

A NEW DEMOCRATIC ERROR?

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The Case for an Expanded Role of Kiswahili in Multi-Party Kenya

Multi-party democracy is ushering in Kenya a climate of debate through envisaged freedoms of expression, assembly and that of the Press.

The Press will increasingly play a central role in shaping public opinion in agenda-setting for a democratic society. To play that role, the press must, of necessity, disseminate as much information as possible to the public to enable it make rational decisions.

The official and national languages of Kenya are English and Kiswahili respectively. The majority of Kenyans communicate in Kiswahili as opposed to English. The major media use English. The author poses the following questions:

- Whose interest is the Press serving in the process of democratisation if information disseminated cannot be digested by the majority in the language they understand?
- On what premise can the Press in Kenya claim a legitimate role in the democratisation process if it marginalises the majority right to information by communicating vital messages in a discriminatory and biased language?

The return of multi-party democracy in Kenya fires the imagination of Kenyans in many directions. We are thrilled by the possibility of evolving into a country that respects justice, the rights and dignity of the individual and the various freedoms especially those of expression, assembly, the Press and movement. We are also hoping to create a nation characterised by a culture of debate and tolerance. For these goals to be realised we need to critically examine some issues that we have so far downplayed or ignored altogether. One of these issues is language.

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It is important to examine this issue because of the complex linguistic situation that obtains in the country. This complexity stems from the country's linguistic diversity as well as from the dichotomy of roles between national and official languages.

There are between 30 and 40 indigenous languages in the country spoken as first languages by as many speech-communities (or ethnic groups). Besides being spoken as first languages some of them are used as a second or even a third language by speakers whose first languages are different.

Kiswahili, one of the indigenous languages, is spoken extensively in the country. Apart from being the first language for a sizable part of the population concentrated at the Coast, it is also spoken by millions of Kenyans for whom it is not the first language. It is estimated that as many as two-thirds of Kenyans speak it. It is also the declared national language in the country. English is widely spoken in the country specifically by those who have gone through formal education. It is also the official language in the country.

Although both Kiswahili and English are spoken widely in the country, it is the former that is numerically superior to the latter. Commenting on the language situation in Kenya, B. Heine, observes that:

According to our survey, Kenya can be assumed to have the following patterns of second language knowledge:

Second language known	Percentage of Kenyans
1. None (= monolinguals)	33.7
2. Vernacular (second languages)	0.5
3. Swahili	42.0
4. English	0.3
5. Swahili + Vernacular	7.7
6. English + Vernacular	0.2
7. English + Swahili	10.3
8. English + Swahili + Vernacular	5.3
TOTAL	100.0

(Heine & Mohlgh, 1980:61)

He then concludes that:

The above table reveals the importance of (K)iswahili as a national medium of communication ... That Kiswahili is indeed the most

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widely spoken language in Kenya becomes clear if we re-arrange the above figures according to languages:

Second language known	Percentage of Kenyans
1. Swahili	65.3
2. English	16.1
3. Vernacular second languages	13.7

These figures bring to the fore the importance of re-examining the roles of Kiswahili and English in the political and economic life of Kenya. As we have already noted, English is the official language in the country while Kiswahili is the declared national language. An official language may be defined as a language through which government business is conducted. It is the language used in government offices, law courts and schools, among others places. It is also the language in which government documents are written and official information disseminated. On the other hand, a national language (in this context) is a language whose use is intended to symbolise national identity. Such a language is seen in similar light with the national anthem, the national flag, the national coat-of-arms and the Head of State. These then, are the supposed domains for Kiswahili and English in Kenya.

In spite of this arrangement, the two languages tend to collide especially in situations where the "national" and the "official" converge. A good example of this convergence is when there is "national day" where "official speech" is to be read. When such a convergence does take place, it is English that has the upper hand although it is understood by about one fifth of Kenyans compared to the two-thirds of Kenyans who speak Kiswahili. On days such as Madaraka and Jamhuri, the practice has been to deliver the official speech in English and then given an off-the-cuff address in Kiswahili. One wonders whether, in our circumstances, this is the ideal. One also wonders whether, asked their opinion, this is the kind of situation Kenyans would prefer.

Another area of even more importance as far as the issue of languages is concerned is that of the law courts and important legal documents. Currently, English is the language of the law courts. Since, as we have already seen, many Kenyans are not in a position to speak the language, they have to communicate through an interpreter whenever they have a business in court.

This raises the disturbing question as to whether some of these people do not get a raw deal in the courts not because there is

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malice or incompetence on the part of the magistrates or judges but simply because the interpreting is faulty. There are instances when the "interpreter" is just anybody who happens to be in the court or in its vicinity and who speaks the same vernacular as the accused. It is most probable that such as "an interpreter" will not be competent enough for the task he is called upon to perform. But even when the interpreting is done by a regular court interpreter, one wonders how much language training they undergo before they embark on interpreting in the law courts.

Most of the important government documents meant for the public are only in English. These documents are inaccessible to a great many Kenyans because of the language barrier, among other factors.

The above paragraphs illustrate the pertinence of the language issue in Kenya. Whether one is thinking about just and fair trials in the courts of law, or the right of access to information, one cannot justifiably ignore the language issue. Indeed, even such notions as the freedom of expression and the freedom of the press may not be as useful as they should be if they ignore the question of language. Hence, as we demand for the various rights and freedoms, we have to take cognizance of the fact that the exercise of these rights and freedoms can be delayed or weakened by linguistic obstacles.

Although we have stated and illustrated that a complex linguistic situation obtains in the country there are strategies that can improve communication amongst ourselves. One such a strategy is to give Kiswahili a bigger role than we have done so far. In this regard, a number of proposals could be made. One of this is that important documents that are in English or are regularly published in the language be made available in Kiswahili. Some commendable steps along these lines have already been taken by individual groups. Notable among these groups is the Public Law Institute who have published a Kiswahili version of the Kenya Constitution. One wishes that, in the future, the government gets financially involved in projects of this nature.

○ The country could also think of introducing Kiswahili as the second official language of the law courts. Of course, to some people, this suggestion might sound far-fetched. It is not. At its current level of development, Kiswahili has the capacity to play such a role. Such a move would enable more people to communicate directly with the magistrates and judges. It would also, perhaps, contribute towards the demystification of the law courts which in turn would lessen people's apprehension of them.

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In the foregoing paragraphs, we have attempted to show some of the real and potential obstacles related to the issue of languages in Kenya. We have also indicated some of the possibilities that suggest themselves as a way forward for us. In so doing, we hope to have made a modest contribution towards the construction of an agenda on the language issue in multi-party Kenya.

Bibliography

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