

THE ROLE OF LINGUISTICS IN SOCIETY

Linguistics is taught in universities both locally and internationally. However, many people do not know the nature of the discipline and its usefulness in society. As we saw in earlier article, we may define simply as the scientific study of language. Linguists are trained in the skills necessary in dissecting the complex systems that are languages.

Linguistics is very important in society. In modern societies, life relies heavily on education. Modern education produces experts that help us live better lives. Engineers design our railways and roads; doctors diagnose and treat illnesses; pharmacists manufacture and dispense drugs to fight all manner of maladies; agronomists develop disease-resistant and high yielding seeds; and veterinarians help us keep our animals free from diseases. Without linguistics, it would be impossible to produce these professionals.

Modern education is grounded on the ability to write and read. In turn, writing and reading dependent on the existence of a language having a system that correlates the sounds of the language and letters otherwise referred to as an orthographic system. An orthographic system (or simply, an orthography) is a system that represents the sounds with letters in a language. Orthographies are designed by linguists and in particular by phonologists whose work revolves around the study of the sounds of language. To this extent, therefore, it is true to say that literacy would be impossible without the knowledge and the application of phonology – a sub-discipline of linguistics.

The ability to write and read is, however, not adequate to see us through education. We have to be taught a language that is eventually used as a medium of instruction in the school system. For us to be able to follow instruction in the school system our knowledge of the medium of instruction must be good or, at least, sufficient to allow us understand the information from teachers and from books. It is due to the importance of the medium of instruction that, in Kenya, the teaching of English - the medium of instruction in country's schools - is allocated more time on the time-table than other subjects. But the teaching of language is only effective if there are appropriate materials for language teaching. These materials - in the form of grammar books, dictionaries and readers - are only appropriate to the extent they are informed by a clear understanding of the dynamics of the language in question.

Understanding how languages work is the business of the linguist. Provision of good language teaching materials is, therefore, only possible by taking into account the linguist's expert understanding of the nature of language. To put it briefly, effective teaching of the medium of instruction (as well as of other languages) is only possible with the input of the linguist.

Linguists (specifically sociolinguists and psycholinguists) help in planning of education language policies. Furthermore, linguists write or supply the know-how for writing grammars, readers

and dictionaries. Revisit, in your mind, all the grammar books, readers and dictionaries that you have used between from the time you were primary until you graduated from secondary school and it will become clear to you the massive impact linguists have had in making you what you are as an educated individual.

I have indicated that it the role of linguists to write dictionaries or to guide on how they should be. The branch of linguistics that trains linguist on dictionary making is called lexicography. Therefore, when you hear a linguist describing themselves as a lexicographer, they are indicating that in their linguistic training they specialized in the study of dictionary-making.

Linguists help in planning and implementing language modernization (also referred to as language engineering). Today, Kiswahili is a very different language from what it was before the 1980's. Through the efforts of linguists, through linguistic engineering, it has been modernized to an extent that using it to teach secondary school subjects such as mathematics, biology, physics and chemist is no longer a big issue. There are adequate technical terms to do the job. Indeed, in Kenyan and Tanzanian universities, teaching Kiswahili linguistics - including Kiswahili phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, discourse analysis, pragmatics and sociolinguistics - is all done in Kiswahili.

There are many other areas where the linguist's knowledge is crucial to society. Sociolinguists assist in decisions on language policy in general and in designing language policy in education; historical and comparative linguists help in reconstructing history and culture; forensic linguists aid police and law courts in handling criminal matters; psycholinguists conduct useful research on language issues in education; and linguists occasionally work in hospitals to assist doctors handle certain types of ailments.