Can a Foreign Languages be a National Medium?

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1. INTRODUCTION

> 'The forces of conservation and
> change (may) have to be reconciled,
> and stability achieved, by deliberate
> policy decisions. It might, for
> example, be decided to have the mother
> tongue used as a medium of instruction
> in the primary school so as to ensure
> that the child's educational development
> is rooted in his own cultural heritage,
> and then transfer to a foreign language
> as the medium for secondary education'
> (Criper and Widdowson, 1975)

The situation described in this passage is approximately
that which has prevailed in Tanzania for the past
twenty years, except (i) that the terms 'authenticity'
and 'modernity' (e.g. Whiteley, 1971:156) might be
more apt than 'conservation'

might be more apt than 'conservation'
and 'change' since in Tanzania the 'authentic' language
- Swahili - is, or has been, the one associated with
change, while use of the language of modernity - English -
may be, or has been, more readily associated with

certain sort of conservation; (ii) Swahili,
though the language of all, is mother tongue, in a
strict sense, for relatively few; (iii) the
distribution of educational functions between Swahili
(primary and teacher training) and English (secondary
and tertiary) is not, and never was intended to be,
'stable'; and (iv) the use of the term 'foreign' in
this context begs a rather crucial language planning
question which it is my purpose in this paper to

examine. In undertaking this examination, I shall address first the general issues, then the particular case of Tanzania.

2. LANGUAGE STATUS AND LANGUAGE MEDIUM

2.1. What should a national medium of education do?

It is noted by Bull (1964) that 'while getting educated is a personal matter, in contrast, providing education is a social enterprise.' A medium of education, therefore, as an essential part of the larger process, must (a) enable learners to get educated and (b) enable society to educate. In the former capacity it should, ideally, adequately fulfil each of the four functions of language for the individual described by Le Page (1964). These are (i) communion, (ii) expression, (iii) conceptualisation and (iv) communication. Getting educated is not just a matter of receiving and imparting information (iv), but also of learning to think and thinking (iii), reacting demonstratively to experience (ii) and relating to teachers and fellow learners (i). As a medium of educating, it should (i) make attainable the educational objectives - political, cultural, economic, ideological, religious - of society; (ii) do so universally, and equally for all; and (iii) do so efficiently and economically.

2.2 If so, what should a national medium of education be?

We may usefully distinguish (in line with Stern, 1983:9) between those characteristics of a language which are relatively objective (or constant) and those which are subjective (or variable). The objective characteristics required of a medium of education fall under the general heading of stadardisation. The language should be 'codified' (to minimise non-functional variation), 'elaborated' (to enable it to cope with as wide a range of functions as required) and 'written' (so that people should have something to read in it). In general, the higher up the education system a language is to be used, the more 'standardised' it needs to be.

The subjective characteristics required of a medium
of instruction are: (i) that it should be accepted
by all concerned (parents, teachers, pupils and society at
large) as suitable for its assigned role and of such
functional importance as to be worth the effort of
acquiring. This is the attitudinal factor and, as
frequently observed, has an important bearing on
motivation; (ii) that it should be teachable to the
required standard. This is dependent partly on (i),
partly on the availability of competent teachers,
proficient in the language and equipped with suitable
methods and materials; and partly on: (iii) that the
language should be experienced in use. This 'experience'
should, if possible, be prior to as well as concurrent
with the use as medium, and the 'use' should involve
functions additional to the function as medium. The
most energetic arguments for the necessity of such
experience have been made in connection with the case
for the use of the mother tongue - the language most
intimately experienced - in the early years of schooling
(UNESCO, 1953, etc) but the experience of a 'natural
language environment' is a demonstrable pre-requisite
for 'optimal language acquisition' (Burt and Dulay,
1981) and as such is plainly what is called for whenever
progress in the other spheres of education is immediately
dependent on satisfactory acquisition of the language as
medium. Burt and Dulay define a natural language
environment as one which exists 'whenever the focus of the
speaker is on the content of the communication rather than
on language itself' as for example in seeking directions or
listening to the news (cf Gorman's 'situation of
interaction and reception' in Whiteley (1971)).
This is the kind of setting, or 'condition', Which in
Krashen's terms, favours 'acquisition' - informal, free,
undirected, naturalistic - over classroom 'learning'
(Stern, 1983:392).

2.3 When is a language 'foreign'?

Any language which is non-indigenous to a particular
speech community may be called foreign. However, 'the
term is usually applied only to languages spoken outside
the boundaries in which one lives, or, more crucially,
to languages learnt only for communication with those
living outside one's own community and not used for
everyday communication within one's speech community'
(Brumfit and Roberts, 1983). A language which is
used within the speech community, but which is not the
mother tongue of its speakers, in a 'second' language.
The three most important possible functions of such a
language are (i) as a language of wider communication
between speakers of different vernaculars, (ii) as an
official language used in public administration, the law
and political activity, and (iii) as a language of
education (i.e. a medium). A language not fulfilling
the first or second of these functions but intended,
within the scope of some national language plan, to fulfil
the third, would be in a plainly anomolous position:
its use as medium underpinned by no second-language
function other than itself, and its status therefore,
effectively, from the point of view of the educational
system, that of a foreign, not a second, language. It is
this situation that I have in mind in asking:

2.4 Are there any a priori reasons for doubting the efficacy of a foreign language as a national medium?

Since it is improbable that a nation would select as its
national medium a non-standard foreign language, we may
direct our attention to the subjective characteristics
required. From 2.2 (above) we would be led to
hypothesise that a foreign language could be rendered
inefficacious as medium by (i) its not being accepted
(because it is 'foreign' - - it lacks authenticity - and
because, outside the educational system, it is
functionally unimportant); by (ii) its not being teachable
(because, by the nature of the situation, no strong

2.6 Can the predicted deficiences of a foreign language medium be planned for and overcome?

Since the predicted deficiences arise from the
subjective characteristics of foreign languages, not
those of second languages, a plausible strategy for
remedying the problems associated with a foreign
language medium could be as follows: create for the
foreign language a second-language-like environment so
that, in short, it becomes more accepted, more
teachable, more experienced in use. This solution,
however, may be (a) very costly (in time, money,
social effects) and (b) not practicable (because
of the persistence of attitudes and habits, and because
of underlying weaknesses in the educational system
as a whole).

3 ENGLISH MEDIUM IN TANZANIA

3.1 The status of English

A visitor to Tanzania in 1986 will see English (in the
daily newspaper, along shopping streets, on some
notices and signs) and could use it (in some shops,
hotels and public offices) but would not hear it spoken
between Tanzanians (except in the presence of
foreigners) even if he visited the University (unless
he happened to overhear a lecture or a seminar or a
departmental, faculty or senate meeting). In this
respect (leave aside the departmental meetings etc)
the visitor's experience in Tanzaniawould be more
similar to what he might encounter in Belgium or
Sweden than to his likely experience in Kenya or Uganda.

The broad sociolinguistic picture in Tanzania still,
it is true, fits approximately into the three-language
structure (Nida and Wonderly, 1971) of 'in-group
language' (the vernaculars), 'outgroup language'
(Swahili) and 'language of specialised information
(English), described by Whiteley as 'linguistic

trifocalism'; but as Whiteley points out (e.g. 1971:151)
there has been some reallocation of settings, largely at
the expense of English (but also at the expense of the
vernaculars) and in favour of Swahili, to the extent
that it has been frequently observed that, e.g.,
'English for us is becoming daily more of a foreign
language, spoken by very few people' (newspaper article
of 1967, quoted in Mlama and Matteru, 1978) or, a less
extreme view and probably closer to the true
situation, 'English is assuming a position somewhere
halfway between a second and a foreign language'
(Mbunda et al., 1980:294). A Handbook for English
Teachers, issued by the Institute of Education in
1969, observed: 'For the time being English is still
used as a medium of communication in Tanzania, although
on an ever decreasing scale, for a limited number of
purposes.' In 1986, except where contacts with
non-Swahili speakers are involved, and except in one
remaining major second-language function, these
purposes are virtually extinct. The remaining function
is: to be medium of secondary and higher education.

I shall not here explore the origins of this shift,
except to note that for the historian of sociolinguistic
change, the events of 1967 - the year of the Arusha
Declaration and of Education for Self-Reliance - provide a
fascinating focus of interest. The National Swahili
Council was established, for the purpose of promoting
Swahili in all spheres of national life. The Second
Vice-President declared that 'Swahili should be used for
all government business and the use of English or any
other foreign language unnecessarily is to cease forthwith'
(Mohamed, 1975). And Swahili was made the medium of
instruction throughout primary education (it had previously
been used in the first four years) with the clear
expectation and intention that it would eventually
replace English throughout the educational system. Voicing
the spirit which motivated these decisions, the Dean of
the Faculty of Law (no less - law being perhaps the
least mutable domain of language use) had written:

'In order to unite the people under a single language
tied in with their common culture it was essential
that Swahili should become the national language in <u>every</u>
aspect of national life' (Weston, 1965 - my emphasis).

3.2. Collapse of English as effective medium

The period from the mid 60s to the mid 80s during which
the shift in status of English in Tanzania from second to
foreign language has been taking place has also witnessed a
a catastrophic decline in standards of English in the
educational system leading to the virtual collapse of
English as a viable medium of education.

3.2.1 The present standard of English

The most recent, and the most systematic, account of
present standards of English is contained in a Report
prepared for the Tanzanian Ministry of Education and the
British Overeaseas Development Administration (Criper
and Dodd, 1982). On the basis of a heavily graded
cloze proficiency test which was administered to 2410
pupils at all levels of the educational system the
authors made the following observations:

> Throughout their **secondary** careers little or
> no other subject information (i.e. apart
> from English) is getting across to about
> 50% of the pupils in our sample. Only
> about 10% of form IVs are at a level at
> which one might expect English medium
> education to <u>begin</u>. (p.14).

> Only a handful of pupils are at a level
> adequate for English medium education - 1% of
> Form I, and the same figure for Form IV.
> (p.23).

> The proportion of (Form V) pupils at level 'A'
> (nearing but not at independent reading level)
> is still small - 17% (p.14).

> (University) students' level of English is
> substantially below that required for
> university English medium study. (p.15).

> Less than 20% of the sample tested were at
> a level where they would find it easy to
> read even the simpler books required for
> their academic studies. (p.43).

> The current average level of those
> qualifying to teach, while higher than the
> level of those they will teach, is not very
> much higher. (p.15).

Though many people concerned with education in Tanzania
at present would probably respond to these statements
with renewed alarm and dismay, they might well not find
them particularly surprising, since the figures given,
though chilling enough, do little more than provide a
hitherto lacking exactness to the quantification of
the latest stage of a progressively deteriorating state
of affairs that has for long, and by many, been observed,
described and bemoaned (Mlama and Matteru, 1978; Hill,
1980, etc, etc.).

3.2.2. Causes and effects

These are not always easily distinguishable. Declining
standards, for example, are a consequence of the L2 -FL
shift and, in their turn, a further impetus to its
eventual completion. Broadly, however, the principal
causes of the present low level of English,
specifically at the secondary level, may be grouped as
follows:

(i) the low level of achievement at primary level. (For a
summary of reasons for this see Hill (1980), based on
Trappes-Lomax (1978).)

(ii) difficulties in the way of remedying this at
secondary level associated with (a) lack of learner
exposure to English except in class, 'the actual amount
of English that pupils in Form I to IV are exposed to
(being) more similar to the situation occurring in
countries where English is being taught as a foreign
language rather than as a medium of instruction or as a
second language' (Criper and Dodd p.35); (b) levels of
linguistic and methodological competence of many teachers —
though, at secondary level, by no means all - being
insufficient to cope with the overwhelming difficulties of
the situation; this in turn having a depressing effect
on morale; (c) shortages and other deficiencies of
materials.

(iii) the apparently short, but in fact indefinitely long,
life expectancy of English as medium. For almost twenty
years, it has been national policy to replace English by
Swahili medium at all education levels. Reaffirmations of

this policy, and plans for its implementation, have
been made at more or less regular intervals
- 1969, 1970, 1974, 1979, 1982 - the latest of these
being contained in the Report of the Recommendations of
the Presidential Commission on Education (sec. 4.1981).
This proposed 1985 and 1992 for, respectively, the
initiation and completion of the changeover, the
the object being 'to enable as many people as possible
to pursue their studies beyond the primary level without
the obstruction of a foreign language (p. 200: my
translation). A decade or so previously, 'the most
optimistic projections expect that by 1973 all subjects·
will be taught through the medium of Swahili up to
School Certificate level. This seems very unlikely, but
certainly by about 1976 nearly all pre-Form IV teaching
will be in Swahili' (Mbunda at al. 1980, written much
earlier). The consequence of this prolonged
indecisiveness - a classic case indeed of Whiteley's
'conflicting claims of authenticity and modernity' -
has been to drain all attempts to do something about
English (or language in education generally) of any
lasting vigour. There has been stability of a sort,

but the debilitating stability of tendencies in
unresolved opposition, not that of languages in a
harmonious state of functional complementarity.

As to effects, the decline in standards of English
has, more or less, resulted in the extinction of English
as a living medium of secondary (Form I to IV) education
(the situation at senior secondary and unversity levels,
however, because of the effects of selection, being far
less serious than this). 'Extinction' here covers both
degree of use and degree of usefulness.
(i) The prediction, quoted above, that Swahili would
certainly take over from English at secondary levesl has,
some years later than expected, come true, but in a way
that was certainly not expected at the time: 'A mixture
(of English and Swahili) is almost universally used,
the only exception being schools where the headmaster is

consciously and actively trying to ensure that English
is used for all purposes throughout the school. In
other schools, we estimate that perhaps up to 75% of
teaching, at any rate in Form I, is being done through
Swahili' (Criper and Dodd, p.34).
(ii) Were it not for the use of Swahili, 'it is hard to
see how any genuine education could take place at
secondary level' (Criper and Dodd, p.16). The research
of Mlama and Matteru (op.cit) showed plainly that pupils
did not understand their subjects as they should,
could express themselves adequately neither in speech
nor writing, and indeed were unable, many of them, to
participate in an English medium lesson at all,
avoiding the eye of the teacher if a question were asked
in English (but rushing to put up their hands, and
producing an intelligent answer, if the same question
were repeated in Swahili). Mlama and Matteru unequivocally
concluded that the time had come for the medium of
education to be (officially) changed. This has not,
however, been the decision of the Tanzanian government.

3.3. Remedial measures

Notwithstanding the recommendation of the Commission on
Education (quoted above) the Government has indicated
that the medium of education at secondary and tertiary
levels will continue to be English. It follows that
English medium has to be rehabilitated and, from this,
that standards of English must drastically and speedily be
raised. The Criper-Dodd Report contains proposals
(accepted by the Government) for achieving these ends:
  (i) to introduce, throughout the secondary system
        Form I to IV) a graded extensive reading schemes;
 (ii) to produce and implement a six-month
        immersion programme for the beginning of Form I,
        as a way of introducing English into subject
        teaching at an early stage;
(iii) to stimulate the use of English in the out-of-
        class school environment;
 (iv) to foster extra-curricular activities involving
        the use of English.

The rationale behind all of these proposals appears to
be the same: that the only way of restoring English at
secondary school to 'a level at which it could be
properly used as a medium of instruction' is for pupils
to receive 'a massive increase in their exposure to
English and their use of English' (Criper and Dodd).
Mlama and Matteru (op. cit. p. 31), in considering the
option of taking remedial measures, observe that
'though it is thought that using English as medium
helps students to know more English, investigation
shows that this is not so' (my translation). The Criper-Dodd
proposals, however, clearly go beyond this minimal remedy,
both qualitatively and quantitatively. They can be
summarised as an attempt to provide 'more formal
instruction' (i.e. more of it) - especially in (i) and
(ii) - and 'other measures' - especially in (iii) and (iv)
- 'compensating for the lack of environmental support'
which is characteristic of foreign language as opposed
to second language learning situations (Stern, op. cit.:
16). Whether the measures will suffice for the
achievement of the stated objectives is a matter about
which, provided we are prepared to be patient, we do not
really need to speculate. The answer will be known in
about five years time.

4. CONCLUSION
A foreign language - i.e. a non-indigenous language
which is not used, outside the classroom, for day-to-day
communication within the speech community - lacks the
subjective characteristics requisite for viability as a
national medium of education. Over the past two decades,
English in Tanzania has, to a significant extent but
not yet wholly, acquired the characteristics of a
foreign language. During the same period a very marked
and serious decline in standards of English has taken
place. In part, this decline may be attributable to
non-linguistic causes, indeed to causes outside the
educational system altogether. But other causes, in

particular the insufficiency of learners' exposure to
the language, and the long unresolved issue of the choice
of medium of instruction, are plausibly subsumed under
what has been suggested as being the major, overarching,
cause - the change of status. The nature of the present proposals
proposals to rehabilitate English as medium of education
- they amount to a compensatory scheme, designed to
give second-language features to a foreign language
situation - gives support to this analysis.

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