary and the secondary school levels. This recommendation was not however implemented. It is the Mackay Commission (1981) recommendation that Kiswahili should be a compulsory and examination subject at both the primary and secondary school levels that was implemented. Indeed this was an important step in the implementation of Kiswahili policy. However, even with this step, Kiswahili remains an isolated subject rather than a medium of instruction. It is important to note that Kiswahili was declared co-official with English in the 2010 Kenya Constitution. Moreover, in the 8.4.4. system of education, a pass mark in Kiswahili could compensate for a fail mark in English.

### **Language Attitudes: Theoretical and Methodological Issues**

The all important definition of attitudes says that an attitude is a mental state of readiness that is organised from experience that has got a direct effect or a changing effect on a human being's reaction to all objects in his or her environment (Allport, 1935, as cited in Smit, 1996: 25). Thus, this definition recognises the importance of social history in connection with experience (cf. St. Clair, 1982). Further, the mentalist perspective of attitudes recognises three components; namely, the cognitive, the affective and the behavioural. It has been observed by Agheyisi and Fishman (1970) that attitudes change but that they are nonetheless enduring enough.

A number of approaches have been used to study language attitudes overtime. Respondents have been asked to respond to either a closed or an open questionnaire. Interviews have also been used in the study of language attitudes. Another method that has been very much used in the study of language attitudes has been that which involves the evaluation of the speaker. For example, various speakers read a specific test and the informants are expected to document subjective reactions to the speech samples by responding to closed scales that consist of either an adjective or adjectival opposites. These were the semantic differential scales developed by Osgood in 1957 (Smit, 1996: 46). However, the resultant matched guise technique that was introduced by W.E. Lambert and associates have been the most widely used method in language attitudes research (Smit, 1996). This method essentially involves reading of a neutral passage by speakers competent in languages under investigation. Consequently, listeners evaluate each guise of the

seemingly different voices on various judgement scales similar to how one would judge radio speakers.

### ***Attitudes Linked to Spread of Kiswahili***

Mbaabu (1985: 2) observes that many upcountry people see ‘Waswahili’ and Kiswahili in bad light. He points out that one way that was used in the spread of Kiswahili was through slave trade and ivory caravans. This has made some upcountry people associate Kiswahili with evil because it was used in slave trade. He also expounds that the other fallacy is that people think Kiswahili is a mixture of Arabic and a number of African languages who were originally slaves. This definitely casts a shadow on the status of Kiswahili.

### ***Attitudes Linked to Elite Enclosure***

Kitsao (1978: 3) observed that the elite do not emphasise the use of Kiswahili in Kenya. He argued that it was disheartening to see that even after the president had declared Kiswahili as the national language in 1974, some people still did not want their children to learn Kiswahili. He further observed that such elite could not fruitfully express themselves in Kiswahili.

Harries (1984: 124) reported that the one-time long serving Attorney General, Charles Njonjo said the following concerning Kiswahili; ‘Kiswahili is a language for the common “mwananchi” (citizen); it is not a language for a person like me’. Here, Njonjo was clearly articulating a point connected with elite enclosure as it concerns African languages. Indeed Njonjo was to emphasise this in parliament in debates that concerned Kiswahili. In the 1969 motion concerning the use of Kiswahili in parliament, Njonjo the then Attorney General who seconded the motion depicted the topos of uselessness (as concerns Kiswahili). According to him:

... to teach our children Swahili in school is really a waste of time and a waste of those children’s talents because Swahili is only spoken in East Africa. You do not have to teach a child Swahili in school because he or she will pick it up in the streets. So, why waste a child’s time teaching her Swahili instead of teaching her French or Latin or some other useful language that will carry that child in other countries? Languages which are international, languages that will help that child, for instance, to study medicine or science should be taught in schools. This will also help our children not to become parochial ... We must think of ourselves as part of the world (Kenya, Republic of 1969: col.2523).

That the Attorney General was advancing the topos of uselessness as concerns Kiswahili is well illustrated in his words above. He clearly delineates the point that Kiswahili is not classroom-worthy because it is a language that can be picked up on the streets. This directly points out the position that the Attorney General allocates to Kiswahili: a very low status language. Further, according to him, Kiswahili cannot be used in medicine and science (important subjects). Despite the fact that Kiswahili is the only indigenous international language in East and Central Africa, to the then Attorney General, it was better to do with a once prestigious language that is dead as Latin than to teach the regionally acclaimed *lingua franca* in East and Central Africa. The elitist inclination of the Attorney General was obvious in his words above.

### ***Attitudes Linked to Power Domains***

According to Passtoors (1990, as cited in Smit, 1996: 14), the following language domains have been identified in Africa:

1. Government and administration
2. Education
3. Judiciary system
4. Science and technology
5. Trade and industry
6. Media
7. Community activities and religion
8. Cultural life and arts
9. Sports and leisure
10. Local markets
11. Family and friendship networks.

The first six comprise the power or formal domains. They are also called higher domains in the context of sub-Saharan Africa. The last six are the primary or informal domains because they are closer to somebody's personal life hence they are lower ones.

Law (under the judiciary system domain), alongside medicine and science (under science and technology domain) are some of the prestigious subjects in Kenya because of the economic perks that go along with them. Law was also in the direct docket of the Attorney General. According to him, Kiswahili and law were not compatible:

I shudder to think if we were to introduce Swahili as the official language, what I would have to do in drafting legislation ... It would be a legal nightmare as far as a legal draftsman is concerned (Kenya, Republic of, 1969: col. 2524).

The same nightmare, according to him, would be seen if one were to use Kiswahili in Mathematics:

Think of sizes: if one were to express all the mathematical expressions in Swahili, a language which is limited in its vocabulary, a language which is limited in its literature, what would happen? I think if we try and express scientific subject in a language of that kind we will be doing our a country a disservice because we will be trying to stagnate the progress of our country instead of moving forward with the rest of the world so that we get the benefits from other people, all the scientists and all the technicians which the other countries have. We do not have to wait to do the experiments because we can borrow from the experiments which they have done (Kenya, Republic of, 1969: col. 2524).

Here, the Attorney General combines the topos of deficiency and the fallacy. Of course, Kiswahili is not limited in vocabulary and literature. Kiswahili in actual fact has a rich literary tradition running for centuries. Kiswahili is identified with stagnation in the context of science. This is not convincing since linguistically speaking, any language can be planned and modernised to tackle science. According to the Attorney General, all about Kiswahili was confusion. Despite the fact that at the time the Motion was moved the standardisation process of Kiswahili was almost forty years old, the Attorney General argued that on the basis of non-standard accents, misunderstandings could occur:

My friend from Kisumu whose type of Swahili is perhaps different from mine, with a different accent, would stand and speak in Swahili and other members

would not follow him...A Somali will speak Swahili in a different way, a Luo, again, will speak it differently and a Kikuyu makes it even worse because of the 'ls' and 'rs' are confused so on and so forth. I am saying this humorously, perhaps, just to indicate the practical difficulties in introducing this foreign language and making it an official language (Kenya, Republic of, 1969: col. 2522-2523).

In Kenya, it is not only on Kiswahili that accents apply. There are also strong accents on English. The Attorney General did not mention this. He went ahead to make his point succinct: practical difficulties of introducing a foreign language and making it an official language. We underline that the main point, which the Attorney General wanted to make was that Kiswahili is not compatible with official status. Of course Kiswahili is not a foreign language as the Attorney General claimed. What is interesting is that the Attorney General had no problem with English being official when indeed it was the foreign language.

Onyango (1990) study on the attitudes of university lecturers towards use of Kiswahili depicted that many of them did not favour the use of Kiswahili in power domains. Precisely 63.6 percent of the lecturers interviewed did not strongly stress the use of Kiswahili in the education system. Further, 77.3 percent of the lecturers interviewed observed that it was not a very good idea to use Kiswahili in official functions. On the contrary, a bigger percentage of the lecturers stressed the use of Kiswahili in informal domains such as cultural activities. A bigger percentage of lecturers also stressed the use of Kiswahili for symbolic functions such as it being an important national language and an important carrier of national cultural values (Onyango, 1990).

### Conclusion

Kiswahili has had a problematic social history in Kenya. The diffusion of Kiswahili in upcountry Kenya had notable challenges. During the colonial period, the policy concerning Kiswahili was a problematic one. After independence, the policy towards Kiswahili has been vague, arbitrary, ambiguous, and one marked by fluctuation as well as one that is declared with problematic implementation. By and large, this social history has contributed to negative attitudes towards the use of Kiswahili especially in the power domains. We also note that negative attitudes towards the use of Kiswahili in power domains are associated with the elite enclosure. The elite discussed in this paper subscribe to the internationalisation ideology of language use, where an indigenous language such as Kiswahili is perceived as 'deficient' in connection with its usage in power domains.

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