Some Similarities in the Language Policies of Kenya and Malaysia

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Abstract

Countries all over the world have different language planning policies. This paper explores the language planning policies of two countries, one from East Africa and the other from Southeast Asia, with a view of determining the similarities in their policies. In addition, sociolinguistic effects of the prevailing language policies are examined and it is established that the following phenomena are shared by the countries analyzed in this paper: a common history of British colonization, bilingual education programs, multilingual populations and the prevalence of linguistic Imperialism. This paper will also show that only a small fraction of the people residing in Kenya and Malaysia has competence in their country's official languages. Not only does this paper therefore, recommend multilingualism at all levels of education but also proposes that more East African and Southeast Asian languages be recognized as official languages. This way these languages and their speakers will become more empowered and will play more functional roles in the new world order.

Key words: official language, local languages, Kenya, Malaysia

Introduction

This paper is situated in the area of language planning. It seeks to compare the language policies of two multilingual countries found in East Africa and Southeast Asia. The paper begins by attempting a definition of the term 'language planning' (hereafter LP) before going on to outline the basic issues in the area of LP. Next the paper presents the language policies of Kenya and Malaysia. Then it describes four areas of similarity in the language situation in Southeast Asian and East African countries. Finally, conclusions and recommendations are made regarding the language situation in these countries.

1.0 Language planning: definitions and basic issues

The term language planning (LP) was first used in the 1950's to refer to the development of policies or programs designed to direct or change the way a language is used in a community. This view is held by those who assume that "language planning is authorized by government in order to deliberately alter a language's function in society for the purpose of solving communication problems" (Weinstein 1980:56). Within this paradigm, LP is therefore seen as a long-term and sustained process. In the modern world where individuals are much more aware of their rights it is not uncommon to come across members of different social groups who wish to maintain their linguistic identities. These groups may actively and often violently campaign for recognition. Therefore many governments try to forestall these kinds of conflicts by engaging in conscious, principled language planning or linguistic engineering activities.

Crystal (2010) views LP as the creation and implementation of an official policy about how the languages and linguistic varieties of a country are to be used while Rubin and Jernudd (1971) define it as a deliberate effort to influence the function, structure or acquisition of languages or varieties within a speech community. LP is mainly carried out by government departments and agencies. However, in some cases language academies, language committees, the media, influential individuals such as authors, and so on also play a critical role in LP.

A general theme in all the above definitions is in the treatment of a language/a variety as a resource to solve a societal problem.

This is true for all societies because no one speech community can boast of being monolithic/homogeneous linguistically. All societies exhibit linguistic variation thus necessitating some degree of LP. In multilingual countries where several languages are in competition the issue of LP is generally more urgent.

Sometimes language policy and language planning are used synonymously. However, for those who maintain the distinction between these terms, language policy refers to the more general linguistic and socio-political phenomena underlying the actual language planning process. It is the expression of the ideological orientations and views while LP refers to the actual proposals and activities that make up their implementation. Since these terms are so intimately intertwined we shall like Ferguson (2006) use them synonymously.

In the course of planning language the language planner may focus on either a language's status or its internal structure or both. The first approach results in status planning while the second one leads to corpus planning. Theoretically it is possible to distinguish between these two forms of planning but practically many nations undertake a mixture of the two when choosing an official or national language. Status planning normally changes the functional roles of the languages concerned with the language that is selected as the official code having more functional roles and special status than the other languages. The selected language usually plays an important role in formal schooling, media, executive, legislature, judiciary, diplomacy, commerce science and technology. This inevitably leads to its 'elevation' hence its speakers are often regarded as the elites.

Language standardization is a major aspect of corpus planning. Thus spelling, pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary are fixed. Graphization/codification (a process of developing/choosing a writing system/alphabet) and Modernization (a process of enriching the vocabulary in order for it to handle modern concepts) are also undertaken during corpus planning. Coulmas (1998: 448) notes "The corpus/status dichotomy emphasizes the dual nature of language planning that is, its concern with both linguistic and social aspects of language. However the two cannot be separated from each other. And LP can never be corpus oriented or status- oriented exclusively."

Cobarrubias and Fishman (1983) outline four ideologies that may influence LP: linguistic assimilation, linguistic pluralism, vernacularization and internationalism. In the case of linguistic assimilation there is a strong belief that everyone regardless of origin should learn the dominant language of society whereas in linguistic pluralism there is a move towards the recognition of the different languages in a society. Efforts are made to give each of these languages functional roles to play either in designated territories within the state or depending on individual users preferences. In Vernacularization, the focus is on indigenous languages. Efforts are made to assign them official status e.g. Tagalog/Pilipino in Philippines, Hebrew in Israel. Lastly, Internationalism is where a non-indigenous language of wider communication (hereafter LWC) is adopted as the official language e.g. English in Singapore and India. Hybrid models may also be used.

Depending on the language planners' decisions, a language can achieve a variety of statuses. It may be the sole official language e.g. French in France. Sometimes two or more languages may share official status e.g. English and Swahili are co-official languages in Kenya. Another possible scenario is where a language has official status but only on a regional basis e.g. German in Belgium. Planning decisions will obviously play a large role in determining what happens to the minority or unofficial languages of any country. This paper seeks to investigate official languages of selected countries in East Africa and Southeast Asia in order to determine the type of statuses held by these codes. In addition attempts are made to describe the implications of language planning models in the selected countries as well as present the similarities in their LP programs.

In the next section the paper gives a brief background of the East African setting before focusing on the Kenyan situation.

2.0 East Africa: Countries and their Languages

There are 5 countries in East Africa namely; Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi. South Sudan is in the process of joining the East African Community. Sometimes the term East Africa is used to refer to only 3 countries (Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania). On other occasions this term (or the term Eastern Africa) may be used to refer to more countries (sometimes up to 20 countries). In this paper East Africa is assumed to be that territory that has 5 countries which make up the East African community. With a population of 153 million spread across 1.82 square km the region is one of the densely populated areas of the world. Tanzania has the highest population (50 million) followed by Kenya (45 million) and then Uganda (36 million). Rwanda's population is at 12 million while that of Burundi is 10 million.

The language policies of the five East African countries are generally similar. At least one of the official languages in each of these countries is a foreign language. Rwanda and Burundi have French while Kenya, Uganda and even Tanzania have English. All these countries' language-of-education policies have adopted both English and Swahili in their curricula, although in different degrees (Ferguson 2006). Swahili is also the official language of the East African Community and the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) recently adopted it. When it comes to functional roles, however, it is only in Tanzania where Swahili faces fewer restrictions, "since English is not really used among Tanzanians…" (Petzell 2012: 142). Swahili therefore dominates most official domains e.g. education, governance, legislature etc. English functions mainly as an international language in Tanzania. The Kenyan and Ugandan cases are different since the English language has widespread functional roles and special status compared to all other languages.

Rwanda has Kinyarwanda, French and English as official languages while Burundi has Kirundi and French. Thus Rwanda has three official languages while Burundi has two. These languages together with Swahili serve as LWCs in the two countries. In Rwanda, English is the medium of instruction in all levels of education except elementary ones. The situation in Burundi is different with Kirundi and French being the mediums of instruction in formal schooling. Burundi is the only East African country that does not assign English official status.

Numerous local languages are also spoken in each of the East African countries. In Tanzania 128 indigenous languages are currently in use (Lewis et al 2009). Kenya has 42 local languages while Uganda has 40. Burundi and Rwanda have 3 each. A majority of these languages belong to the Bantu group. Others are either Nilotic or Cushitic. A number of these indigenous languages are endangered since very little is being done to promote/preserve them. There are several policy documents stating that indigenous languages should be seen as an asset and important part of the people's heritage, but the implementation phase is far from being undertaken. In reality what is being witnessed is a case of passive assimilation (that minority languages are not forbidden as such but they are handled with indifference by many East African governments).

It is apparent that Internationalization is the most favored model of LP by most of the East African nations. Four out of five countries have adopted a non-indigenous language (either English or French) as their official language. Thus, Kenya and Uganda have English as the 'main' official language. It is dominant in education, executive, legislature and judiciary. A similar situation is witnessed in Burundi and Rwanda where French has axed out all the other languages in these domains. In Tanzania, however, there has been a tendency towards a hybrid system where the LP policies entail some aspects internationalization and assimilation (if we make the assumption that Swahili is the most dominant language in these domains in Tanzania).

In the next section we describe the Southeast Asia setting.

3.0 Southeast Asia: Countries and their Languages

A total of 11 countries make up the Southeast Asian region. These are Brunei, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Southeast Asia is geographically divided into two regions namely Mainland Southeast Asia (also known as Indochina) and Maritime Southeast Asia (also referred to as Malay Archipelago). Thus Mainland Southeast Asia constitutes of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and Peninsular Malaysia while Maritime Southeast Asia includes: Indonesia, Philippines, East Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore and East Timor. In 2010 the total population in these countries stood at 593 million.

Due to constraints of time, this paper will only focus on one Southeast Asian country namely; Malaysia. Malaysia which covers an area of 329 847 square km and has a population of 29.7 million is similar to Kenya in two areas. First, it is a former British colony and second, it has two official languages (both Malay and English serving as official codes). There are several indigenous languages in Malaysia mainly from the Mon-Khmer and Malayo-Polynesian families. These languages are: Malay varieties (there are 10 non-standard varieties of Malay), ethnic languages (e.g. Iban, Dusun, Kadazan, Semai) Chinese Varieties (e.g. Mandarin, Cantonese, Hakka, Hokchew, Hokkien), Indian languages (mainly Tamil, Punjabi, Telugu), Creoles (e.g. Malaccan which is a Portuguese-based creole) and Malaysian Sign Language (Ozog 1990). It is therefore evident that both Kenya and Malaysia are multilingual countries.

In the next section this paper highlights four major areas of similarity in the linguistic situation in East Africa and South East Asia.

4.0 Similarities in the language policies of Kenya and Malaysia

In order to compare the language policies of East Africa and Southeast Asia in any meaningful way this paper limits itself to only two countries in the two regions. In the case of East Africa this paper will only focus on Kenya while in the case Southeast Asian countries only Brunei and Malaysia shall be addressed. To carry out a more systematic analysis this paper presents the linguistic similarities in these countries under the following sub-titles: multilingualism & triglossism, multiculturalism, common history of colonization, bilingual education and linguistic Imperialism.

4.1 Multilingualism and Triglossism

In sub-section 2.0 this paper shed some light on the multilingual nature of the Kenyan society. From the discussion it is evident that there are two official languages and over 42 indigenous ones in Kenya making the country multilingual. There is a clear distinction in the distribution of these local languages within each of Kenya's 47 counties. A good number of these languages have dialects. Luyia for example has 17 dialects. The number of local languages may be higher if the language/dialect dichotomy is ignored (Ogechi 2005). In addition there are other unstable languages such as Sheng' and Engsh that are growing rapidly and are popular with urban youth (Ogechi 2005). Thus the Kenyan society exhibits linguistic heterogeneity. This has led to it being described as a triglossic society where English is the High code, local languages are Low Codes and Swahili is an Intermediate Code (Ogechi 2005). While many rural speakers tend to use indigenous languages which are closely associated with the ethnic groups in Kenya (see Kebeya-Omondi 2012), those in urban areas mainly use English, Swahili or Sheng. This is due to the cosmopolitan nature of many urban centers in Kenya. Code switching (the use of two or more languages in one conversational turn) is also common among Kenyans of all walks of life.

Similarly, the language situation in Brunei and Malaysia is highly multilingual (see sub-section 3.0). Both countries have English and Standard Malay as their official languages and numerous indigenous languages are spoken by their inhabitants. English is the H code, the indigenous languages are the L code while Standard Malay is the Intermediate code. Thus Malaysia and Brunei may be considered triglossic communities. Each of these three countries (Kenya, Malaysia and Brunei) has two official languages. In all these countries, however, English is a more 'superior' official language than either Standard Swahili or Standard Malay. Another common characteristic of the Kenyan, Malaysian and Brunei situation has to do with the indigenous codes: a majority of these countries' indigenous languages are not officially recognized and are mainly used in private domains such as the home. Thus English continues to play a major role in education in the three countries. It is also an *indispensable* mode of communication in other public domains e.g., the executive, legislature, judiciary, media, commerce and industry.

4.2 Multiculturalism

Culturally, the Kenyan society exhibits a lot of diversity mainly due to differences in ethnic group membership. There are over 42 ethnic groups in the country (excluding those of exotic origin e.g. Asians, Europeans, Arabs, Somalis, Chinese and so on. A majority of Kenyans (probably 84%) belong to one of the 42 groups while only about 16% are in the exotic category. Different ethnic groups have different traditional practices. For example nomadic and pastoral groups such as Maasai and Samburu still wear elaborate jewelry and have different eating habits. Typically they prefer animal meats, fats, blood and milk. Their music and dance are also characteristically different from other ethnic groups in Kenya.

Like Kenya, Malaysia is multiracial and multicultural. We shall consider the population composition in Malaysia. The source of these statistical data is Central Intelligence Agency US (http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-fact book/fields/2075). According to these sources, approximately 50.1% of Malaysia's population of 29.7 million are Malays, 22.6% are Chinese, 11.8% indigenous, 6.7% Indian 0.7% others and 8.2 % are expatriates. Malays form the largest ethnic group in Malaysia. This group may be compared to the Kenyan indigenous groups which constitute over 84% of the country's population. However this similarity is lost when one considers a further breakdown of Kenya's ethnic groups thus: Kikuyu 22%, Luyia 14%, Luo 13%, Kalenjin 12%, Kamba 11%, Kisii 6%, Meru 6%, other African 15% and non-African (Asian, European and Arab) 1%. From these figures, the largest ethnic group in Kenya, the Gikuyu, only constitute 22% of the population while in Malaysia the Malays exceed half of the population. This explains why Swahili and not Gikuyu is the 'other' official language in Kenya while in Malaysia Malay serves as the 'other' official code.

Finally, more diversity in the two countries is found in the religious beliefs of its people (http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the_-world-fact_book/fields/2075). Kenya's religious composition is: Protestants 45%, Roman Catholics 33%, Islam 10%, Indigenous religions 10% and others 2%. If specific denominations are ignored, it is clear that a majority of Kenyans (78%) are Christians while only 10% are Muslims. The main language of Islamic faith is Arabic. However, in Kenya Swahili is also an important language among Muslims probably due to a high concentration of their followers in the coastal area. In contrast, Christianity in Kenya is often transmitted through English not Arabic. However, Swahili and local languages of Kenya also feature in sermons, liturgy and hymns mostly among the urban poor and rural congregations, respectively. Indigenous religions are mainly conducted in the respective ethnic languages. Thus linguistic variation exists in the different religious faiths in Kenya. In the case of Malaysia, 61.3% of Malaysians are Muslims, 19.8% are Buddhists, 9.2% are Christians, 6.3% are Hindus and 1.3% practice traditional Chinese religions. The country is officially an Islamic nation. Thus in the Southeast Asian country Islam is the dominant religion while in Kenya it is a minority group. For the most part, religious affiliation follows ethnic lines. Almost all Malays are Muslims. Most Chinese are Buddhists although a small number practice Christianity. The third largest ethnic group, the Indians, practices Hinduism and are Tamil speaking. Many individuals from the indigenous groups in the two countries have converted to Christianity. Since language is the most direct, immediate and culture-bound way of communication (Coulmas 1998) studies on multicultural and multilingual societies are likely to unearth interesting facts about the interaction between language, culture and ethnicity hence increase our knowledge on this topic.

4.3 Common history of Colonization

Kenya and Malaysia are ex-British colonies. Britain established the East Africa Protectorate in 1895 and in 1920 a colony known as 'Kenya' was formed. The colonizers went on to replace the local languages in most public domains. Thus English became the language of governance, law, education etc. while Swahili (the *Ki-Settler* variety) was used by British government officials in governing the masses. In 1950s and early 60s the locals through the MAU MAU uprising fought for independence which they finally got in 1963. After independence, nothing much changed: English continues to play a major role in post- independence Kenya. It still serves as the dominant official language of Kenya.

The British first became involved with Malay politics formally in 1771. In the 18th and 19th century the British colonial masters (The Straits Settlements, as they were called) began to occupy and control huge sections of Malay Archipelago. In 1895 the British increased their influence over Malaya as they came totally under British rule. During this period Government, Malay and Christian schools were established. These schools had different language policies (see sub-section 4.4 for details). Notably, English became rooted in this country and even after its independence from Britain in 1957; the ex-colonizer's language continues to play an important role in Malaysia. It is therefore clear that English is the main official language in Kenya and Malaysia and this may be attributed to the common history of being colonized by Britain.

4.4 Bilingual education

Bilingual education also known as dual-language education refers to academic programs that are conducted in two languages. Baker (2010) classifies bilingual education into two categories: additive and subtractive bilingualism. In additive bilingualism the learning of a second language does not interfere with the learning of a first language whereas in subtractive bilingualism the learning of a second language interferes with the learning of a first; it replaces the first language.

Kenya's bilingual education policy leans towards **subtractive bilingualism**. There are indications that LP began with the British settlers and Christian missionaries (Gorman 1971, Nabea 2009). In spite of colonizers advocating for separate education systems for different races, a survey of policies by various LP committees indicates that bilingual education programs appear to have been preferred over the years. Before independence African schools, for example, used local languages as MOIs in lower levels of learning and English at higher levels. Conversely, European schools used only English at all levels of schooling. Most post-colonial era policies however, recommended that English be retained as the MOI in secondary and tertiary levels while lower levels of learning employ the language of the catchment area as MOI. It was also agreed that the MOI in upper primary be only English. Today mother tongues are prohibited at higher levels of schooling and their use within the school compound may earn one severe punishment.

Swahili, on the other hand, was allowed some room in the Kenyan classroom. Initially it was only one of the taught subjects but from 1985 (when 8-4-4 curriculum was rolled out) it was elevated to a compulsory subject at both primary and secondary levels. At the tertiary level only English serves as the MOI. A high premium is therefore placed on English both as a MOI and as a school subject.

In contrast, Malaysia has had an **additive bilingual** program both at pre- and post-independence eras. When formal education first appeared in the country, in the form of vernacular schools, the Malay language was the MOI. At independence a bilingual education policy was introduced to ensure that learners attain a high degree of proficiency in both English and Malay since the two served as official codes of the new state. In addition to English and Malay, Chinese is also a MOI in some schools. Malay and English are compulsory school subjects. Like Kenya, where vernacular codes serve as MOIs in foundational levels of education, Malaysia allows non-Malaya learners (the Chinese and Indian) to use their vernaculars as MOI. Generally, the MOI in public primary schools is of two categories: Malay medium national schools and non-Malay medium national type schools where the MOI is Chinese or Tamil. At secondary level Malay is the MOI while English remains a compulsory subject. The language also remains a prerequisite for admission into tertiary institutions. Thus, in Malaysia Malay and English are principal languages in the school curriculum (Ozog 1990). Kenya only has English since Swahili is a 'junior' language of education.

4.5 Linguistic Imperialism

Linguistic Imperialism refers to the transfer of a dominant language to other people as a demonstration of power. In order to account for 'the inequality of languages' in Africa, Phillipson (1992) uses the term 'linguistic imperialism' which he defines as "the dominance asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages" (p. 47). While drawing heavily from the writings of scholars from Central, East and West Africa, Phillipson decries the stigmatization of indigenous African languages in both colonial and post-colonial periods. He attributes this to the importance attached to English in many of the ex-British colonies where it is an official language thus, making it 'more equal than' the other languages.

As already mentioned, Kenya attained her independence in 1963 while Malaysia attained hers in 1957. At independence the true sons of the soil were called upon to take over leadership and governance of their countries. These new leaders continued to perpetuate the colonizers' ideologies, language included. The language policies of these three post-independent nations continued to have English serve as an official language. Those fluent in the language were greatly admired and rewarded with top positions in the newly formed governments. Over the years English came to be viewed as an important tool for socio-economic and political advancement. The majority of the countries' citizens who lacked mastery in the language was highly disadvantaged socio-economically (Bamgbose 1999). They could not partake of the 'national cake' hence the onset of social, cultural and political inequality in these countries.

Kenya's language policy has remained largely unchanged from 1963 when she gained her independence. Indigenous languages have continued to be ignored and Swahili continues to play a minimal role in education. Malaysia drastically reorganized her language policies shortly after independence. Efforts were made to elevate the Malay language as well as develop/modernize it in 1959 in Malaysia. However in 2002, a shocking decision was made by the government of the day that science and mathematics would be taught in English not only at tertiary levels but also during the first year of schooling. This raises the question 'Why'? Why after all the efforts that had been made to develop the Malay would there be such a drastic change in language policy? One of the reasons is the internationalization attribute that Malay lacks. It is a fact that English is an important international language in the world today.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper has shown that in spite of Kenya, and Malaysia being miles apart in terms of geographical distance, they have several features in common as far as their language policies are concerned. They both have the following features: a common history of British colonization, multilingual/triglossism, multiculturalism, bilingual education programs and linguistic Imperialism. It is evident that English continues to dominate all public spheres in Kenya and Malaysia. Whereas it serves as a lingua franca in these nations, only a small fraction of the population has mastered the language. In Kenya, for instance, English is barely understood by 75% of the population (Nabea 2009). This is absurd given that it has served as the sole official language of the republic of Kenya from 1964 to 2010.

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This paper therefore recommends that the language policies of Kenya and Malaysia be reorganized so as to include more indigenous languages from these communities. It is clear that the more English grows the more it retards the growth of numerous local languages in these countries. Like Phillipson (1992) we advocate for the rights of all languages and suggests a variety of strategies (such as multilingual schooling, changing language policy, upgrading African languages and indigenous education) to accomplish this.

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