

ADAPTING AN AFRICAN LANGUAGE AS A MEDIUM  
OF INSTRUCTION AT THE UNIVERSITY:  
THE CASE OF KISWAHILI IN KENYA

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1. Introduction

Linguistic research has for many years proceeded on the understanding that all languages are in principle equal. The assumption here is that no language can be shown to be better or worse than another on linguistic grounds. As Lyons (1968: 43) states, all living languages, it may be assumed, are of their nature efficient and viable systems of communication serving the different and multifarious social needs of the community that use them. This is what Coulmas (1989b: 3) has called the 'egalitarian perspective' on the study of language. Coulmas (1989b: 3) attributes this view of language to the general positivist trend in social sciences and the value attributed to democracy.

Although languages are in principle equal, they have socio-functional differences. They differ with respect to how their potential has been functionally exploited in order to serve certain forms of communication (Coulmas 1989c: 181). For instance, while some languages have registers for many communicative purposes, others are at various levels of adaptation in order to meet the rapidly changing communicative needs of their speakers. The latter is especially true in cases where languages have to fulfil new functions.

To be able to meet the communicative needs for educational, economic, scientific and technical development, languages which have not been adequately prepared for this purpose will need to be 'modernized', 'adapted' or 'elaborated'. They will need to be developed so that they become intertranslatable with other languages that serve more communicative functions. They will, in other words, be made more appropriate medium of communication for modern topics and forms of discourse (Cooper 1989: 149).

Kiswahili, the *lingua franca* of East and Central Africa and the declared language of Kenya and Tanzania, is one indigenous African language that is undergoing modernization. This is especially true in education. In Tanzania it has been adapted to the teaching of all subjects in primary schools and some considerable effort has gone into the preparation of the language for teaching in secondary schools. The latter has however not been put into effect owing to lack of political will (Mekacha 1995, Msanjila 1999).

Kiswahili is used to teach the subject itself in primary and secondary schools in Kenya and Tanzania. It is also used to teach linguistic and literary courses in the Kiswahili departments in both Kenyan and Tanzanian universities. It is the teaching of linguistics in Kiswahili that concerns us in this paper. Citing the use of Kiswahili as a medium of linguistic instruction at the university as an example, this paper shows the challenges of adapting a language to a new function. It also generally shows the challenges that many African languages are likely to face if they are to become appropriate vehicles of 'modern discourse'.

Before we discuss the process of adapting Kiswahili to the teaching of linguistics at the university in Kenya or in East Africa for that matter, it appears important to briefly outline why it has become necessary to use the language as a medium of linguistic instruction in the Kiswahili departments in Kenya.

## 2. Why Kiswahili?

As Coulmas (1989b: 3) argues, languages cannot be made suitable for serving new functions in thin air. They become suitable to serve new functions as a result of communities' desire to employ them for tasks that used to be carried out with other languages or not at all. This is what seems to have happened to Kiswahili. In the early 1970s when the teaching of Kiswahili was introduced at the university, the linguistic aspects of the language were taught in English. This trend was however discontinued in the late 70s and the early 80s. The students themselves, many of whom were going to become Kiswahili teachers in secondary schools and colleges, put their departments under a lot of pressure to teach and examine them exclusively in Kiswahili. The students argued that being taught in English did not adequately prepare them for the job for which they were being trained. There was thus need or desire for the use of Kiswahili as a medium of instruction in the teaching of linguistic courses in Kiswahili departments. This need was predicated on the quest for relevance and effectiveness of training.

Besides students' pressure that was brought to bear on the Kiswahili teaching departments, the use of Kiswahili as a medium of instruction for linguistic courses should be seen within a wider context. It should be seen within the context of promoting and developing indigenous African languages in general. This is what Webb (1994: 187) calls the 'revalorization' of autochthonous languages whereby an 'undervalued' and 'underdeveloped' language is given a higher functional or instru-

mental role and a more positive social value. It is an attempt at cultural development and the promotion of individual and collective identity through language. It is an endeavour to assert cultural and linguistic independence and it is also a striving to uplift the prestige of a language. In general, it is an attempt by an indigenous African language to claim a place in a continent dominated by ex-colonial languages. Above all, it is a struggle by a language to meet new challenges.

## 3. Adapting Kiswahili to linguistic teaching

Since the teaching of Kiswahili in the universities began in the early 70s, the departments that teach the language have remarkably increased and with that also the number of students. While in the 70s there were only two departments that taught Kiswahili in Kenyan universities, there are currently seven of them; and while in the 70s there were only a handful of students studying Kiswahili, there are at present several thousands (Musau and Ngugi 1997: 219). The curriculum has also significantly expanded in its scope. A comparison of a university curriculum used in the 80s and the 90s and one used in the year 2000 shows that the number of courses taught have more than quadrupled (see for instance, *Kenyatta University Calendar 1989/90* and 2000/2001).

How then have the departments in general responded to the pressure of adapting Kiswahili to the growing needs? How have they coped with the development of a metalanguage to handle the diverse needs of the linguistic sub-disciplines and the growing body of knowledge?

The linguistic terminology that is used in the Kiswahili departments in Kenya is from two sources. One of them is the Institute of Kiswahili Research, University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. This institute which took over the functions of the defunct Inter-territorial Language Committee (founded in 1930) has been involved in the research and development of Kiswahili terminology among other concerns (Mwansoko 1984). The efforts of this institute in the development of linguistic nomenclature are attested to by the compilation of a standard dictionary of language and linguistics referred to as *Kamusi Sanifu ya Isimu na Lugha* (TUKI) published in 1990. In this modest dictionary is to be found basic linguistic terminology that comes in handy in the teaching of some undergraduate courses. This dictionary is, however, only partially useful. There are many technical terms in linguistics that are not covered by it, for example basic terminology in pragmatics and second language learning is clearly lacking.

In the absence of an exhaustive list of Kiswahili terminology for the teaching of linguistics, the individual lecturers' efforts have proved immensely invaluable. Faced with scarce terminology individual lecturers have developed additional terminology to meet the needs of the various courses that they teach. Some have compiled these into word lists, which they have presented in departmental meetings and national and international conferences for discussion. The individual lecturers' ef-

forts are then the second source of terminology for the teachers of Kiswahili in Kenya. Without these efforts, the teaching of linguistics in Kiswahili would be a very difficult task.

A brief account of an experience in one of the Kenyan universities will help to illustrate how the individual effort comes in and why it is necessary. The teaching in Kiswahili of a course with the title 'Second Language Learning' was for the first time begun in 1994 (see Musau and Onyango 2000). The only Kiswahili linguistic dictionary available then contained a few terms that were relevant for the teaching of the course. Faced with a situation where there was nowhere to turn to, the lecturers involved in the teaching of the course had to create additional terminology. The initial list of terminology had many problems but the lecturers continued to improve upon it. Later it was presented in seminars and conferences for discussion with colleagues. The lecturers hope to disseminate the list by publishing it in journals. As can be seen from this episode, the adaptation of Kiswahili to the teaching of linguistics can be particularly difficult in a case where there was no prior usage.

#### 4. Methods of lexical expansion

The development of linguistic terminology whether by the Institute of Kiswahili Research in Tanzania or by individual lecturers generally seems to follow common methods of lexical expansion (see Cooper 1989: 151). One main method appears to be borrowing where terminology is borrowed via English with its meaning and is lexicalised (becomes nativised or assimilated phonetically and grammatically):

Examples:

ENGLISH	KISWAHILI
acoustic phonetics	fonetiki akustika
allomorph	alomofu
allophone	alofoni
homonym	homonimi
tone	toni
coda	koda

Another common method is through loan translation where the form and meaning of a word is employed as a model for Kiswahili word formation, i.e. where elements of an English word are translated into Kiswahili.

Examples:

ENGLISH	KISWAHILI
language planning	upangaji lugha 'planning language'
language policy	sera ya lugha 'policy of language'
open syllable	silabi wazi 'syllable open'

accentual system	mfumo lafudhi 'system accent'
hard palate	kaakaa gumu 'palate hard'

Composition or compounding is also evident. In this process two word forms or morphemes are combined to form one word:

Examples:

ENGLISH	KISWAHILI
idiolect	mtindo + pekee 'style + idiosyncratic'
apocope	udondoshaji + mwisho 'drop + end'
dialectology	elimu + lahaja 'knowledge + dialect'
affricate	kizuiwa + kwamizwa 'stop + block'
segment	kipande + sauti 'piece + sound'

A few terms have been developed by semantic extension. Here the semantic range of an item is modified or expanded to accommodate new meaning:

Examples:

ENGLISH	KISWAHILI
adjective	kivumishi 'amplifier'
embedding	ubebwaji 'the act of being carried'
co-occurrence	muoano 'marriage'

#### 5. The challenges

Although the teaching of linguistic courses in Kiswahili has been going on for over twenty years, it has not all been plain sailing. There are numerous challenges that face the endeavour.

##### 5.1 Inadequate terminology

The linguistic metalanguage in Kiswahili that has so far been developed is not adequate. There are many areas of linguistics that have not been covered. A comparison of the current Kiswahili linguistics dictionary with some English linguistic dictionaries, for example *The Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics* (Bussman 1996) or the *Linguistics Encyclopaedia* (Malmkjaer 1991), shows the vast ground which the development of linguistic metalanguage in Kiswahili has yet to cover in terms of the diversity, quantity and depth of elaboration. This lack of terminology needs both a national and a regional approach if it is to be adequately addressed. Nationally, the Kenyan universities will need to hold workshops and seminars where new tentative terms will be discussed. What has been agreed upon at the national level can then be discussed at a regional level with the aim of producing acceptable word lists for use in the teaching of linguistics.

## 5.2. Lack of co-ordination

Besides lack of terminology, there is lack of coordination nationally and regionally in the creation of linguistic nomenclature. In a survey done in Kenyan and Tanzanian universities, Mwansoko (1998: 34) claimed that about 80 percent of the linguistic terminology in Kiswahili in use in Kenyan and Tanzanian universities was common. He however noted that a substantial number of linguistic concepts had different terms in different universities in the region. In effect, one referent had one or more synonyms as the following examples from Mwansoko (1998: 44-45) show:

TERMINOLOGY IN ENGLISH	EQUIVALENTS IN KISWAHILI
larynx	kongomeo, koromeo
vocal tract	mkondo sauti, bomba la sauti, mkondo wa hewa
stops	vizuiwa, vikatizwaji, vituo
nasals	nazali, vingong'o, vipua
source language	lugha chasili, lugha changizi, lugha kopezi, lugha toaji
adverb	kielelezi, kijalizo, kisifa, kielelezo
verb	kiarifa, kitenzi, kitendo
predicate	mtendaji, kitendaji, faali, kiima.

These examples show that one concept or referent is referred to variously. To have synonyms is not itself a bad idea provided they are understood to mean the same thing in different places. The problem with the examples shown here is that they arose as a result of uncoordinated efforts by different individuals and institutions. This proliferation of synonymous forms could in the long run hamper communication among students and experts of linguistics in Kenya and in the wider region where Kiswahili is taught. It might act against uniformity, economy and precision in communication.

In view of this, there appears to be need to co-ordinate the various efforts that are geared towards the creation of terminology not only in Kenya, but in the East African region as well. It appears that there is need for the establishment of national and regional standardization bodies, which will collect, standardize and disseminate linguistic terms in Kiswahili. Such bodies will also organize workshops in which new word-lists will be discussed, standardized and recommended to Kiswahili teaching universities for use. In the long run, such bodies should be able to produce a more inclusive dictionary or dictionaries of linguistics in Kiswahili based on discussion and consensus.

It should be noted, however, that the creation of standardization agencies should not be seen in isolation, but as part of the language's overall corpus planning. In this kind of planning, the universities have a stake but so do the governments which are interested in the promotion of this African language.

The co-ordination of terminology creation efforts is also necessary if the process is going to meet the standards of nomenclature development. Kiingi (1986: 15) used the acronym PEGITOSCA to encapsulate the ideals of terminology development. The acronym stands for Precision, Economy, Generatively, Internationality, Transparency, Non Obscenity, Systematicity, Consistency and Acceptability. Judged by these standards, some of the terms so far developed in Kiswahili cannot stand closer scrutiny. A look at the Kiswahili linguistic and language dictionary for example shows that the process of terminology creation has some flaws. An examination of some of the Greco-Latin forms, for instance, shows that there are instances of inconsistency in the rendering of linguistic terminology in Kiswahili. A few examples will help to illustrate this:

TERM	KISWAHILI
phonology	fonolojia
morphology	mofolojia
analogy	analojia
onomatology	onomatolojia
accentology	<b>elimu lafudhi</b> 'knowledge of accent'
dialectology	<b>elimu lahaja</b> 'knowledge of dialect(s)'
lexicology	<b>uchambuzi msamiati</b> 'analysis of lexicon'

While in the rest of the examples the form (-ology) is rendered as (-lojia) in Kiswahili, in the last three examples the pattern is changed and a more descriptive rendition is provided. This also applies to the following examples:

TERM	KISWAHILI
acronym	akronimi
antonym	antonimi
homonym	homonimi
hyponym	hiponimi
synonym	<b>kisawe</b> (a word similar in meaning to another)

While the form (-onym) is rendered as (-onimi) in most of the examples, the last one is rendered differently.

Inconsistency of terminology creation is also evident in a few cases where some of the words have not been fully assimilated into the Kiswahili sound system, which has a dominantly a CVCV structure:

## Examples:

TERM	KISWAHILI
phonetics	fonetiki
semantics	semantiksi
semiotics	semeotiksi
lexis	leksisi
syntax	sintaksi

While the first word has been fully nativised, the rest have not and are therefore not easily pronounceable by a Kiswahili speaker.

Inconsistency in linguistic terminology formation in Kiswahili can be remedied by a two-pronged approach. The first one suggested by Kiingi (1981) and Mdee (1985) is that of consistently creating equivalent forms in Kiswahili where they do not exist. By the use of this method, an anglicized Greco-Latin form will be replaced by newly created or existing Kiswahili form. Admittedly, most of the nomenclature created in this manner will be almost impossible to recognize by non-Kiswahili speakers. To supplement this method, terminology of Greco-Latin stock can be borrowed and adapted phonologically and morphologically. If not balanced with the first method, this approach is likely to be criticized as a method that uses a foreign language with the phonology of an African language (Abdulaziz 1989: 39). In sum, a consistent compromise between the two methods would be preferred.

### 5.3. Need for reading materials

Apart from the co-ordination of terminology creation efforts, the development of nomenclature needs to be supported by reading materials such as journals and books. One of the major handicaps for developing a linguistic metalanguage in Kiswahili is the unavailability of reading materials especially books and journals. Although there are some regular journals published by the Institute of Kiswahili Research in Tanzania, there are generally very few linguistic books that are published in Kenya. It is indeed ironical that while an effort is made to teach and examine various linguistic courses in Kiswahili, students continually rely on textbooks written in English for their reference. Generally, very few tertiary education books are published by the Kenyan publishing industry (Chakava 1992:136; Makotsi and Nyariki 1997: 31). This industry mainly concentrates on textbooks for primary and secondary education where they are sure to make significant sales. The industry considers tertiary publishing to be unviable (Chakava 1992: 136). Mainly for this reason, there are very few linguistic textbooks written in Kiswahili in Kenya.

The unavailability of reference materials written in Kiswahili impacts negatively on the dissemination and popularization of the terminology that has already been created. This also affects the stability of the created terms because there is no denying that the printed word tends to have some authority and permanence.

The problem of reading materials can be resolved if the universities could have their own printing presses which could publish books and journals that are relevant for university use. The assumption being made here is that such university presses would be outlets for scholarly publications because their costs would be underwritten to varying degrees by the sponsoring institutions, private foundations or government agencies. To be sure, two of Kenya's universities have recently established their own printing press. It is however still too early to assess their impact on the publication of linguistic books and journals. The problem of lack of reading materials could also be resolved by the creation of institutes and centres affiliated to universities which could publish books and journals in special fields. The institute of Kiswahili Research at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania is a good example of the role that such a center can play in research and the publication of relevant reference materials (Mulokozi et al. 1984).

### 5.4. Pedagogical issues

The whole process of adapting Kiswahili to linguistic teaching as discussed in this paper raises some fundamental pedagogical issues. Faced with inadequacy of terminology, do the lecturers concerned only limit themselves to the areas in which there is terminology? Are students deprived of essential knowledge which is available in English? Are the students disadvantaged? There is no evidence available to the present writer which suggests that students doing their linguistic courses in Kiswahili are disadvantaged in any way. It is however up to Kiswahili departments to make adequate preparatory measures to ensure that the students they teach are adequately trained in linguistics. In the first place, the introduction of new courses (courses for which there is no terminology in Kiswahili) should be preceded by the creation of suitable, even if tentative, terminology. Departmental committees can best accomplish this task. Secondly, since a lot of reading materials are still in English, lecturers should make sure that students can comprehend materials written in that language. They can do this by providing the equivalent English terminology alongside the newly created Kiswahili ones.

### 6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the process of adapting Kiswahili to the teaching of linguistics at the university in Kenya and the challenges that face the process. It shows the path that an indigenous African language is likely to trace before it becomes adapted to 'modern discourse'.

The paper also shows that adapting a language to a new function should not only be adequately prepared for but should also be co-ordinated. This is best done by a standardization agency at the national and regional level. It is not enough for African governments and universities to decide which languages should be taught, they need to recognize that African languages cannot be adequately developed without corpus

planning. Now, for corpus planning to succeed, there is need to invest resources in institutions and agencies that are suited for the task of language modernization.

Coulmas' argument (Coulmas 1989c: 182) that unless there is a functional requirement, the functional potential of a language will not develop is clearly supported in this paper. What this means is that unless the need for the use of language is created, the opportunity for its modernization or its development does not arise. Correspondingly, if Kiswahili is to expand its linguistic nomenclature, more linguistic courses will need to be taught in the language. In a nutshell, the modernization of African languages will only take place if a need for their various uses is created. This can be done through status planning, a process in which a language's roles are defined.

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