



Language ideologies, policies and practices within the multilingual Kenyan context

David Barasa

Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology / Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz

Article History

Received: 10.08.2023

Revised: 18.08.2023

Accepted: 06.09.2023

Published: 08.09.2023

Keywords

Education

English

Kenya

Kiswahili

Language Policy

How to cite:

Barasa, D. (2023). Language ideologies, policies and practices within the multilingual Kenyan context. *Journal of Linguistics, Literary, and Communication Studies*, 2(1), 55-62.

Copyright © 2023 The Author



Abstract

Kenya is linguistically diverse with approximately 66 native and 8 non-native languages; out of which 33 are developing, 15 are vigorous, 2 are in trouble and 4 dying. Generally, actively used native languages in Kenya have been on the decline due to a number of forces such as colonisation, globalisation and language policies. This presentation focuses on educational language policy implementation in Kenya and illustrates its effects on the use of “minority languages”. The study establishes that language policies in Kenya are ad hoc declarations that have had negligible impact on the use of native African languages in schools and other formal settings. The policies greatly favor English following the logic of pre-colonial practices of assimilation and exclusion. English and Kiswahili, the regional lingua franca, remain the most prominent languages in formal education, overshadowing over fifty native African languages spoken in Kenya. English continues to be used in classroom and formal settings even in areas where native languages are dominantly spoken. Those who advocate for the use of English view it as a language of science and technology and that which propels one to a higher social status. English is also promoted as a language that helps to ease mobility within and beyond the East African region.

Introduction

There are between 44 and 74 languages spoken in Kenya today. Out of these, about 66 are native while 8 are non-native. The native languages spoken in Kenya belong to the broad language families, that is, Bantu, Nilotic and Cushitic groups. The of classification is an analysis into linguistic types in which each linguistic family is distinguished by a set of structural characteristics (Greenberg, 1948). The Bantu languages comprises of 37 languages while the Nilotic and Cushitic families have 17 and 12 languages each, respectively. A list of the languages in the three main language groups is presented in Table (1) below.



Table 1: Kenya’s native languages (adapted from Eberhard et al. 2019)

Bantu	Nilotic	Cushitic
Kiswahili, Gikuyu, Ekegusii	Ateso, Turkana, Kalenjin,	Rendille, Somali, Borana,
Akamba, Kiambu, Kimeru,	Dholuo, Maasai, Keiyo,	Gabra, Aweer, Burji,
Kipokomo, Kigiryama, LuBukusu,	Kipsigis, Markweeta, Nandi,	Daasanach, Dahalo, El
Chichonyi, Chidigo, Chiduruma,	Okiek, Omotik, Pokot,	Molo, Orma, Waata,
Dawida, Gichuka, Kimiiru,	Sabaot, Samburu, Suba, Terik,	Yaaku
Kipfokomo, Kitharaka, Kiwilwana,	Tugen	
Kuria, Luidakho, Lukabaras,		
Lulogooli, Lutachoni, Mwimbi-		
Muthambi, Lunyala, Olukhayo,		
Olumarachi, Olumarama, Olunyole,		
Olusamia, Olushisa, Olutsotso,		
Oluwanga, Sagalla, Singa, Taveta		

Besides, most languages presented in Table (1) are often mentioned as dialects of larger language groups. Studies have shown that the so-called dialects are in most cases separate languages, linguistically speaking (see, e.g. Kanana 2011). For instance, OluLuhya is said to consist of 17 dialects, that is, Lubukusu, Luidakho, Olwisukha, Lukabaras, Lulogooli, Lutachoni, Lunyala, Lukhayo, Lumarachi, Lumarama, Lunyole, Lusamia, Lushisa (Kisa), Lutsotso, Oluwanga, Lutiriki and Lutura. Regrettably, at the present, there is no dialect continua study that proves whether what is clustered as dialects of OluLuhya are indeed languages or dialects. Another example is Kalenjin which is mentioned to consist of 11 dialects: Keiyo, Kipsigis, Markweeta, Nandi, Okiek, Pokoot, Sabaot, Markweeta, Sabaot, Terik, Tugen. The two examples show the need for clarification on this matter; thus, the focus of future studies on Kenya’s language classification should provide a better picture of Kenya’s languages and their dialects. The arguments on apportioning dialect tags on languages will not be expounded further in the present discussion.

In addition to the languages listed in Table (1) above, there is the Kenyan Sign language as recognized by the (2010, Constitution, Official Languages of Parliament, Article 120(2)). Also, there are a number of non-native languages spoken in Kenya. The non-native languages include: English, French, Chinese, Oman, Gujarati, Konkani, Nubi and Punjabi.

A majority of native Kenyan languages can be said to be endangered based on the nine core factors that help to assess and understand the language situation of endangered languages established by UNESCO. The most outstanding ones being lack of intergenerational transmission, loss of existing language domains, lack of material for language education and identity, and unfavourable language government and institutional language policies (cf UNESCO, 2013).

Based on the factors listed above, there is a serious threat facing minority languages such as Tachoni, Terik, El Molo, Ogiek, Omotik, Bong’om, Sogoo, Suba, Waata, Daasanach, Aweer, Singa and Yaaku. Most of these threats are from dominant native Kenyan languages. Contrary to majority opinion; English and to some extent French and Chinese are spreading in Kenya, but mostly as second languages. But, as Brenzinger (2006) pointed out, small African languages are currently still not endangered by these ex-colonial languages but tend to be replaced by other major African languages.



This holds true for a number of languages, such as Tachoni and Suba, where there are some indications of loss of speakers through shift to Lubukusu and to Dholuo, respectively. In general, there is a widespread tendency of speakers of minority languages to shift towards Kiswahili, English or other dominant native Kenyan languages (Barasa 2017). As a result of the shift to dominant languages by minority language speakers, there is lack of intergenerational transfer.

Most minority speakers whose repertoire covers more than one language tend to prefer English Kiswahili or other dominant languages as these is deemed to have higher social standing within the social context (cf. Barasa, S. 2015). Hence, the languages are no longer used in social domains such as market transactions, communication at home, village public meetings and in religious activities.

Literacy for minority language speakers is mostly in English or dominant native Kenyan languages. The lack of literacy material in minority languages as well as unfavorable language policies have led to neglect and thinning of these languages. The next section provides an overview of Kenya's education system and the language policy and practice in Kenya.

Kenya's Education System

In this section, we provide an overview of Kenya's education system in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial period. After we, focus on the language policy and practice that was pronounced during the post-colonial period.

Education in Pre-colonial period

In pre-colonial period, each ethnic group had its own education system. For each of the numerous ethnic groups, indigenous education was a process of inculcating the youth with survival skills and preparing them to assume certain responsibilities in the community (Omulando & Shiundu, 1992). The education system also reflected cultural and economic practices of the community. The evolution of culture and economic practices were based on climatic conditions, topography and ecological conditions.

Using the community's language, the aims of the communities were well articulated, stored and preserved in the oral traditions of the society. Indigenous education, during this period, aimed at producing individuals who were independent, self-reliant, mindful of other peoples' welfare and spiritually whole. The education system also communicated the morals of the community community such as honesty, courage, kindness and respect that transmitted through stories with legendary heroes and stock characters (e.g. *nakhamuna* 'hare', *irimu ria nyakonde* 'ogre', *wamahiti* 'hyena', use of narratives, songs, dances, poetry, riddles and tongue twisters; Observation - imitation among others. The choice of subject matter and teaching strategies were determined by the age of learners. The success in this system of education was determined by ability to adapt and adjust to their new roles such farming, medicine, prophesy etc.

Education and language policy in colonial period

Formal western education was first established in 1844 in Rabai, near Mombasa by Christian missionaries (Sherfield, 1973). The western education aimed at spreading Christianity and bringing western civilization to Kenya. The education also aimed at training manpower that would provide cheap labour to the colonial structures.

Unfortunately, the formal western education did not reflect the specific cultural needs of the local societies. Instead, it aimed at replacing indigenous cultural values with those of colonialists that would serve their own needs and interests. Basically, this form of education belittled the African culture. In some cases, they even outlawed some local cultural practices (Cheru, 1985). The education aimed to



teach the value of colonial government and make the learners remain subservient to colonial government.

The colonial government did not actively promote the use of the English in the colony. The colonial government policy was always inchoate and vacillating such that there were no occasions that measures were put in place to promote or deter its learning (Wendo, 2009). The colonial administration was apprehensive over the teaching of English to Africans on realization that such teaching interfered with the goal of maintaining a sub-ordinate class of workers. Wendo further notes that such denials inadvertently provided a stimulus for Kenyans to learn English so as to be employed in white collar jobs. Thus, the preferred medium of communication for the elite during this period was English.

The first active enactment of language use was presented at the United Missionary Conference in 1909. From the conference, which was spearheaded by the missionaries, native languages were adopted in the first three classes of primary school, Kiswahili in two of the middle classes in primary school, while English was to be used in the rest of the classes up to the university (Gorman, 1974). The native language orthographies were developed based on the Latin alphabet. In 1924, the Phelps-Stokes Commission recommended the abolishment of Kiswahili in the education curriculum except in areas where it was spoken as a first language. Native languages were to be taught in early primary school classes while English was to be taught from upper primary all the way to the university. The Zanzibar dialect of Kiswahili was standardized by the Interterritorial Language committee in 1930. Generally, the colonial language policy was fluidly enacted. Between 1950 and 1951, the Education Department Reports, that is, the Beecher's 1949, Binn's 1952 and Drogheda Commission of 1952 recommended the use of English in lower primary to be taught alongside other native languages (Gorman, 1974). Kiswahili was to be used only in areas where it was spoken as the first language. Further, the Prato-Hutasoit Commission recommended the use of English as a medium of instruction in the school system. This consolidated the hegemony of English.

Contrary to the long held postulation that it was the objective of the colonial government to promote English language in the colony, the colonial language policy was always inchoate and vacillating such that there were occasions that measures were put in place to promote or deter its learning. However, such denial inadvertently provided a stimulus for Kenyans to learn English considering that they had already taken cognisance of the fact that it was the launching pad for white collar jobs.

Language policy and practice in post-colonial Kenya: 1963 to present

According to Spolsky (2009), there are four major factors that determine language policy of a nation state: the sociolinguistic ecology (language practices), a set of beliefs (language ideology) relating language to national identity, the effects of globalization (the pull towards international languages, especially English), and pressure for attention to the rights of indigenous or migrant linguistic minorities. These factors have shaped the current language practices.

From independence, there has been continuous deliberate neglect of native languages by Kenya's education policy makers. At a broader level, the practicality of the language policies to education and other key sectors of government activities are discussed in two subsections below. The first subsection is an overview of Kenya's language policy while the second one is a case of challenges and possibilities borne from language practice.

Kenya's language education policy

Like most countries that got independence from the 1950s, Kenya adopted the colonizer's education policies in general and language policies in particular (cf. Spolsky, 2009). Kenya's language policy is



based on the colonial language policy, which recognised English as the official language, that was adopted following the European scramble for power in Africa towards the end of the 19th Century (Kibui, 2014). In 1963, Kenya adopted English as the official language to be used in all formal sectors while Kiswahili served as the country's national language.

A number of changes on the language policy since 1963 follows recommendations of various commissions formed by the government. The different commissions recommended a trilingual system in education where African languages were to be used in non-formal communication in relevant locations where the languages were dominantly spoken (Barasa 2016). Kiswahili and English were proposed for use in urban areas.

The Ominde as well as the Gachathi commission in 1964 and 1976, respectively, recommended the use of English from primary school to university level. Though Kiswahili and other African languages were to be emphasized in the education system at different levels, they still continued to receive inferior status compared to English (Kibui, 2014: 92). The Mackay Commission in 1981 made a favorable approval of Kiswahili. The commission recommended that Kiswahili becomes a compulsory and examinable language in both primary and secondary education (Kibui, 2014). This recommendation received approval from the government and was put in practice in Kenya's school curriculum and whence both languages have been subjects of examination at the end of primary and secondary school cycle. Nevertheless, English still maintained its top status as the main language of instruction in schools throughout the education cycle.

Kenya's constitution (The Republic of Kenya 2010) provides an avenue for linguistic diversity by stipulating that the state shall develop, promote and protect the diversity of languages of the people of Kenya. Kiswahili is recognised as the national and official language whereas English is the official language. In addition to the two languages, the constitution also recognizes the more than 42 languages spoken in Kenya, sign language and braille. It is yet to be assessed as to whether these constitutional requirements have improved the status of the African languages spoken in Kenya. Generally, the implementation of this proposal remains a challenge despite subsequent recommendations by the other commissions that supported the use of indigenous languages in early years of schooling.

The continued marginalization of many African languages as spoken in Kenya has contributed to a linguistic shift. As noted above, there is a widespread tendency for speakers of minority languages to shift towards Kiswahili, English or other dominant languages. The endangered language speakers do not have numerical power and resources to exert their language; hence, like many other minority language speakers in Kenya, they are consistently excluded in the allocation of resources to develop and promote their language. And as pointed out earlier, some children from parents acquire either Kiswahili or English as their first language; meaning that there is lack of intergenerational transfer of these languages.

Although most native languages feature in electronic and social media, English and Kiswahili are the most widespread in electronic media (see, e.g. Barasa, S. 2015). English and Kiswahili are predominant in all public settings and have all, but marginalized other non-dominant languages spoken in Kenya (Barasa, 2016). This has been aggravated by language policies that do not reflect the linguistic diversity of Kenya. The discussion in the next section will thus make a brief assessment of the impact of language policies in Kenya's linguistic landscape.

Challenges and possibilities



After decades of neglect and unfavorable language policies, Kenya's Constitution 2010 emphasized the importance of preserving native languages. However, these has not been followed by provision of funding to support speakers interested in establishing language programmes aimed at preserving and revitalising the native languages; especially those that are endangered. More recent literature indicates that insufficient resources have hampered implementation of first-language based education (see e.g. Heugh & Bwanika, 2015). Inadequate financial and intellectual support from governments has further hindered efforts directed at developing African languages. In most urban centres, native languages are not are not languages of wider communication. This has left minority languages to suffer from neglect within the government's operational language policy framework.

Kiswahili and English continue to be the dominant languages in Kenya. They are used formal setups, politics, courts, education system, television, school books and newspapers. The dominance of English, a foreign language, is partly due to colonial heritage and also for reasons of global interaction and mobility. They are considered 'prestigious' by a majority of citizens who choose increasingly to bring up their children in these languages at the expense of their own. English is prevalent not only in the formal education sector, but it is also the language of the media.

Surveys conducted by Barasa (2017) suggest that the young generation is gradually shifting to English and other dominant African languages. There is also a significant cross-cultural contact as community boundaries are shrinking day by day within the Kenyan context. Thus, the survival of most native languages spoken in Kenya is thus not entirely depended on legislation but on the speakers, who value their language and their culture.

Apart from Kiswahili which is intended to facilitate the East African unity and trade, scholars in Kenya have argued that it is not possible to use any of the African languages as medium of instruction in schools at the national level because of the fear that it would fuel ethnic rivalry. A compromise to this fear, whether real or unknown, is to encourage multilingualism in all sectors of the government whenever it is possible; where official and national languages are used alongside with native languages so that marginal communities can be able to participate and contribute for large part of the society. This because, multilingualism does not create differences but rather facilitates integration on multi-lingual and multi-cultural basis in line with principles of democracy, tolerance and cultural co-existence (Prah, 2010).

Some of the solutions include recording native speakers, to capture, e.g. the traditional oral storytelling, proverbs and songs that tells something about the language structure and the people's culture. The recordings can be put on internet; Endangered Language Archive (ELAR) or on social platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram to make available the native languages to the young generation who have access and preference to these kinds of media. This, hopefully, preserve the different aspects of the language and encourage the use of these languages.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the language policies in both Kenya and Uganda are ad hoc declarations that have had negligible impact on the use of native African languages in schools and other formal settings. The policies greatly favor English following the logic of pre-colonial practices of assimilation and exclusion. English and Kiswahili remain the most prominent languages in formal education, overshadowing over fifty native African languages spoken in Kenya.

English continues to be used in classroom and formal settings even in areas where native languages are dominantly spoken. Those who advocate for the use of English view it as a language of science



and technology and that which propels one to higher social status. English is also promoted as a language that helps to ease mobility within and beyond the East African region. In line with the dynamic world, a more convenient means of promoting the native African languages is to encourage multilingualism where English and Kiswahili are used side by side with other African languages. Native African language speakers in general and minority language speakers in particular should be accorded the opportunity to learn and develop their language resources through operationalized language policies and financial support from the Kenya government.

References

- Barasa, D. (2017). *Ateso Grammar: a descriptive account of an Eastern Nilotic Language*. Muenchen: Lincom GmbH.
- Barasa, D. (2016). Iteso's Language Repertoire and Use Patterns. In Andrea Hollington (ed.) *Multilingualism in the Global South and beyond* (pp. 6-8). University of Cologne: Global South Studies Center Cologne.
- Barasa, D. 2015. Inflectional forms of tense and aspect in Ateso. *The University of Nairobi Journal of Language and Linguistics*. 4, 82-102.
- Barasa, S. N. (2015). *Ala! Kumbe! "Oh my! Is it so?"*: Multilingualism controversies in East Africa. In Dick Smakman and Patrick Heinrich (eds.) *Globalising sociolinguistics: Challenging and expanding theory* (pp. 39-53). London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Brenzinger, M. (2007). Language Endangerment Throughout the World. In M. Brenzinger (ed.), *Language Diversity Endangered* (pp. ix-xvii). Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Eberhard, D.M., Gary, F.S. & Charles D. F. (eds.). (2019). *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. Twenty-second edition. Dallas, Texas: SIL International. Online Version: <http://www.ethnologue.com>
- Gacheche, K. (2010). *Challenges in implementing a mother tongue-based language-in-education policy: Policy and practice in Kenya*. In POLIS Journal vol.4.
- Gorman, T. P. (1974). "The Development of Language Policy in Kenya with Particular Reference to Education System." In Whiteley, W. H. (Ed.) *Language in Kenya*. Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 397-446.
- Government of Uganda.1992. *The Government White Paper on Education*. Entebbe: Ministry of Education & Sports.
- Greenberg, J. H. (1948). The Classification of African languages. *American Anthropologist*, 50(1), 24-30.
- Heugh, K. & Bwanika, M. (2015). *Implementing local languages medium education in the early primary curriculum of Ugandan schools: A literacy and adult basic education (LAFE) intervention in six districts in North and North West Uganda*. Kampala: Literacy and Adult Basic Education.
- Kaji, S. (2013). Monolingualism via multilingualism: A case study of language use in the West Ugandan Town of Hoima. *African Study Monographs*. 34 (1): 1-25.
- Kanana, F. E. 2011. Selected Proceedings of the 40th Annual Conference on African Linguistics, ed. Eyamba G. Bokamba et al., 190-205. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project.
- Karp, I. (1996). "Iteso." Encyclopedia of World Cultures. *Encyclopedia.com*. 2 Dec. 2015. <http://www.encyclopedia.com>.
- Kibui, A. (2014). Language policy in Kenya and the new constitution for vision 2030. *International Journal of Educational Science and Research*, 4(5): 89-98.
- Kirunda, R. (2015). Language in education in Uganda: The policy, the actors and the practices. A case of the Urban District of Kampala. *Indian Journal of Research*, 4(5): 190-193.
- Nakayiza J. (2012). *The sociolinguistics of multilingualism in Uganda*. Unpublished Doctoral thesis. University of London.



- Obondo, M.A. (1997). Bilingual Education in Africa: An Overview. In Cummins, J. & Corson, D. (eds.). *Encyclopaedia of Language and Education: Bilingual Education*, 5: 25-32. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Otaala, L. (1981). Phonological and Semantic Aspects of Ateso Derivational Verbal Morphology. Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Nairobi.
- Piper, B. (2010). *Uganda Early Grade Reading Assessment Findings Report: Literacy Acquisition and Mother Tongue*. RTI International and Makerere University Institute for Social Research.
- Prah, K. K. (2010). Multilingualism in urban Africa: bane or blessing: *Journal of multilingual discourses*, 5(2) 169-182.