LANGUAGE PLANNING IN PRE-COLONIAL KENYA

AYUB MUKHWANA

Department of Kiswahili, University of Nairobi, Nairobi, Kenya

ABSTRACT

Language planning has been looked at historically as a language problem phenomenon that arose when Third World countries began to gain independence from their European colonial masters. This paper argues that this kind of observation is faulty for Kenya, like many other Third World Countries, for she had language problems even before the advent of European colonial masters and so continuously planned her languages over history. This paper uses the social psychological theory by Lambert and Gardner to discuss what it perceives to be language planning in pre-colonial Kenya by outlining the linguistic roles that were assigned the languages in use in the country then in education, religious, political and even in social domains. In all the known historical epochs of the geo-political entity that is now called Kenya there appeared some kind of language planning – hence the conclusion that there was language planning in pre-colonial Kenya.

KEYWORDS: Language Planning, Pre-Colonial Kenya, Arabs, Portuguese, (Ki) Swahili

INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of *Language Problems of Developing Nations* by Fishman et al (1968), it has been assumed in language planning and policy matters that the issue of language planning is a making of Third World countries when they begun to gain independence from European colonial masters. This paper argues that pre-colonial Africa, and in this particular case Kenya, had language policies peculiar to particular countries. This argument arises from the fact that Africa was never linguistically a tabular razor and that since language planning can either be done consciously or unconscious as Rubin and Jernudd (1971) put it, we should not take the language planning issue in pre-colonial Kenya for granted.

The history of pre-European colonial Kenya language planning and policy in a country that we presently call Kenya has involved three groups of people, namely Islamic religious groups, Portuguese invaders and the Omani Arab rulers. The efforts of these groups of people in influencing language use and maintenance in pre-colonial Kenya will be referred to and will form the basis of the language planning and policy of the pre-colonial Kenya.

Through history, this paper attempts to explore the basis of the language planning issue in Kenya because as Osundare (1981) argues, language is both a mental and an institutional phenomenon. Being a mental phenomenon, language formed Kenyans' language planning and policy without being necesarily institutionally forced. On the other hand, the presence of institutions that preferred the use of some languages to others influenced the formation of language policy in pre-colonial Kenya. This is the essence of the present paper on language planning in pre-colonial Kenya. Through these observations, this paper uses language in pre-colonial Kenya as a phenomenon which structured the language thoughts of Kenyans and as a record of the country's language policy history. This paper argues that individuals can be controlled by language and are in turn also able to use language to control others. This is the essence of language planning that this paper is out to tackle. The present paper is thus concerned with the problem of how Kenyans in pre-colonial Kenya interpreted and reconciled the linguistic differences in their society. The question that the paper seeks to ask and answer is: How were such issues as status and power upheld in valuing languages in use in pre-colonial Kenya? The answer to this question tells the story of there being in pre-colonial Kenya a language planning effort.

Very little has so far been said by researchers about language situation in pre-colonial Kenya (Mukhwana 2010). The basis for the current historical narration thus consists of the interpretation of written literature about language in pre-colonial Kenya. The interpretation of language use and maintenance in pre-colonial Kenya will provide insights into the role of Kenya's language situation shaped language planning in pre-colonial Kenya. This paper seeks to bring some insight and perspective to the question of how Kenyan language policy was shaped. In this connection, the paper feels that one neglected focus of study is the history and evolution of pre-colonial Kenya's language policy. This paper believes that by examining past language controversies concerning language in pre-colonial Kenya, a further context for understanding the current linguistic dilemma as observed by Kembo-Sure (1988, 2002) will be provided.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

In this paper, some terms have been used reservedly and purposely to capture the aim of the paper and so they need some operational definitions. In a sociolinguistic paper such as this one, the term language planning may cover numerous language related phenomena. However, in this paper the term language planning is a working definition associated with changes in language role relationships as applied in communication depending on the willingness to use a given language as opposed to the other because of what the language can offer without necessarily decreeing the language plan.

The concepts of pre-colonial period and Kenya may also need some operational definitions. First is the concept of pre-colonial period. In the history of a country that is now called Kenya, the concept of colonialism came after the Berlin conference that partitioned Africa among European countries. The British were the colonialists in Kenya. This therefore means that the period before the advent of the British colonial masters is the pre-colonial period. This is the sense in which the concept of pre-colonial Kenya is used in this paper.

Kenya, as used in this paper, is that geographical entity that is now politically and historically Kenya as is known and perceived now by Kenyans themselves and by their neighbours and the rest of the international community. The name Kenya may have come late but the entity that is geographically Kenya has always been there.

THE PROBLEM

Whenever languages come into contact, there emerges a language situation that assigns the languages communicative roles in the diverse speech community. This is because language contact situations give rise to bilingualism, multilingualism or even poli-lingualism. In turn, these language tags give languages language roles like does diglossia, triglossia, quadriglossia and poliglossia. The fact that languages are each assigned a role in communication circles and domains means some kind of language planning takes place. In pre-colonial Kenya in particular, this truism seems to have however been either forgotten or overlooked. It is on the basis of this that the present paper gives an analysis of the pre-colonial Kenya language situation so as to come up with what was then obtaining as Kenya's language planning then. Such an analysis will go a long way in joining the missing link between the pre-colonial Kenya's language planning phenomenon and that of both the colonial and post colonial language planning.

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

The Social-Psychological theory by Lambert and Gardener (1972) that observes that instrumental as well as integrative reasons send peozple preferring some languages to others. This preference of languages is what causes unplanned language planning which is the essence of the current paper. Thus, the current paper uses this theory to determine language policy in pre-colonial Kenya. As the theory is used, in each historical event or occurrence concerning

language use in pre-colonial Kenya, the leading question will be: What can be learned about language planning in this pre-colonial period from systematic observation of people's linguistic behavior? The linguistic behavior, following the lead of the theory at hand, was dictated by socio-economic gain in favouring languages that promised them reward. Thus, it is expected that in pre-colonial Kenya, language planning shifts and/ or maintenance were based on psychological, economic, cultural and social predisposition of the users of the languages concerned.

In order to expose the nature of the language policies that obtained in pre-colonial Kenya, this paper strives to logically proceed from the more social-pragmatic aspects of the language situations in the country. The present paper combines a psycholinguistic perspective with sociolinguistic factors that obtained then.

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCED LANGUAGE PLANNING IN PRE-COLONIAL KENYA

Several factors are have been identified as having influenced the issue of language planning in pre-colonial Kenya. The factors include religion, education and administration. In the sub-sections below, we critically analyse each of these factors before we give the concluding remarks.

Religion as a Factor in Language Planning in Pre-Colonial Kenya

The first known foreign contact of the people of the geographical entity covering present day Kenya with the outside world is said to have been with the Arabs (Whiteley 1969). This contact was the first time that the people of present day Kenya were exposed to the Arabic language and Arab culture. The Arabs who came to Kenya had run away from the holly Khalifate war and opened up present day Kenya to Arabic influences. These Arabic influences resulted in the use of the Arabic language for both religious and merchantile purposes especially on the Kenyan coast. These Arabs who came to Kenya started trade in ivory and slaves. In order to get slaves easily, the Arab slavers employed Kenyan coastal militia and middlemen. Only those people of present day Kenya who adopted Islam were spared the wrath of the early Arab invaders of Kenya. Thus, accepting Islam meant accepting the adoption of elements of Arab culture, including Arabic language. This act led to the spread of the Arabic language, especially on the Kenyan coast. It is due to this importance of Islam to the formation of a language policy in pre-colonial Kenya that sends Mwenda Mukuthuria (2009: 38) to observe as follows:-

The word Islam is of Arabic origin, which means peace, cleanliness and submission. Therefore, Islamic religion can be viewed as the state of any human being devoting himself/herself and accepting the teaching and guidance of Allah. A Muslim is any person who accepts the teachings of this religion and submits himself/ herself before Allah. This divine message was delivered through Arabic language.

The East African coast, of which Kenyan coast is part, has had contacts with the rest of the world for many centuries (see Salim 1973). The advent of Islam in Kenya led to great influence on the cultural history of the East African coastal towns. For instance, the Arabic language which was introduced to the East African coast through Islam greatly influenced Kiswahili, especially in the lexicon and in the development of literary forms (Abdulaziz 1995). Also, the availability of Arabic script made it possible to record a great deal of Swahili literary and historical material. The mere fact that Arabic had a written form that was applied to Kiswahili language when these languages came into contact clearly shows how these two language varied in terms of prestige, written form history and even domains of usage. Thus, in terms of language planning that may have then not been implicit, Arabic was in Kenya valued higher followed by Kiswahili and at the bottom of the linguo-social ladder were local languages in use at the coast and anywhere else where Islamic religion spread to in Kenya.

However, it should be noted that detailed accounts about the East African coast and Arab travelers began to emerge from the 10th century. Al-Masuud (945 A.D) in his book ***Murujul Dhahab*** speaks of the East African coast and countries like China, India and those of the Gulf region. Al-Masuud observes that the people of Qumbalu (Pemba?) consisted of Muslims and pagans, and they spoke a Zenj language that Abdulaziz (1995: 142) thinks must have been a form of Kiswahili.

With the coming of Islam to Kenya in the 10th century, also came Arabic language because Arabic developed as the general language of Muslim civilization all over the Muslim world. Arabic literature too had a great deal of influence on the development of Kenyan national literatures especially in the predominantly Muslim coast (Wamitila 2001). This issue about Arabic literature is particularly true when we consider the Arabic Qasida form which was used as a model by Swahili poets, and other poets in Islamic regions in Kenya. This is because Arabic, the classical language of the Qur'an and the prophetic *Hadith,* is considered the common property of all Muslims, which up to this day is taught in Madrassas and Mosques (Abdulaziz 1995: 147).

In the pre-colonial Kenyan case, however, Islamic worship was conducted both in Arabic language and Kiswahili, both at the coast and even in the interior towns like Mumias and Kitui from the 19th century (Schildknecht 1969). This act of worship formed a strong linguistic influence, in conjunction with the Qur'anic schools. In fact it is only recently that Muslim religious leaders have urged and implemented the translation of the Qur'an from Arabic into Kiswahili in Kenya (Fisher 1969, Schildknecht 1969).

When the Arabs came to Kenya as early as the 10th century, groups of elite called *ulama* gradually developed. The *ulama* are those Muslims who were learned in the Qur'an, the Hadith, Arabic grammar, Islamic jurisprudence and many other branches of Arabic and Islamic studies. The ulama were so careful about their actions, be they religious, social or linguistic. The ulama read out their sermons on Fridays in Arabic because that was how the Prophet Mohammed used to address his audience. Arabic was the language which Mohamed and his people spoke. The linguistic situation described here is that of Arabic being a language in a social and religious besides educational class of its own and second to none. The coastal Kenyans and even those in the interior never bothered nor cared to translate the sermons after they had been read in Arabic into Swahili, the language well understood then by the Kenyans, especially at the coast. Contrary to this expectation, the Swahili language usage in Islamic worship was by the 13th century seen by the few learned people as harbouring vestiges *Kufur* religious rebellion and so this language was then not useful in religion to the then people of present day Kenyan coast. This attitude in itself meant disbelief in God for it negated the *iman* belief that the Arabic language carried. It should however be noted that now the attitude has changed since most Islamic sermons in Kenya are now said in Kiswahili.

Education as a Factor in Language Planning in Pre-Colonial Kenya

Qur'anic education was a major societal responsibility and a criterion for prestige in present day Kenyan societies before the coming of the British administrators (see Constantine 1988: 67). In the few schools that the Muslims established in pre-colonial Kenya, pupils learned the Arabic alphabet, how to recite the Qur'an and the fundamental concepts and rituals of Islam.

As early as the 9th century, there were places of worship at the Kenyan coast (Oded 1974: 8). These places of worship acted as institutions and institutes where continuing education for young and adult Muslims was imparted by means of teaching, sermons and rituals. In these places the message of Allah was reinforced and rejuvenated. Basically taught were Islamic concepts, rituals, and obligations. For those who excelled in these teachings, there were specialized

religious schools where scholars were trained in law, theology and Arabic literature. Eventually before the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century, many Kenyan coastal peoples learned how to read and write Arabic using the Arabic alphabet. The societal standing of such pre-colonial Kenyans was different from that of the rest of these Kenyans who did not know how to appreciate this new culture brought by Arabs.

This appreciation of Arabic culture also resulted in many coastal languages enriching themselves by hundreds of Arabic loan-words. It became fashionable favouring words of Arabic origin even where the indigenous coastal languages had words for the same concepts. As Whiteley (1969: 8) puts it, it was not even enough merely to use Arabic words but it was necessary to attempt to pronounce words with native Arabic accent. But it was not for nothing that this had to happen because here there was something more than fashion at work; as the language of Islam, the religion of the coast, Arabic enjoyed special status. Prior to the introduction of a Western type of secular education in the early 20th century, being educated meant learning to recite the Qur'an and to write using the Arabic script (Whiteley 1969: 8). It is this type of esteem that Arabic was held that resulted in much of the vocabulary of coastal culture being derived from Arabic. Indeed, without knowledge of Arabic language, one was not seen as civilized *staarabika* but rather as primitive *mshenzi.* Therefore, before the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century, knowledge of Arabic which also went with literacy, led to greater prestige for those who acquired Arabic for they got new social status.

As early as the 9th century, Arabs who came to the present day Kenyan coast introduced Arabic education in Arabic script to the people of the then pre-colonial Kenya. The argument these Arabs advanced was that the prophet Mohammed made the pursuit of learning compulsory for both male and female Muslims. Thus, the people were sent to the Qur'anic schools where they were taught the texts of the Qur'an and the *Hadith* in addition to other subjects. But all these were taught in Arabic. The Arabic language made such pre-colonial Kenyans have an advantage over those Kenyans who never had a chance to meet the Arab Muslims. Therefore the kind and type of thinking by the pre-colonial Kenyan coastal people about Arabic language is that it was a superior language compared to all the local languages like Kiswahili and Mijikenda dialects. Some Kenyans preferred the Arabic language and the Islamic system of education because the two were useful to them in terms of social advancement. As regards the indigenous type of education, the attitude was not the same as the above because this type of education was limited in rewards compared to the Islamic one (Nasiru 1997). Looked at from this angle, the attitude and opinion of the pre-colonial indigenous coastal Kenyan of his own language was therefore negative.

History has it that in the African colonial context, the flag followed the cross. This therefore means that the missionaries came to Kenya the pre-colonial before the colonialist came. When the missionaries came to Kenya, they introduced some kind of language planning which may be worth discussing here. When the Christian missionaries first set foot on Kenyan land, they had a negative attitude towards Kiswahili language for they associated its use with the spread of Islam. Given that historically these two religions have been perceived as being rival religions, it was logical for the Christian missionaries to treat this language through which Arabic was spread with suspicion. Missionaries instead chose to prefer the usage of indigenous languages in the spread of Christianity. In this case therefore we can argue that initially, Christian missionaries had a language plan that gave prominence to Kenyan indigenous languages. This, however was short lived for the Christian missionaries soon learned that they would not work without Kiswahili and that the language did not have any innate connection with either Arabic or the Islamic religion.

In the schools that the Christian missionaries established, Kiswahili became the main language of instruction. Kiswahili was adopted as the language of instruction because of the multilingual nature of Kenya which would have rendered education in the numerous Kenyan languages very expensive. Besides, the missionaries needed basic workers like

messengers and religious chatechists. Knowing the importance of written literature in the spread and development of languages, Christian missionaries like Dr. J.C Krapf of the Church Missionary Society wrote books on Kiswahili Grammar like *Outline of the Elements of the Kisuahili Language With Special Reference to Kinika Dialect (1850).* One major contribution of the Christian missionaries in the planning of language in Kenya is the use of Latin script in writing. In comparative terms, the Latin script is easier than the Arabic one and so this made reading and writing in Kiswahili and other Kenyan languages easy.

Politics as a Factor in Language Planning in Pre-Colonial Kenya

Apart from Arabs, the pre-colonial East African coast was also ruled by the Portuguese from the 16th to the 17th century. The Portuguese are said to have contributed almost nothing to the culture of the people of East Africa (Abdulaziz 1995:144). What this meager contribution to the culture of the people of East Africa means is that the Portuguese culture and language made no major impact on the life of the Swahili, the Mijikenda, the Pokomo and the people of the interior East Africa as a whole. Only terms of card games and names of fruits like Cashew *(Korosho),* Pineapple *(Nanasi),* Prawns *(Kamba)* remain in Swahili and other indigenous Kenyan languages today. Also felt in the vocabulary of Kiswahili and other Kenyan languages are words like Gwaride *Parade* and *Meza* Table. Because of this meager contribution to the culture of the people of Kenya and East Africa in general, the feeling of the people of this region towards the Portuguese language can be said to have been insignificant.

In any case, the Portuguese rule (16th to 17th century) at the East African coast did not last for a long period. The Omani Arabs took over the administration of the East African coast then. However, the Zanzibar based sultanate of Oman had a fairly loose administration along the East African coast, run by Liwalis (Abdulaziz 1995:145). In Zanzibar, both Arabs and a few Indians were culturally and linguistically assimilated to the Swahili culture, which was now richer and more diverse (see ibid.). Kiswahili was the day-to-day language of Africans, Arabs and Indians in the East African region that was economically controlled by Seyyid Said until his death in 1856.

During this Omani Arab period, most Arabs and many Indians adopted Kiswahili as their primary (or even first) language particularly in Zanzibar. Kiswahili, because of its contacts with people from India and the Arabic speaking world, also borrowed words from the two cultures. The language preference exposed here is that of coastal people then accepting Kiswahili language. Like other languages, Kiswahili borrowed terms for new concepts from Arabic and other languages because they were foreign to the Swahili world. Arabic words like *Mola, ulama, karama* and *hijabu* entered Swahili language courtesy of the interaction between the Swahili world and the Arab world. By accepting these loan words from Arabic, just to fill this communication void, there was unplanned Swahili language planning for the language had to find itself expressing concepts it never would have done before.

Trade as a Factor in Pre-Colonial Language Planning in Kenya

When the early Arabs came to the East African coast, and especially on the Lamu archipelago in Kenya, one of their aims was trade (Mukuthuria 2009). This trade spread from the North southwards and with it was the spread of Islam. The language of the spread of Islam and this coastal trade was Kiswahili. This is because Kiswahili emerged as the language of both the spread of Islam as a religion and as the spread of the language from its cradle land of Shungwaya in Kenya. Thus, the use of Kiswahili in the spread of both Islam and the Swahili language points to the fact that there was language planning that favoured Kiswahili in the domains of the language's spread and in its use in the spread of Islam as a religion.

This has been given as the reason why the spread of Kiswahili from Shungwaya from the archaeological point of view points to the fact that shows how it spread from north to south. Therefore, Swahili language was planned as the language of the spread of Islam and Swahili dialects.

Later on in the 19th century, there came Arab traders who used commerce to give a perspective on the language planning issue. When the Busaidi monarchy from Oman led by Seyyid Said settled in Zanzibar in 1832 and later in 1840 moved his sultanate to Zanzibar, all Arabs who arrived in Zanzibar learned Kiswahili for the purpose of communication. This language was used to spread Islam besides trade. In this case, therefore there was the elevation of Swahili language to a language second to none and this is how Kiswahili reached Kenyan towns like Lodwar. More still, the Arab traders had Swahili middle men and who embraced Swahili as their language of trade. This use of Swahili in matters trade encouraged the language and gave it a special place in pre-colonial Kenyan language planning circles. Kiswahili was thus appreciated by indigenous Kenyans and so encouraged its spread far and wide in mainland Kenya.
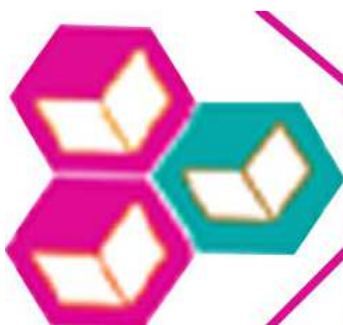
CONCLUSIONS

From the foregoing discussion, it clearly comes out that at least there was language planning in pre-colonial Kenya. What makes discussion on language planning in pre-colonial Kenya appear as if it is not an issue worth discussing is the thinking of pioneering scholars in the field who treat language planning as a resent phenomenon that has arisen with post colonialism. The truth of the matter is that whenever there are efforts to solve a language problem, that becomes part of language planning. The language problems, as can be seen from the discussion, were many and they occupied the entire pre-colonial period.

Cultural contacts between the early Arab visitors at the Kenyan coast and the Swahili and other indigenous coastal peoples enriched these languages in terms of material culture and linguistic influence. The new cultural elements and concepts introduced into Swahili and other indigenous coastal languages got terminology that would be used to refer to them. At the same time, these languages were assigned communicative roles in the pre-colonial Kenyan society. Arabic was used for the purpose Islamic worship while Kiswahili was used in commerce. During the Christian missionaries' period, indigenous Kenyan languages were used for the spread of Christianity. If these are not efforts of language planning, what are they?

REFERENCES

1. Abdulaziz, M.H (1995) *"The Impact of Islam on the Development of Swahili Culture". In Mohamed Bakari and Saad S. Yahya (eds.).* Islam in Kenya. Mewa Publishers. Nairobi.

2. Constantine, F (1988) *"Charisma and the Crisis of Power in East Africa",* Charisma and Brotherhood in African Islam. O'Brian, D.B.C and Coulon, C (eds.). Clarendon Press Oxford.

3. Fisher, H.J (1969) *"Separation in West Africa",* in Islam in Africa. Kritzeck, I and Lewis, W.H (eds.). Van Nostrand-Reinhold Company, New York.

4. Fishman, A.J, Charles A. Ferguson and Jyotirindra Das Gupta (eds.) (1968) Language Problems of Developing Nations. John Wiley and Sons Ltd. New York.

5. Kembo-Sure (1988) *Language Roles and Attitudes in a Multilingual Society: The Kenyan Experience.* Unpublished Staff Seminar Paper no. 4, Department of English, Moi University.

6.   Kembo-Sure (2002) *"Language Planning and National Development in Kenya",* in Languages in Contact. Ingrid Rissom (ed.). Bayreuth African Studies 51, 2002.

7.   Mukhwana, a (2010) Language Planning and Policy in Kenya: A Case Study of Kenyan Cities. VDM Verlag Dr. Muller.

8.   Mwenda Mukuthuria (2009)" *Islam and the Development of Kiswahili* "in The Journal of Pan African Studies, vol.2, no. 8. March 2009

9.   Nasiru, W.O.A (1997) *"The Attitude of Traditional "Ulama" to Muslim Female Education"* in Muslim Education Quarterly. Ashraf, S.A (ed.). The Islamic Academy. Cambridge.

10. Oded, A (1974) *Islam in Uganda: Islamization Through A Centralized State in Pre-Colonial Africa.* Israel University Press. Jerusalem.

11. Rubin, J and Jernudd, B. H (eds.) (1971) Can Language Be Planned? The University Press of Hawaii.

12. Salim, I. A (1973) The Swahili Speaking Peoples of Kenya's Coast: 1895 – 1965. East African Publishing House. Nairobi.

13. Schildknecht, F (1969) *"Tanzania",* in Islam in Africa. Kritzelck, J and Lewis, W. H (eds.). Van Nostrand-Reinhold Company. New York.

14. Wamitila, K. W (2001) Archetypal Criticism of Kiswahili Poetry. Bayreuth African Studies 57. German.

15. Whiteley, W.H (1969) Swahili: The Rise of A National Language. OUP, Nairobi.