

LANGUAGE IMPOSITION - HISTORICAL AND EDUCATIONAL
AN EAST AFRICAN VIEW

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The history of Swahili and English in mainland Tanzania provides an interesting case - study in the conditions for successful language imposition, and perhaps a cautionary tale for New Guinea. Some background parallels are immediately obvious. A nation of 12 million people speaking 120 different vernacular languages from at least five basic groups is probably the closest Africa gets to the linguistic complexity of New Guinea. European missionary contact in East Africa began in the late nineteenth century, as in New Guinea, and German rule had been established some thirty years before Tanganyika became a mandated Territory. In Tanganyika, again as in New Guinea, a lingua franca of indigenous origin made substantial progress in the colonial period. But the purpose of this paper is not to draw comparisons, still less to point morals. More cautiously I propose to examine the stages by which a language was imposed on the homelands of other languages and to leave those who will to draw such inferences as may be valid for this country.

Most Tanzanian vernaculars are classified as Bantu. In the north there is a Nilotic intrusion and Zulu influences are traced in the South. The Iraqw language of the Highlands has been inconclusively identified as Hamitic, and the invasion of the Masai from the north, before the western Bantu migration was complete, added another language group to the confused situation. Formerly identified as Nilo-Hamitic, assuming Hamitic addition to a Nilotic base, its classification is now less certain in view of the recognition of a large number of words common to the Nilo-Hamitic family but not to be found in either of its supposed parents. Hence another language group is conjectured, referred to as T/K after its singular and plural determinants. Thus succeeding waves of migrants have changed the language map of East Africa leaving two linguistic islands from an earlier period - the click languages of the Hadzapi and Sandawe probably related to the Hottentots of South Africa.¹

Swahili has developed from within this multi-lingual situation which, it will be argued conditioned its success. Two theories have been propounded to explain its origin. The first assumes the existence of a distinct Waswahili tribe descended from the original Bantu invasion and living as merchants on the coast. Trading with Arabia, Persia, Malaya, India and Portugal, they took over and Bantuized the names of their articles of

merchandise, then spread these terms inland by trading with other tribes. Against this theory that Swahili was originally a pure Bantu language Dr. Reusch has argued that "the Swahili nation did not originate from one particular tribe, but is a mixture of Arabs with different coastal tribes who became 'islamized'." ² Inevitably their religion drew them apart from other pagan tribes, while from their association a syncretistic language was born.

However uncertain its origins, the growth of Swahili from about 7-800 A.D. falls into four natural phases. During the first stage of approximately 1,000 years Swahili spread along the coast carried partly by the expansion of the so-called Zanj empire, but like it confined to settlements isolated from one another on the landward side. Even in 1814 Henry Salt was to refer to the Sowauli as a sea-faring tribe whose "language appears scarcely to deserve the name of a distinct dialect but is a kind of mixed jargon -- spoken at the seaports." ³

Penetration inland occurred during the second phase of Swahili growth, from about 1780 when the first Arab traders journeyed inland until the European Scramble for Africa in the 1880's. By 1857, when Burton reached Kazeh (Tabora) there were about twenty-five Arabs living at this trading centre from which caravan routes radiated north, south and west. Other settlements had been established along the slave route from the coast. Further south in 1859 Livingstone came across tragic evidence of an active slave trade from Kilwa to the mouth of Lake Nyasa and reaching into Katanga. In the north the same decade saw the journey through Masailand of a Swahili called Juma bin Mbwana. ⁴

By the mid-nineteenth century Tanzania was traversed by an impressive network of trade routes carrying the Swahili language inland from the coast. Of this there can be no doubt, but to whom they carried it is open to question.

Islands of Swahili culture were created in the Arab settlements and traces left with the descendants of porters or where runaways from the Arab caravans sought protection from local chiefs. Men who could negotiate the sale of food for arms with the passing caravans gained power and prestige in their tribes. But where the Arabs sought captives or the truculent Wagogo used force and cunning to support demands for hongo - or passage tax - linguistic contact was not extensive. Indeed, for many miles of their journeys the Arab traders can have seen no faces, fearful, friendly or hostile in the barren landscape, for the main concentrations of population lay off the slave routes. ⁵

The real expansion of Swahili occurs in the phase following this initial penetration as is plain from the observations of K. Roehl. "It was the case in Usambara - and

further inland this was still more marked," he comments on the 1890's, "that the people with whom one could carry on a real conversation in Swahili could be easily counted." He contrasts this situation with the contemporary conditions of 1930 when "it will hardly be possible to find a single village in the whole of East Africa (Tanganyika) where a considerable number of people born in that village do not talk or at least understand Swahili." ⁶

How did this growth occur? It can scarcely be ascribed to commercial intercourse since the Arab slave trade had been abolished before this period of rapid expansion.

The only tenable explanation for the years up to the 1930's lies in the adoption of Swahili for local administration. Swahili was used both by Arab officials and local headmen in the German administration, and the governor himself insisted on its usage, disregarding communications from European missionaries in English.⁷ The administrative convenience of this lingua franca was not lost on the British who recognised that with one language to be used in the senior service, high standards could be set while the junior service could be more flexibly deployed throughout the territory. As Whitely comments "members of the Junior Service, irrespective of the part of the territory to which they were posted could be sure of finding a small community of Swahili speakers around the boma." ⁸

His conclusion is supported by much evidence of the period. The C.M.S. missionary J. H. Briggs, in his testimony before the 1925 Education Conference commented that children "from the lower strata of social life understand very little Swahili whereas the sons of chiefs and headmen continually in contact with the Europeans gain quite a considerable knowledge of the language." As the Deputy Director of Education added, Swahili "is commonly used by all natives who travel widely, trade widely, and have course with officials of the local government and Europeans generally." ⁹

The role of administrative usage of Swahili appears vitally significant. Having eschewed comparisons with New Guinea, I can scarcely pursue Don Barrett's comments in a recent issue of the South Pacific Post on the value of Pidgin in the District Administration of New Guinea. In passing I can only refer to the dismay expressed by one missionary translator who, having worked long to produce a Telefomin translation of Mark, found sales to be disappointingly small, because he explained "the people, especially around the government post, preferred to use the Pidgin translation."

Purely linguistic factors probably facilitated the extension of Swahili in Tanzania. The simplicity of its sound forms, its easy adaptability arising from its syncre-

tistic origins, and above all its kinship with other Bantu languages assisted its adoption. Nevertheless, this was not a "natural" process nor, as it's sometimes suggested, the spontaneous result of contact with born Swahili speakers. Rather was it a prime example of language imposition resulting from alien administration.

L. F. Broshanan, in his analysis of some historical cases of language imposition at the Leverhulme Conference, Ibadan in 1961, identified four factors which he had found basic to cases of successful language imposition in the ancient world: firstly, that each language was originally imposed by military power, secondly, that it was maintained over several decades by a similar authority, thirdly, that acquisition of the imposed language conferred obvious advantages on the peoples of the area concerned, and fourthly, that the area concerned was itself multilingual.¹⁰

These factors were clearly operative in the case of Swahili in Tanzania. Some of the factors could be repeated in the case of English; imposition and enforcement by a strong administration, and the awareness of career advantages immeasurably greater than the rather limited opportunities obtainable through knowledge of Swahili. But inevitably no later language imposed in Tanzania could enjoy the full advantage of entrance to a multilingual area since the successful extension of Swahili had already conferred a measure of linguistic unity. The whole character of a multilingual situation is transformed if one lingua franca, Swahili - or perhaps Pidgin, gains wide currency within it. The advantages in adoption of a second common language, however great in material terms within the modern sector of the economy are negligible in terms of inter-group communication between the indigenous people.

Hence the administrators and educators who encouraged the spread of the lingua franca Swahili and insisted on its usage in primary schools as a stepping stone to the use of English may, by so doing, have prevented the successful imposition of English at the next stage. Its potential in conferring linguistic unity had been pre-empted.

Under the British administration Swahili was used as the medium of instruction in primary education and English at the secondary level. Gradually the introduction of English as the medium was brought earlier in the educational process. In 1959 with responsible self-government in view, a committee on education encouraged the acceleration of this process,¹¹ so that by independence most primary schools were using English from Standard 3. The Nairobi experiment encouraged an even earlier start under official policy in the post-independence years.¹²

The change-over from Swahili to English then came earlier in the educational process every year until the whole trend was reversed in March 1967 by a statement from the Ministry of Education. "The Swahili language will be the medium of instruction throughout the primary course," it read, "with English being taught as a subject only in those public primary schools whose present medium of instruction is Swahili, and English medium public primary schools convert to Swahili medium with Standard 1 next academic year, phasing through to Standard 7 by 1973." ¹³

This reversal marked the success of the fourth phase in the extension of Swahili. W. H. Whiteley has suggested that "widespread support for Swahili dates from the recognition by TANU that the language was an important factor in political unification."¹⁴ Elsewhere a European language served this purpose. "In many of the emergent countries of Africa," commented Prator at the Brazzaville Symposium on Multilingualism, "English or French is regarded as one of the strongest tools of nationalism, and the multiple indigenous languages are equated with tribalism."¹⁵ In Tanzania Swahili took this place and the period of rising nationalism witnessed its growth at every level.

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Swahili cultural study groups were formed in association with TANU during the 1950's. The vernacular was replaced by Swahili in literary campaigns, while Swahili records became popular and plentiful increasing the programme material available for the Tanganyika Broadcasting Corporation.

The Inter-Territorial language committee, setup in 1930 to promote the standardisation and development of Swahili gained a new sense of purpose under the aegis of Makerere, but still its progress was not fast enough. So the task of widening the Swahili vocabulary was transferred to University College, Dar-es-Salaam. Simultaneous English-Swahili interpretation was introduced there in the Legislative Council in 1955, "members being also permitted to speak in Swahili where the speaker is satisfied that they would otherwise be hampered."¹⁷ The political struggle was carried to the country through a TANU Swahili news-sheet, largely written by Julius Nyerere.

In 1958 the new governor, Sir Richard Turnbull, gave his inaugural address in Swahili, setting a precedent that was copied increasingly through the 1960's by politicians addressing English-speaking audiences. Although English retained much of its status-value, politicians almost without exception turned to Swahili at secondary-school assemblies.

After independence the value of Swahili for political unification was increased by the Union of Tanganyika and Zanzibar in April 1964. Language was a common

Footnotes (Cont'd)

16. Tanganyika African National Union.
17. Handbook of Tanganyika Territory, 1958, p.138.
18. As reported in The Nationalist, June 27, 1966.
19. As reported in The Standard, January 5, 1967.
20. Editorial in The Nationalist, January 5, 1967.

Revised version of talk given at Second Annual Conference of KIVUNG,
Port Moresby, October 12, 1968.