

The linguistic situation in Tanzania

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1. Introduction

This paper describes the linguistic situation in Tanzania. The country is characterized by triglossia, where English is the international language used in higher education, Swahili is the widespread national language understood by very nearly the entire population, and a smaller African language is spoken in the home. The Swahili name for the language itself is *Kiswahili*. This term is sporadically used in English as well even though the established English name for the language is *Swahili*.

The United Republic of Tanzania (*Jamhuri ya Muungano wa Tanzania*) is situated just below the equator in eastern Africa. The name is an amalgamation of Tanganyika (mainland) and Zanzibar (islands) and was created when the two formed one nation in 1964. There are 26 regions (*mikoa*) in the country and the current head of state is President Kikwete who was elected in 2005. The official capital of Tanzania is Dodoma, but the de facto seat of most government institutions and the commercial centre (and by far the largest city population-wise) is Dar es Salaam.

The precise number of languages spoken in Tanzania is not clear. The number 120 is still often quoted despite the fact that it bears no real credence. The number is based on a statement made by former president Julius Nyerere¹ in 1960 (Taylor 1963:176). The most recent survey of the Tanzanian linguistic situation states 164 languages (Languages of Tanzania Project 2009). *Ethnologue* (an encyclopaedic reference work, web-based as well as printed, cataloguing the world's languages) mentions 128 languages (Lewis 2009) and Maho and Sands 126 (2003). The reason for the diverging numbers is that many of the Tanzanian languages are part of a dialect continuum (Legère 2007:43). Besides, to draw the line between a language and a dialect is not straightforward in view of the fact that many of these languages are quite similar. Moreover, there may be several glossonyms (language names) that denote the same language, thus giving rise to more language names than there are actual languages. To add to the confusion, the glossonyms do not always correspond to the autonyms (the name used by the group of speakers themselves) of the languages.

Regardless of the fact that these approximately 128 languages² are the mother

¹ Julius Nyerere is called *Baba wa Taifa* 'Father of the Nation' as he was the first president of Tanzania.

² In this article, these languages will be referred to as 'minority languages', being understood as

tongues of the majority of the inhabitants, they are not used in public domains, schools etc. Instead, Swahili, and in some settings English, are the official languages. Swahili, like the majority of the approximately 128 minority languages, is a Bantu language. Bantu languages are a subgroup of the Niger-Congo family and constitute the largest language group in Africa. Swahili is the largest Bantu language when it comes to the number of speakers who use it as a second or third language (and lingua franca), but the number of mother tongue speakers in the world is fairly low. There are mother tongue speakers of Swahili in Kenya and Tanzania, but Swahili functions as a lingua franca in Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo as well. In Tanzania, the figures range between 350,000 (Lewis 2009) and 2,379,294 (Languages of Tanzania Project 2009:2). The figure given in *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009) is not very reliable since Zanzibar alone, where the vast majority are mother tongue speakers of Swahili, has a population of over a million people. It seems safe to go with Rubagumya’s assumption that Swahili is the mother tongue of approximately 10% of the population in Tanzania (Rubagumya 1990).

2. The history of Swahili and English in Tanzania

As early as before the 10th century, Swahili was spoken on the east coast of Africa (Mazrui and Mazrui 1995:35). The name Swahili is said to originate from (the plural of) the Arabic word for ‘coast’: *sawahil*. It was on the islands and along the East African coast that the language arose in order to facilitate the communication between merchants. It is unclear exactly how the language came into being. Some suggest that it may have arisen when Arabic merchants residing along the coast married the Bantu women living there (Polomé 1979:79). What we do know today is that Swahili is a Bantu language with several Arabic loanwords. The language did not extend into the mainland until the 19th century, but when it did, the language spread rapidly as a result of trade in slaves, ebony, gold and ivory.

The German colonial interest began in the 1880s. By that time, the Swahili language was already widespread. The German colonists encouraged a further spread since they depended on Swahili for their administration. Even though German was taught as a subject in school, Swahili was the medium of instruction and the Germans documented the language (Rubagumya 1990:6).

At the end of World War One, the British took control of Tanganyika (i.e. the mainland). Hence English became the official language of the country. Swahili was accepted at the provincial and district level by the administration. In addition, Swahili was kept as the medium of instruction in the first five years of primary school. English was introduced as a subject in the third grade and then it became the medium

languages that are restricted to a few non-formal domains. This does not necessarily imply that the speakers constitute a minority numerically, but that the languages are marginalized and subordinate to Swahili and English.

of instruction after eight years in school. Swahili was available as a subject throughout secondary school. Even Christian missionaries saw the advantages of using a language that many people understood, notwithstanding the fact that they disliked its strong association with Islam. In 1930, a Language Committee was founded in order to standardise and promote the development of Swahili (Whiteley 1969:82-83).

The status of Swahili was further strengthened when TANU (Tanganyika African National Union) was formed in 1954 and began using the language to mobilise the people in the struggle for independence. Since such a large number of people already understood the language, it came to be a unifying force. Politicians had hardly any need for interpreters because Swahili was understood all over the country (Rubagumya 1990:9). The former president Julius Nyerere contributed greatly to the consolidation of Swahili. Being a teacher of both English and Swahili, he actually translated (and published) Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* into Swahili himself. He proclaimed the use of the language and it was during his leadership that Tanzania became the first country in Africa to make an African language the national one. When Swahili was declared the national language in 1964, several institutes and organisations were established to co-ordinate and maintain the language. Overall direction and co-ordination of these activities was the responsibility of the Promoter of Swahili (Bamgbose 1991:134). In 1967, BAKITA (*Baraza la Kiswahili la Taifa*), i.e. the National Swahili Council, was established “to promote the development and usage of the Swahili language throughout the United Republic” (Goke-Pariola 1993:81). Despite difficulties, the Swahili language has kept its elevated position in society. The language has played a major role in unifying the people and solidifying national identity.

3. The Swahili language today

When Swahili was declared a national language, there were several varieties in use. The government needed to choose one variety to standardise and thus make it the national one. The choice fell on the prestigious Zanzibari dialect – Kiunguja – despite the fact that there is no long-established literary tradition using this variety. It is, however, written with the Latin alphabet unlike the traditional literary variety from Lamu and Mombasa, which is written with the Arabic alphabet (Lodhi, Rydström et al. 1979:24-25). Today in Tanzania, “[s]ome 90% of the population speaks Swahili” (Laitin 1992:140). People all over the nation consider Zanzibar to be the place where ‘pure’ Swahili is spoken. What is more, Swahili has a strong connection to Tanzanian nationality. “Tanzania has utilized Kiswahili...as an expression of their being Tanzanians” (Mazrui and Mazrui 1995:82). The general sense that the Swahili language is the symbol of the nation is apparent to anyone visiting Tanzania.

3.1. Swahili versus the minority languages

The Swahili language is used all over the country, even in isolated areas, and it has deeply penetrated Tanzanian society. It is the prevalent language in all public settings. The minority languages are only spoken in the home, and they are severely threatened by Swahili. In public areas, the minority languages are not at all heard; their usage is prohibited in education, and discouraged at political gatherings and religious meetings; they are not used by any radio or television station; and there are no newspapers published in any of them. The political setting does not allow the use of the minority languages since their use is seen as a risk to national unity and as backward-looking. Even though the minority languages are not precisely banned, they are disapproved of. Despite the fact that there is a cultural policy document stating that the minority languages should be seen as an asset to the country and as an important part of Tanzanian heritage (Government of Tanzania 1997), the policy is ineffective since nothing is being done to execute it. There is absolutely no encouragement from the government to promote the minority languages. In the UNESCO category for Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes, this is included in the category of *passive assimilation*, i.e. that the minority languages are not forbidden as such, but that they are handled with indifference.

As mentioned, the minority languages in Tanzania are threatened by Swahili (Brenzinger 2007:196), not by English. It is not unusual that a larger regional language like Swahili poses a greater threat to minority languages than a language of wider communication such as English. In general, speakers of minority languages often forsake their languages for the social and economic benefits of larger languages. “It seems clear that many of the approximately 120 languages in Tanzania will lose many or all of their speakers within a generation or two” (Janson 2002:191). A growing number of speakers who start to abandon their language is a first step towards language extinction. When the next generation does not learn the language, the language is seriously threatened (Batibo 2005:62).

There are several projects, in Tanzania as well as around the world, focusing on documenting and describing the minority languages before they are lost (cf. Harjula (2004), Rugemalira (2005) and Petzell (2008) to mention a few recent ones). One such project is currently conducted at the University of Gothenburg by the author of this paper. The aim of the project is to describe a minority language called Kami, and the title is *An analysis of an endangered language – the Kami in Tanzania*. The purpose of the project is to (i) document this endangered variety for both linguistic and speaker communities and, (ii) analyse the structure of the language and relate the new findings to current linguistic assumptions especially related to comparative Bantu. As such the project has both documentary and theoretical aims. The study comprises a grammar of Kami, i.e. a sketch of the phonological, morphological and syntactic structures. The main method is linguistic elicitation (i.e. to obtain language

data from a person), supplemented by interviews and recordings of speech.

Kami is spoken in the Morogoro region of eastern Tanzania, about 200 km west of the coastal city of Dar es Salaam. According to the most recent linguistic survey, approximately 5000 persons claim to speak Kami (Languages of Tanzania Project 2009), but it must be borne in mind that most of the speakers code-mix and code-switch with Swahili, and only a few speak a ‘pure’ version of Kami.

It is vital to describe the under-described languages of Tanzania before the process of decline has gone too far. Although time-consuming, to capture speech on tape for grammatical analysis is crucial for describing under-documented languages. It is hoped that this description will supply researchers with information for further and, possibly, comparative studies, but also that it will be of benefit to the Kami speakers themselves and may be a step in raising the status of this and other minority languages in Tanzania.

3.2. Language cultivation

During field studies in Tanzania, I have encountered Tanzanians who claim that Swahili is in fact a language related to Arabic. This is obviously not true³ although a substantial amount of the Swahili vocabulary is of non-Bantu origin. Arabic is still the largest provider of loan words in Swahili even if, these days, a lot of English words are entering the language.

The bulk of new words that appear in the Swahili language today enter the language through the process of borrowing. The most common form of borrowing taking place is so called *convenience borrowing*. This means that when a word for a new phenomenon in the language is needed, a word (or a concept) is imported, with or without adaptation. It is commonplace for a language to take in loanwords; cf. for instance English which has imported a considerable part of its vocabulary from Romance languages.

The early borrowings in Swahili stem from Arabic and Persian. Additionally, “[t]he lesser contributors to the Swahili lexicon are Persian, the Indo-Aryan languages (of Cutchi/Kachchi, Gujarati, Hindi, Sanskrit), Portuguese, Turkish, German and French in descending order of importance” (Lodhi 2000:1).

As mentioned, the new words that are taken into the Swahili language come from English. That is the reverse of what former president Nyerere stated in 1978; namely that new words should, if possible, come from other Tanzanian Bantu languages before foreign languages were considered (Legère 2002:172). Instead, the other Tanzanian Bantu languages borrow technological terminology from Swahili – terminology that is in turn borrowed from English. The words and concepts borrowed into Swahili today are predominantly related to technology, but also to science, sports

³ Arabic belongs to the Afroasiatic family.

and modern entertainment.

There is no coordinated approach for dealing with loanwords in Swahili (Legère 1991:75). This can be seen in how compounds are treated. At times the associate particle *ya* is used to link the nouns, as in *kadi ya sauti* ‘sound card’, and sometimes not, as in *barua pepe* ‘email’. Notwithstanding the National Swahili Council BAKITA and other institutions that coin terms, there is no common method for dealing with new vocabulary in Swahili.

4. The English language today

Although Swahili is the highly valued national language, English is termed the *official language* and has a special position in society. “Swahili...symbolizes the country’s traditional values in contrast with English, which is associated with technical innovation and outside values” (Fasold 1990:96). English is used as the medium of instruction in higher education; it is the language of the High Court, diplomacy and foreign trade. “[T]he former colonial language is seen as a prerequisite for scientific and technological development” (Rubagumya 1990:2). It is also perceived as a magical key to social prestige and power. Nevertheless, English is still considered an international language rather than a second national language (Schmied 1985:265).

Apart from being a tool for social advancement, “English is the key to education” (author’s notes from participant observation 2003). A student may succeed in all other subjects but without a command of English they cannot continue studying at higher levels. English is introduced as a subject in the third year of primary school and it becomes the medium of instruction in Form I, which is the eighth year (i.e. first year of secondary school) (Roy-Campbell and Qorro 1997). Swahili is offered as a subject throughout school and university, but the medium of instruction at all levels above primary school is English. Like many other countries, Tanzania exhibits a three-language model (Bamgbose 1991:54-58). On the local level, in rural areas and villages, there are minority languages that function as markers of solidarity. At the national level, a larger regional language like Swahili is used. Finally, on an international level, English is used as a language of wider communication. English and Swahili have separate roles in society, and it is not contradictory to think highly of both languages since they have their different domains. The same person can appreciate English because it is important in education and Swahili because it is a symbol of national identity. Swahili denotes traditional ideals, while English is related to technological modernism and external ideals.

As noted by Rubagumya (1991), there is a paradox in that students prefer to be taught in English, but they fail to express this wish in English and their understanding of what is said in class is very low. According to one survey, only 1% of the students in secondary school are at a level adequate for English medium education (Criper and

Dodd 1984:25). The numbers for the entire country are equally low. In 1985, Schmied stated that no more than 5% understood English (1985:242). The number is slightly higher in urban areas and lower in remote rural areas. It is estimated that approximately 15% of the population in Tanzania have some knowledge of English (Rubagumya 1989:107). It should also be mentioned that the level and/or quality of English varies greatly, and code-mixing and code-switching with Swahili is common. Conversely; “[t]he occasional inclusion of English words in spoken Swahili is a phenomenon that is widely spread” (Legère 2010:54).

Since English is not really used among Tanzanians, there is no acknowledged variety of Tanzanian English. Instead, British Standard English is still taught (Kanyoro 1991:403) in the country. This is in contrast to for instance Zambia, which has its own variety of World Englishes. That said, there are of course linguistic characteristics that differentiate the English spoken in Tanzania from other varieties, but it is not clear whether this is a distinct variety (Yahya-Othman and Batibo 1996:388). Schmied acknowledges a separate variety of World Englishes, East African English, spoken in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania (Schmied 2008:189). This variety is learnt primarily in school and is not transmitted between parents and children. The main difference between Standard English and East African English lies in the pronunciation, which is accepted, but “Tanzanian English grammar will not be tolerated, at least in the near future” (Schmied 2008:192).

5. Conclusion

This article has dealt with the triglossic situation in Tanzania. The historical spread and growth of the two dominant languages Swahili and English has been sketched and the current linguistic situation discussed. We have shown that both English and Swahili are firmly consolidated in Tanzania and that they most likely will be for quite some time. However, the under-described minority languages are threatened – not by English but by Swahili. It is very important to describe these under-described languages before the process of decline has gone too far; not just for the obvious benefit of the present speakers, but also to contribute to linguistics as a science. Every described language provides us with a wider knowledge of what grammatical constructions are possible in a language, and how the human linguistic ability functions.

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