

## **LANGUAGE ATTITUDES IN COLONIAL KENYA: AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

By

1. AyubMukhwana, Department of Kiswahili, University of Nairobi,  
P.O. BOX 30197-00100 NAIROBI, Kenya. Email: [ayubmukhwana@yahoo.com](mailto:ayubmukhwana@yahoo.com)
2. PriscahJerono, Department of Kiswahili, University of Nairobi,  
P.O BOX 30197-00100 NAIROBI, Kenya. Email: [priscah\\_jerono@uob.ac.ke](mailto:priscah_jerono@uob.ac.ke)

### **Abstract**

There is a lot of literature on the history of the language situation in colonial Kenya. However, not much of this literature has centred on the issue of language attitudes in colonial Kenya. The aim of this paper therefore is the place of language attitudes in Kenya's language policy in colonial Kenya. The paper exploits historical language developments as recorded in the literature. The theoretical base upon which the paper is based is that of Gardener and Lambert (1972) on the motivational orientation of language learning. The conclusion of the paper is that in colonial Kenya, Kenyans were motivated to learn and use English not for integrative reasons but for moving up the socio-economic ladder. On the other hand, Kenyan indigenous languages, including Kiswahili, were maintained for integrative reasons.

**Key words: Colonial Kenya, English, Kiswahili, language attitudes**

### **Introduction**

In a multilingual setting like the one that characterized colonial Kenya, attitudes play a big role in guiding language policy and planning (Mukhwana 2010). But of the many languages that obtained in colonial Kenya English, Kiswahili, indigenous Kenyan languages plus Hindi and Urdu characterized the language policy debate. When Kenya was colonized by the British, English was introduced in the colony as the official language (Whiteley 1974:13). Thus, English was the language of law, administration, business, and higher education. However, the missionaries being custodians of education in Kenya and had done a lot of research into Kiswahili, the language was used in some vital areas of public life including basic education and missionary activities. But following the recommendations of the Phellips-Stokes Commission of 1924 that indigenous languages be used in schools if education had to yield its desired end results, Kenyan indigenous languages were also used in education.

Although this was the position as far as language policy was concerned, there is no evidence that colonial Kenya's language policies or lack of them was as a result of informed choices along the lines of attitudes. This language policy limbo in colonial Kenya suggests that either the issue understanding the language situation in colonial Kenya was ignored or ill understood. Underlying language attitudes in colonial Kenya can lead to the formation of a logical language policy and organization of a proper language planning in colonial Kenya.

The aim of this paper is to examine patterns of language use and preference in colonial Kenya so as to identify language attitudes that obtained then to shape the then language policy in Kenya.

The theoretical base of the paper is the social psychological one and mostly associated with Gardner and Lambert (1972). Basically, this approach holds that language users make choices regarding their languages and from the choices inferences regarding their personal characteristics can be made.

Below, we systematically proceed our discussion by isolating factors that we believe influenced language attitudes in colonial Kenya.

### **Language Attitudes Associated With Religion**

With the coming of Christian missionaries in Kenya at the end of the 19th century, Arabic language was heavily criticized by them. For example, the eighth meeting of the Executive Council of the International Institute of African Languages and Culture of 1930 favoured vernacular languages in education but not Kiswahili. Missionaries were custodians of education; they established schools where English was initially both subject and medium of instruction. Missionaries initially rejected Kiswahili because they believed it was an Arabic dialect (Knappert 1965). The missionaries, through the Commission of Education in East Africa of 1919 even opposed the very use of Kiswahili in missionary activities claiming that Kiswahili carried the spirit of Islam and could not, as such, be used in the Christianization of the Africans (AI — Amin Mazrui 1978:228). What caused this kind of language attitude was the fact that most Swahili people have a predominantly Islamic background, and that in Kiswahili there exist many terms of Arabic origin which were interpreted to mean a clear relationship to Islamic institutions. This argument about Kiswahili, with its stress against Islam, expressed the language attitude of some of the Christian missionaries who adhered to the Livingstonian principle and who were supported by C. Hobley — the then Provincial Commissioner of Coast,

Later, in the education domain, the attitude of the missionaries was that mother tongues were to be used in the initial stages of learning; then would come Kiswahili. Therefore with the arrival of the missionaries at the end of the 19th century, came the early beginnings of language policy and language engineering in colonial Kenya. The United Missionary Conference of 1901, for example, tried working with the mother tongues in their missionary and education activities but it was not easy. Kiswahili proved to be the ideal language. Since Kiswahili was to be used to spread both the Gospel and education, the

codification of the language was soon started with contributions of missionaries such as Bishop Steere, Reverend Krapf and Father Sacleux who made systematic study of Kiswahili language (Whiteley 1969:15-17). As the mission stations also acted as trading posts, Hospitals and Education centres, the word-stock development of Kiswahili accelerated — especially to do with the above mentioned domains. Before then, the authority for developing terminology for Kiswahili had been with the speakers of the language; but now with the advent of Christian missionaries and with their positive language attitude, this authority for the first time passed into the possession of outsiders and was used to formally engineer Kiswahili language.

With this positive attitude and effort to codify Kiswahili, a considerable amount of religious literature also appeared in the language. Quite a number of grammar books were also written by the missionaries on Kiswahili language and include, among others, *100 Swahili Exercises* by Steer and a Swahili dictionary by Krapf. This writing of books by missionaries is evident of the way attitudes of the missionaries contributed positively toward the codification and linguistic development of Kiswahili language. However, as a result of the missionary effort in the language development, a number of shortcomings were evident:

- i.) As the missionaries were not necessarily trained linguists, they did not manage to unify the orthographies of the dialects of Kiswahili language. This in turn led to the development of attitudes amongst those from different missionary societies (refer to war of words between Krapf and Steere) and even the Swahili themselves towards the newly developed Standard Kiswahili (see Chiraghdin and Mnyampala 1977 and Abdallahwa Khalid (1977).
- ii.) In most cases, technical registers outside the narrow domain of Christian religion were not addressed and developed fully. This in turn drew negative attitude to the new Kiswahili from the mostly Islamised Swahili population.
- iii.) From the debate on the Phillips-Stokes Commission of 1924 where the Director of Education said local vernaculars had no educational value, it can be concluded that Kenyan indigenous oral literature was largely ignored and suppressed. To this day, the production of Kenyan literature and consequently the development of a reading culture in Kenyan mother tongues remains a problem. This negative attitude for Kenyan languages and culture by some missionaries has made Kenyans think and even believe that English was superior and so was the culture it carried (see Jones 1925). This supposed superiority of English resulted in some cases in the loss of Kenyan cultural identity and a rejection of Kiswahili and other indigenous languages in favour of English. Some chiefs and parents requested that their children's education be given in English as it would give them an advantage over other members of the tribes (Sindiga 1977:5). What this language attitude points to is that during the British colonial period, English language was used to achieve more general social changes such as prestige and social mobility; during this period,

missionary activities were not interfered with although the government did retain the right to inspect mission schools.

Details of the language attitudes in education in colonial Kenya are given in the subsection below:-

### **Language Attitudes Concerning Language in Education**

British colonial period in Kenya (1887-1963) witnessed increased literacy rate. Vernacular languages started to be used in formal education and so ceased to be primarily oral vehicles of communication during this period between 1887 and 1963. However, no serious artistic works were written in these Kenyan vernaculars; but there developed the use of vernacular languages in print. Printed literacy materials in vernacular languages grew and as this happened there arose a wide public concern over the essence of education in Kenya and whether it should be offered in vernaculars and Kiswahili but not in English.

Thus, in education in Kenya, Kiswahili was mostly used in the upper classes of primary education while vernacular languages were used in the lower classes. Although Kiswahili was used in education in Kenya, there were no proper educational materials in Kiswahili. Kiswahili was also not used as a language of administration or economic world, especially at international levels. What this use of Kiswahili meant is that in Kenya, Kiswahili was used by the British colonialists to keep the African ignorant about himself and the world around him and not to empower him economically (see Mvungi 1975).

The period from 1930 to independence witnessed an increasing literate population which was concerned about the state and usage of the language that they thought was increasingly important in their lives as Kenyans. Kenyans had attitudes that favoured English for the language would improve their economic lives by being the medium through which they could exercise their everyday business.

From 1930, in colonial Kenya, increased literacy led to greater social awareness. Kenyans acquired social status on the basis of the language they were schooled in. This acquisition of social status meant that better financial status and power were clearly associated with certain languages that were appropriate for certain class levels. English was accorded a higher status than Kiswahili, and the vernaculars were at the bottom of the scale. These assignments were however the function of the attitude and not inherent in the languages. The attitudes held about Kiswahili and vernaculars were just a result of the association of the languages with a particular group of people rather than inherent features of the languages.

During the period before 1930, Kiswahili was found to be a lingua franca of high repute in East and Central Africa including Kenya. The problem was to determine which dialect of the Kiswahili language was to set the standard of spoken and written Kiswahili. The colonial administrators and missionaries were of the view that a particular dialect be

selected, and then it be set as the standard form of Kiswahili after being subjected to the scrutiny of reason and logic. This scrutiny of reason and logic is the essence of attitudes. Krapf's views on the suitability of Kimvita dialect were rejected not just because he was a lone voice, but also because Kimvita was found by other missionaries and colonial administrators to be illogical and out of fashion. Krapf criticised the heavy lexical borrowing that characterised the Kiunguja dialect at the time and termed it contaminating Kiswahili language (Chiraghdin and Mnyampala 1977). But Bishop Steere and those who supported his views like Meinhoff expressed the attitude that the dialect of common use be the base upon which to build standard Kiswahili. Therefore, Kiunguja dialect got the opportunity and became the basis on which to standardise the Kiswahili language for the future.

This period after standardization of Kiswahili in 1930 was marked by a positive attitude concerning the correctness of Kiswahili usage, but next to no concern about the correct usage of the vernacular languages for they were mostly unexaminable in schools. Against this background, it can be argued that the attitude assumed by missionaries and colonialists was that Kiswahili was the indigenous and legitimate Kenyan lingua franca for serious written and oral usage works and that the vernaculars were necessary for the daily lives of the common uneducated and that were unsuited to serious intellectual matters. But during this period, attitudes toward languages in Kenya were not very openly expressed, for the available surviving written records of public discussions on attitudes toward language are few and scanty.

As early as 1927 when English that carried prestige could not be taught to Kenyan children, the attitude felt by parents was that Kenyans were being insulted by the education authorities in the colony (Sindiga 1977). The result of Kenyan children not being taught English was an outcry among the parents because it was contrary to their expectations. Kenyans demanded that their children be taught in English, because it was the gate to entry into a new world. This demand for English is a good example of attitudes of Kenyans towards English. If English was dropped as a subject and as a medium of instruction, Kenyan children would even not go to school at all (Sindiga 1977).

During the whole British colonial period, The Committee of the Governors of Uganda, Tanganyika and Kenya argued that it was impracticable to make English the medium of education. Thus, there was lack of availability of equal education opportunities for Kenyans by reason of race, colour, religion, or national origin in public educational institutions at all levels in Kenya. There was no common syllabus due to the existence of different languages as media for education for there was English, Kiswahili and other local languages. This situation can be thoroughly analyzed and interpreted as follows:-

This lack of availability of equal educational opportunities for Kenyans on ground of race, colour and national origin was mainly manifested through language. Depending on the factors of race, colour and national origin, the languages of instruction in the schools were either English, Kiswahili, Indian languages or indigenous languages. In other words, in

British colonial Kenya the type of language used in education created a gap between the powerful and the powerless, the rich and the poor, the urbanite and the rural folk: and each group had a language attitude that favoured one language or another.

Due to demand, some Kenyans were lucky to get an education in English. Those Kenyans who received an education in English had the effect of the language extended to their culture. The higher the Kenyans went on the education ladder, the more intense their acculturation in English was, and the weaker their loyalty to their indigenous Kenyan languages and cultures. With culture goes a peoples' behaviour. When Kenyans learned English language, the behaviour associated with the original speakers of the English language in Kenya was also taken by them. In the Kenyan context, the original English speakers had both economic and political power and so their societal standing was high. Indigenous Kenyans who were schooled in English also had their social, political and economic power being higher than that of those Kenyans who did not have English knowledge. This created more positive attitudes towards English in education.

### **Language Use and Attitudes in Politics**

Kiswahili and other vernaculars were used by British colonial administration as a political weapon to keep Kenyans ignorant about themselves and their surroundings. Therefore, during the British colonial period in Kenya, Kiswahili and other vernaculars were regarded as generally inferior to English but there was nothing Kenyan masses could do about this situation. It was only at one stage in Kenya's history that Kiswahili was rejected by Africans. The reason for this was that Kenyans discovered the attitude of the British colonial administrators in using Kiswahili as a master-servant language of communication.

There were sometimes during the British colonial period when efforts were directed at making Kiswahili a more stable language in terms of its structure and societal standing (look at efforts of 1930 aimed at standardizing Swahili). However, these British colonialists reduced Kiswahili to a second class position, far inferior to English. But as the language declined abruptly in social favour, it persisted in its oral use. The native Swahili people continued to increase in number. Due to this increase, the British established a system which weakened Kiswahili and native language speakers politically, bearing in mind the relationship between language and politics (Mutahi 1980, Osundare 1981, Gorman 1974). But despite this foreign incursion, Kiswahili speaking population persisted and ultimately triumphed when independence fighters like Ngala, Muliro and Kenyatta used it to unite Kenyans. Thus, as the political trauma of the British colonisation of Kenya wore away in the 1960s, political events in Kenya favoured the development of Kiswahili,

At the beginning of British Colonial rule in Kenya at the end of the 19th century, there was minimal contact between master and servant when the English speaker was the master and the Kiswahili speaker was the servant. The master forced himself to learn the servant's language because the attitude was that there were so few Kenyans who were able to speak English. This was however because of the British colonial policy that linguistically made Kiswahili the language of the rank and file while on the other hand English had been



introduced in Kenya as a language of a few people. English, therefore, unconsciously succeeded in establishing itself as a language necessary in the accomplishment of ambitious undertakings.

When Kenya attained independence in 1963, Kenyans now saw the importance of choosing between English and Kiswahili. It was at this time of independence that Kenya's first Independence fighters like Kenyatta encouraged Kenyans to use Kiswahili as their national language. Long before that, Christian missionaries were preaching to Kenyans in vernacular languages or Kiswahili but not in English. But all the while, an important Kiswahili literature had continued to grow throughout Kenya. And even so, to the people in power (colonialists) during this period before independence, the attitude was that the use of Kiswahili meant lack of status. Kiswahili was therefore regarded as the language of the common man.

Between 1887 and 1963, the British administrators managed to force a complete cultural and linguistic turnover in present day Kenya. The British sought to replace the existing Arabised Muslim culture of the coastal Kenyans and establish their own. During this colonial period English was attitudinally linked to the British as a symbol of social prestige. Kenyans had a love and esteem for English. The motivation of Kenyans in acquiring English nevertheless remained instrumental rather than integrative. Kenyans only hoped to use it to get access to material benefits accruing from knowledge of the language. This is the reason why the attitude of Kenyan independence fighters towards English during the British colonial period is complex and can only be described as love-hate relationship. Although there was a struggle against British domination during their entire rule in present day Kenya, the English language carried connotations of good education and social prestige for those who were lucky to get access to it. And these connotations appear to underlie whatever 'love' attitude there is for English in Kenya today.

Thus, from 1887 to 1963, attitudes of Kenyans towards English were always positive. Before the advent of the British administrators in Kenya in 1887, the chief language of communication in the country and even beyond was Kiswahili. When the British took control of Kenya, very many of the local inhabitants knew Kiswahili for it was already a lingua franca in East and Central Africa. The coming in of the British changed the language situation in Kenya. English became the colony's official language whereas Kiswahili was unofficially the colony's lingua franca; and vernaculars were used in their respective areas.

As it has already been stated elsewhere in this paper, language stratification in Kenya therefore saw the functioning of English as Kenya's official language and Kiswahili as a "silent" national lingua franca. All the indigenous languages were treated as ethnic and tribal languages and so were on the lowest social level. In education, these tribal languages were kept at a low educational level, that is lower primary schools, and Kiswahili remained an important indigenous school language up to the end of primary schooling (

Gorman 1974). English only came as a compulsory school subject from the Intermediate school through High school, a policy which remained more or less the same until the time Kenya gained her political Independence in 1963 (see The Beecher committee's recommendations of 1950). Initially welcomed by Kenyans as liberators from the Arab slavery, the British also came to be seen as oppressors. Kenyan attitudes towards the English language during the years just before independence reflected this change in their attitudes towards the British. But even during this period before independence, Kenyan behaviour towards English continued, by and large, as before. This is because Kenya liberators used the language to negotiate for their country's independence from the British. So Kenyans continued to study English and to use it to negotiate for independence from the British because they had no viable alternative.

The East African Royal Commission report, The Report of the Work of the Special Centre of 1957, The Beecher Committee recommendations of 1950, The Ten Year Plan for the Development of Education of 1948 and The Commission of Higher Education in East Africa of 1937 show that the British colonialists in Kenya emphasised the use of English among the indigenous Kenyan elite because they knew the importance of language as a factor in empire building. The British in colonial Kenya decided to have English as a common linguistic thread to sew their colony together. The premium that was placed on the English language made Kenyans to generally treat and view this language as better than any other in Kenya. It is because of this psychological factor that Kenyans had an attitude that English was a better instrument of power as opposed to Kiswahili and other indigenous Kenyan languages.

As early as 1919, people of present day Kenya had an attitude that English could be used as a passport into the political and administrative arena ( Gorman 1974:406). The first Kenyans to go to the legislative council were people who were schooled and who were at least knowledgeable in English. It was only by knowing English that Kenyans could comprehend debates in the legislative council. In this case, Kenyans who could not speak English were therefore more likely to vote than to be voted in. Kenyans who could speak Kiswahili were therefore reduced to obeying the law than to take part in its making. Therefore, knowledge or lack of knowledge of the English language made some Kenyans unequal citizens. Those Kenyans who had knowledge of English were perceived to be economically, socially and politically better off; and indeed they were, as opposed to those with the knowledge of Kiswahili and other indigenous Kenyan languages.

But in spite of the fact that a majority of the pioneering Kenyan elite who were schooled in English had behaviour associated with Englishmen, nothing binds people more closely together than a common language (see sentiments by the Headmaster of Arab High School in Mombasa in Whiteley 1974:406). It is because of this knowledge about linguistic bond that the pioneering Kenyan elite had language attitudes that emphasised Kiswahili, for to them it formed a link with the rest of the Kenyans. Therefore Kiswahili and other indigenous languages were retained and used in Kenya during the British colonial period because they had both sentimental and spiritual value for Kenyans. These pioneering



Kenyan elite did not want to appear to be alienated from their fellow citizens. The alienation would separate Kenyan elite class from their own people.

In the former British colonies like Kenya, the British colonial policy and attitude towards African languages was what can be described as 'benevolent tolerance (Awoniyi 1982:24). In some respects, the British administrators encouraged the development of African languages and the British government provided training in her institutions like universities for outstanding and willing students. European researchers like Westermann and Meinhof researched into Kiswahili and other African languages. The British administrators also fostered the development of African languages by encouraging their teaching in schools,

But despite the fact that the British administration in Kenya made efforts to make Kenyan native languages appear worthwhile by encouraging their usage, the then native Kenyans themselves despised African native languages(Sindiga 1977).

The reasons for the Kenyans having negative attitudes towards the native languages were as follows:

- i.) During the said British colonial period, many Kenyans had attitudes that erroneously equated formal education with the ability to speak and write English only (Sindiga 1977:4, Muthiani 1986). Therefore when they were told that their native Kenyan languages were as good as English, the Kenyans felt cheated, for to them English was the only language that could make them match their colonial mentors in respects like social advancement.
- ii.) During most of the British colonial era in Kenya, it paid to study English rather than Kenyan native languages like Kiswahili, Kikuyu or Luluhya. The attitude Kenyans had was that English, unlike the native languages, was the passport to the white-collar jobs and other respected posts in politics, administration, trade and commerce, and even the church (see Sindiga 1977: 3). This is particularly true because only those Kenyans who could read and write like Kenyatta, Ngala and OgingaOdinga held these important societal positions that were otherwise meant for the British colonial masters.
- iii.) Psychologically, Kenyans in colonial Kenya had attitudes that considered the speaking of English prestigious. Some of the Kenyans who went to Britain for studies came back with British women for wives and this made them to become linguistically alienated from their own, but to the rest of the Kenyans this was not a problem for they were all educated through the English language.
- iv.) There were some missionaries and colonial administrators who 'poisoned the minds of native Kenyans as regards the speaking, learning and even teaching of native Kenyan languages . They told Kenyans that native Kenyan languages were uncouth and primitive and so were not worthy of academic analysis and study. Therefore there arose some kind of language attitude that manifested inferiority complex among Kenyans. This created a negative attitude towards Kenyan mother tongues in colonial Kenya.

- v.) The manner in which vernacular languages were taught in Kenya made some Kenyans discouraged and to have negative attitudes towards them. A language like Kiswahili was standardised by foreigners without the involvement of native Kiswahili speakers (Chiraghdin and Mnyampala 1977; Abdallahwa Khalid 1977). The same foreigners taught the standardised form of the language to native Kiswahili speakers. This in itself created some kind of language conflict. Furthermore, most of the dialects that were used to teach languages like Luluhya had not been standardised and so this created some language conflict on the part of those who were taught Luluhya given the fact that the Abaluhya people are a unity in diversity. This kind of teaching of Kenyan vernacular languages discouraged many would-be students of Kenyan vernacular languages. Some of the people taught Kenyan native languages made up their minds that their own languages were too difficult to study. Some of these Kenyans would complain about orthography, tone marks, grammar and pronunciation. This was basically an attitude of mind on language issues.

The teachers of English or those who were knowledgeable in English resented Kenyan languages. The school authorities discouraged students from speaking vernacular languages while on the school compound. Whoever spoke in his or her mother tongue would be given what was popularly known as a 'disk' and this led to some kind of fine or penalty on the part of the speaker. This situation encouraged English in Kenya. This was the language attitude up to the time Kenya gained her independence from the British.

During the European colonial period in Kenya, the British colonialists initiated a kind of language attitude that can be described as linguistic brainwashing. They introduced English to a few Kenyans. This introduction of English to only a handful of Kenyans made the membership of these Kenyans in their traditional Kenyan setting dramatically changed. The British colonial masters modified the social structure of these few Kenyans in that they became a kind of bridge between the British colonial masters and the majority of Kenyans who were not schooled in English. This societal modification in the membership group made these "lucky" Kenyans to suddenly find themselves in a position of power and grew to like their new place in Kenyan life.

But the kind of language attitude that favoured English did not last. English exposed the 'educated' Kenyans to revolutionary literature. The literature made the English speaking Kenyans know that the entire British colonial system was bad. They, therefore, sought to come up with a new Kenyan society that would be morally uplifting and harmonizing. These educated Kenyans decided to forget about the intellectual and ideological rewards that English afforded them. The English speaking Kenyans sought personal and emotional satisfaction as Kenyans. These Kenyan elite wanted political independence from the British colonial masters. Political Independence would not be complete without linguistic independence. Kiswahili being Kenya's lingua franca then played a very important part in Kenya's independence struggle; it was the language used to mobilise Kenyans. Here, a pattern of self-criticism on the part of the Kenyan elite was extended to every aspect of the

Kenyan daily life. This led to the political, cultural, and linguistic rebirth of Kenya. On the linguistic level, Kenyatta declared Kiswahili Kenya's national language after Independence. This state of affairs reinforces the thesis that a person's group membership is one of the most significant sources of his or her language attitudes.

### **Conclusion**

Language use and language attitudes in colonial Kenya bear a lot of similarities. Language use and language attitudes in colonial Kenya differ only in given periods. The roles played by Arabic, Swahili, English and other vernacular languages in use are what shaped the language attitudes of Kenyans in colonial Kenya. The leading question, thus, was which languages were used in what domain, when, and with what socio-economic implications?

In this paper, while language attitude controversies have mostly focused on issues relating to English and Kiswahili, mother tongues and other languages in use in Kenya have not enjoyed much prominence. It has been noted that getting appointment in government service needed knowledge of English but not other languages in use in Kenya during the colonial period. The result of this state of affairs was that English was held in high esteem at the expense of the indigenous languages in Kenya. The implication of this act on the indigenous languages was devastating as Kenyans themselves became contemptuous of their indigenous languages. The attitude of the native Kenyans towards their indigenous languages was therefore negative because they wanted English as it guaranteed them opportunity for white-collar jobs and good conditions of life.

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