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## *Language choice for development: the case for Swahili in Kenya*

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**ABSTRACT** *Development, aimed at a general improvement of the quality of life in society, should target the majority and not the minority at the exclusion of the majority. Attainment of such development, in turn, calls for involvement of people in making decisions as well as in the plans for their implementation. They will then feel that they own those efforts and participate more enthusiastically in efforts to achieve stated goals. This calls for an effective communication system to link the government and other development agencies on the one hand, and the public on the other, enabling an appropriate flow of information between the two. If well utilized, the media would play a very significant role in ensuring such a flow of information. This article examines the role played by the media in trying to achieve the stated development goals in Kenya. While it would have been more effective to reach people in their first languages, considering the multilingual nature of the Kenyan society, the challenges are many. Fortunately, there is Swahili, a language spoken and understood by many, not only in Kenya, but also in the rest of East and Central Africa. In spite of the potential it has to reach a wider audience, it is not adequately utilized in the media. Language practice in the media relies more on the use of English to communicate important information intended to reach all, irrespective of the first language spoken and knowledge of English. In order not to continue excluding the majority from public discourse on development and other national issues, the article calls for a change in the language policy in the media in Kenya.*

### *1. Introduction*

Improved living standards are an important measure of development in society. It is national governments who are largely charged with the responsibility of ensuring better health provision and general living conditions for their people. Hence there is a need for governmental direction to be given to development efforts undertaken nationally, regionally and internationally. Such direction is usually channelled through the agency of the various government departments, who liaise with other organizations trying to ensure that the population gets the necessary services. As well as working with agencies, however, the government also needs to ensure the co-operation of citizens so that they can contribute to development efforts in an environment that is conducive to its success.

In this respect then, government and citizens are partners in development – an ideal of collaboration that calls for, and is designed to be about, a productive working relationship. In establishing and maintaining such a relationship, communication plays a vital role. With a good communication network in place, action becomes, or at least has the potential to become, more effective. Among other functions, such a network should serve to ensure that decisions made are communicated to all that they might affect. The public should be kept informed with regard to how policies are reached and how they will be affected by them. Ideally, the public should also know what problems are being faced, and what are the future prospects. In this widespread dissemination of information, effective use of the media is the key component in providing a communication network.

In spite of this imperative, while drawing mainly on practices in the Kenyan media, this article will show that, in most African nations, the media have not yet been adequately utilized to attain the optimum effectiveness and suggest that this is due in substantial measure to the choice of language used in the media.

## 2. *Significance of the media*

The significance of the media can be better understood by looking at the various functions that the media play in society in Africa. As tools of communication, the media have the potential to make a very big contribution in development, education, entertainment, and information. As well as this, people are kept informed about important happenings in the world via the various media. People see how political, educational, religious issues affect society. Media also of course have a lighter side and they can serve as a source of entertainment. Sometimes, the media reach a far wider audience than any single teacher ever could, but to equate the greater extent of their audience with a higher quality of information may not be accurate. Sheridan (1965: 264) depicted the scenario thus:

A lesson that is given on film, radio or television may reach an audience of millions, bridging the barrier of illiteracy and bringing specialist instruction to the most isolated communities.

Whether in fact the media have been successful in that function in Kenya and other African countries with similar language policies in the media provide the focus of this article.

The media can tackle a wide range of issues which educate, inform and entertain but this does not say all there is to say about the media, for the media are a very powerful force that affect our daily lives and they can easily be used prescriptively to the detriment of either encouraging or permitting freedom of thought, speech and action. Media can go some way towards supporting for example a dress code or take the lead in the introduction of new patterns of life borrowed from other cultures, but when this impinges on the curtailment of individual choice and freedom then the media have lost their objectivity and become prescriptive. The way in which national dictators have occupied air time and frequently determined the output of the media, is an indication of the specifically *political* potential of the media for influencing people on a large

scale. Just as much however as the media can be utilized for the dissemination of repressive perspectives, so they can be utilized as an agent of desired change in society.

In Africa, the increase in the numbers of independent as well as state media organizations – as well as increased ownership of television sets among the public – has given the media, in general, more power in society. McQuail (1987) and Wood (1983) say that the media are used to identify, follow and explain different occurrences in our environment by relating them to our current political, and economic situations giving many people an opportunity to participate in discussions and decisions on issues that affect their lives both nationally and internationally.

The question here is whether the media in Africa have allowed African people to do so.

### *3. The print media in Kenya*

Perhaps because of persistent widespread illiteracy, and despite the variety and depth of their news coverage, newspapers remain beyond the realm of the majority of Kenyans. Many people are thus forced to rely on the radio and television for information. These however present problems in the choice of language. Many of the programmes broadcast use a language that is not understood by the majority. Whilst approximately more than half of all Kenyan people speak Swahili (the national language) – albeit with varying degrees of intelligibility – not more than one Kenyan in twenty understands English. Yet it is in English that many radio programmes are broadcast instead of Swahili, a language that the majority of Kenyans are much more comfortable with. Adegbija (1994) notes a similar situation in many African countries.

It is a similar situation with newspapers. There is a Swahili daily newspaper in Kenya called *Taifa Leo* but research into circulation of daily newspapers according to language during the eighties, showed that over a two-month period, 267,750 newspapers in English were read daily between Monday and Saturday compared to 56,975 Swahili newspapers (Kiganya 1995). Those statistics must have changed by now but the important fact still remains that most people understand Swahili as opposed to English but it seems that they do not use papers as a source of information.

Besides the dailies, there are various professional journals which report research findings, but these too are published in English. Seminars and conferences on development issues which are directly affecting society are conducted in English and the various conclusions and recommendations on the way forward published in the same language. This is particularly inappropriate when the seminars and reports are about the rural poor.

### *4. Radio and television*

Because many people can listen to or watch at the one time, both radio and television have a huge impact on society. Radio, however, remains the most widely available throughout the country. Although the poverty level is such that

individual families may not be able to afford a radio set, access to radio is widespread in even very remote parts; an entire village may share access to a set which they communally utilize to follow important events. With this important prioritization as an instrument of communication, the radio becomes a major facility for educating and sensitizing the public in new knowledges. In fact, since its inception in Kenya in 1927, the radio has become the single most important mode of communication between the government and the public.

In spite of this favoured position within communication media, even radio programmes which discuss important policy issues and significant matters continue to be broadcast, not in a local language, but in English. Ideally, local languages should predominate in order to communicate effectively with listeners, but in reality, local language radio broadcasts only occupy very few hours of airtime. The Kenya Broadcasting Corporation's Eastern, Central and Western Radio Services which utilize several local languages are very limited by the fact that each language is allotted between one and two hours daily. Because of the government's tight controls in broadcast licensing, to date, there is only one privately owned radio station, Kameme FM, that uses the Gĩkũyũ language. The only other station that uses a local language is the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation run Coro FM which uses Gĩkũyũ too. All these, however, are regional and do not have national coverage. This means that many issues cannot be tackled adequately let alone exhaustively. Even when a national radio channel does dedicate itself to broadcasting in a single language other than English, such as is the case with the Kiswahili Service of the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) radio, problems of a different nature surface and KBC has tended to limit itself to 'salaams' and music programmes.

In particular, during election time, people want to hear the claims, counterclaims and arguments put forward by the various contestants for office as they discuss important issues of direct relevance to people's daily lives so that an informed choice can be made. Listeners rarely get this opportunity however as most of the discussions are broadcast in English. For example, this is what happened in the preparations for the 1997 general elections and again in the preparations for the 1999 national census even, ironically, including the attempts to inform and sensitize the public. Once again, the whole issue of the recent review of the current constitution is by and large being discussed in English with only a few hastily prepared programmes in the Kiswahili Service.

Social issues of many different sorts have been aired on radio such as the the accident rate on the roads which has long been an issue of national concern. Several public efforts made to make the roads safer have included a radio programme designed to educate the public on road use – one with the graphic title 'Road Carnage'! Regrettably however and in spite of its good intentions and its dedication to a worthy cause, the ordinary road users do not understand whatever is discussed in the programme since it is in English. With this breakdown in the choice of language – the most elementary strategy of radio communication – it is small wonder that most Kenyans do not adhere to even the most elementary of road safety rules. Similarly, the programme 'Legal Advisor'

currently aired on Thursday evenings discusses difficult legal issues in simple language that can be understood by people outside the legal profession, but that 'simple language' is English! In order to benefit a majority of people, such a programme should have been within the Kiswahili Service.

Once again however, new technologies have enabled developments in the monodimensional structures of radio broadcasting from a centre to peripheries to take place. More *interactive* listeners are now increasingly involved either by phone or by writing letters. This has been the style of much popular radio and television broadcasting throughout the world for the past ten years but in Kenya, it gained substantial momentum after the liberalization of the broadcasting sector which in turn brought on board private operators. Osoro (2000a; 2000b) correctly observes that interaction has become the dominant trend in the period since private radio stations were started. Such interactive programmes have become very popular because they give listeners an opportunity to express their problems, feelings, aspirations and expectations on issues affecting them. Listeners hear and exchange views with people of different opinions and as a result get to understand the position of the public on different aspects of life being discussed.

##### *5. Interactive radio programmes*

As we have noted, interactive programmes are found mainly in the newer, privately owned radio stations. Nation FM has 'Your Shout' and 'Changamka'; Metro FM has 'Let's Chat', 'Metro Love Zones' and 'Ladies' Night'. Each of these programmes presents different, important topics not only in politics and economics but also more broadly in social issues. In August 2000, Metro FM had a special month-long series of programmes on HIV/AIDS. They invited different specialists to answer questions about it on air. Unfortunately, all these programmes were broadcast in English. Although Kenya Broadcasting Corporation, the national radio, has also started broadcasting similar programmes, they are mainly heard on the English language service. These include programmes with titles like 'Your Views on Phone' and 'Ties that Bind'. 'Youth Variety Show' is the name of a youth programme and is particularly interesting because it tackles various problems facing the young people who phone in to ask questions which are answered by counsellors. It tackles issues of teenage pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, drug abuse and parent-child relationships, which are pertinent issues that need to reach as wide an audience as possible through the use of Swahili or other local languages. Although the Kiswahili Service has started a few programmes like 'Sema Usikike' ('Talk and be Heard') and 'Umemchagua Nan' ('Whom have you Chosen') in content these tend to dwell on trivial issues such as, in the latter, people calling in to select their favourite musician.

The radio is not involving the majority of people in important national discussions through the use of judicious programming. The main reason for this is the choice of language. In the case of Kenyan radio it is because the Kiswahili Service has lagged behind in programme innovation. In order to serve its public more fully, it needs to improve fast. One cause of the limited availability in the

provision of Swahili language based programming is that the government does not allow private radio stations to broadcast nationally. Currently, many of the good quality programmes mentioned above remain the preserve of Nairobi residents. One solution to ensure that programmes go out in local languages would be to introduce a law compelling all licensed stations to air a certain percentage of their programmes in Swahili, the national language of Kenya as well as Tanzania.

### *6. Television*

The situation with regard to television is not very different. The only television network that has a near national reach is the one owned by the national broadcasting company, Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC). However, because a very small percentage of the populace – especially in rural areas – owns television sets, the wider coverage is not reflected in viewing numbers. Airtime is used to present news, commercial advertisements, and many other programmes in both Swahili and English. Unfortunately, it remains true that (apart from the news) most programmes are still presented in English. Just as is the case with the radio, the result of this arrangement is that few people benefit.

Many studio panel discussion programmes are aired by KBC television, some weekly, others as special programmes in response to important events. They cover a wide range of issues and provide very important sources of information and knowledge. However, once again, the continued use of English remains problematic and – although many find it an unacceptable truth in this day and age – English remains a language that many rural and some sectors of urban society do not understand.

Programmes which specialize in presenting serious debates include ‘Insight’, ‘Face to Face’, ‘The Debate’, ‘Professional View’, ‘In Search of an Answer’, ‘Press Conference’ and ‘Economic Focus’. On 31 May 2000, there was a special debate on the origin and development of the pressure for a constitutional review. The guests included Bishop Njue, Patrick Lumumba (a law lecturer), Kibaki, Saitoti (members of parliament), and two other citizens all of whom spoke in English; only J. Nyagah spoke in Swahili. The whole debate brought out very significant issues on the constitution which were of interest to a wider, but not necessarily English-speaking, audience.

On another occasion, a programme called ‘View Point’, aired in February 2000, saw Kipruto arap Kirwa, a member of parliament, discuss the problems that face maize farmers in Kenya. Similarly in ‘Economic Focus’ of May 2000, the guest was the chairman of the Coffee Farmers Association in Kenya who shared with viewers the experiences that coffee farmers go through in growing and marketing their crop. He also spoke about the problems in the sector including poor marketing, low prices, and delays in paying farmers. However, most coffee and maize farmers are poor rural dwellers. They had a right to learn more about the problems affecting these sectors of national production and economy, but since these programmes were presented in English, they were excluded from any discussion. This meant in turn that the programme became

one *about* them, rather than one in which their input – even if only as viewers or listeners, not discussants – was vital to its success.

Programmes in Swahili which address issues of a development nature are very few; 'Mjadala' ('The Debat') and 'Hile na Lile' ('This One and That') are not made or aired frequently or regularly. The need for more discussion programmes in Swahili can be seen for example, at a time that there was frequent and acute shortage of power and sugar in Kenya. Such shortages needed to be explained in detail to the public since they greatly affected daily life. Certainly an attempt was made to explain the situation to the public in the media but, once again, it was done in English.

Many of the new privately owned television stations which broadcast from and to Nairobi present most programmes in English. These include Nation television, with talk shows like 'Up Close and Candid'. On 9 August 2000, the programme's guests were Musikari Kombo and Otieno Kajwang, members of the Public Accounts Committee in the eighth parliament. The topic of discussion was a list of prominent people, most in government, who had irregularly obtained heavy loans from the National Bank of Kenya and failed to repay them hence contributing to the near collapse of the bank. There was a national debate on 'the list of shame', as it was referred to, and it was good to have the two expounding on it and answering questions from the public but then, as is often the case, the programme was aired in English. The majority were inevitably excluded from the discussions. Overall then, the situation in Kenya is one in which, the media do not play their role of educating the public so as to enable them to participate in national decision making.

Most Kenyan people are not given the opportunity via the media to become better informed about events taking place around them. It seems as if the current language policy on the media enables those who are already well informed to access yet more information, while those already excluded find themselves outside a language route by which they can find out more. People in the upper economic sectors of society – and who are usually already well educated and well informed – continue to receive more information via the various media. In comparison, the poor, already underprivileged by lack of access to international languages of communication and lack of access to media reception – let alone input – find themselves further disadvantaged in a widening gap between opportunities, knowledge and information made available to them and to those already privileged (see for example, Oskamp 1991: 181). Some commentators even see in this scenario a deliberate strategy to keep the poor majority in ignorance in order to manipulate them easily.

### *7. Public mobilization for development*

Development, to be successful, involves co-operation but not co-opting. Governments need to work along with ordinary people in order to improve the living standards of the latter group. This therefore calls for the involvement of the public in the formulating and implementation of various policies in national development. To achieve this, there must be an effective communication network

between the state and the various development agencies on the one hand and members of the public who are affected by the activities of those development organs on the other. The public must be given the opportunity and capability to make choices by being kept informed about the relevant and changing situations. It is ordinary people who need access to new knowledge on important issues, to significant developments as well as to new innovations in society which have the potential to affect their daily lives and the quality of those lives.

On the one hand, the official political, cultural, economic, health and educational plans and policies of governments need to be communicated to the public. This should be in a language that they fully understand. A language policy or practice in communication which excludes the least privileged in society only serves to create suspicion and build a general lack of trust among the people. One example of this was when the Nairobi City Council drew up a plan to rebuild some of the old housing estates for the benefit of their dwellers. Surprisingly – it first seemed – this plan was not well received by the residents of the targeted estates. It soon transpired that the plan had not even been fully explained to the target people, far less had they been part of the planning processes of enquiry, proposal and intended implementation. In a somewhat belated attempt to redress this failure and to address the need for fuller communication about the proposed plan, a television programme called ‘The Debate’ was dedicated to the issue on 14 September 2000. Although this was billed as an attempt to explain the plan to the concerned public, the choice of the English language for the transmission, meant that few residents of the estates understood, let alone benefitted, from the debate or the ‘explanation’. Without appropriate consultation with the residents, resistance to the plan from them continued and eventually the plan for ‘improving’ the flats had to be shelved. One step towards remedying that situation as it headed for failure, would have been to insist on the use of Swahili as well as other local languages in the programmes designed to inform people about the steps the local government intended to take, the reasons for taking them, and the beneficial results that could be anticipated.

It has become the norm in Kenya to discuss both in print and on electronic media, important national issues only with a privileged sector of society. Invariably in English, the decisions arrived at are then implemented on behalf of the excluded remainder – who are in fact the majority of the people – without further, or any, participatory consultation with them. Consequently, left out of the process, they end up feeling mere passive recipients, largely unappreciative of imposed developments. Perceived and described by the privileged as forever ‘complaining’ rather than as people actively seeking ways in which to participate positively, they remain unwilling and even resentful recipients unable to contribute their voice, ideas and concerns to the debate. Yet, governments should actively seek such participatory consultation in order to achieve the desired co-operation. There is an urgent need to halt and then reverse the process of excluding the majority in putatively ‘consultative’ processes aired on the media. All people, women and men, need to have a sense in which they too ‘own’ the

effort to develop the nation. Politicians prepare elaborate and lengthy speeches on important national issues and then deliver them *in English* in the villages. What purpose is served by this? In such stratified circumstances of communication where speaking English is considered prestigious, do they communicate successfully with the people they set out to inform or even consult? Any (mis)understood communication can only confirm established perceptions of local languages as being of low status.

Whilst it is evidently impractical for every individual citizen to actually physically or vocally participate in every single process of decision making, it is important for people to have channels of communication that imply respect for local values and yet enable them to be kept informed of whatever has been discussed and what decisions have been arrived at. We are all vocal partners in national development.

Beer (1985: 218) holds that the involvement of the majority of people in politics has a close relationship to the language question. The use of a language that is widely known enables a bigger part of the citizenry to be active participants. This is true not only in politics but also in all other spheres of public life. Presently, the media have largely failed to focus on widespread or popular participation in issues of development and in fact its strenuous and persistent use of English has actually tended to work against participation by the majority.

It is a contradiction to seek to create widespread participation by using a language that is not understood or spoken by many people. Insisting on speaking English in addressing national, Kenyan, issues and on first languages is of course linked to the politics of ethnicity. Perhaps an ideal solution would have been to develop all local languages to a point where they could all be used in more areas of discourse and therefore, theoretically, to reach all people. This is a very expensive route. The continued development and expanded usage of Swahili is the other option.

#### *8. Benefits for the language*

The media have the ability to function as an excellent language advocate due to their wide audience. In spite of the limitations on its usage that I have indicated in this article, Swahili has benefited from the media, and in fact the media are in the forefront in the development of Swahili as they have played a very significant role in its spread and development (Dadi 1995; Adegbija 1994).

#### *9. Conclusion*

In a divided information society the two major classes see a minority who have access to information and to the means of communication, while the majority who are least aware of what is happening around them, are not only deprived of the means of communication in terms of access to hardware, but even by the very languages used. In poorer countries only a few enjoy the benefits of information technology while the majority remain largely ignorant.

In order to have more people participating in charting the destiny of their country and reaping the benefits of the information society, there is a need to

look afresh at the policies that govern the use of the media in communicating to the public. We have shown that to a large extent our media do not communicate to the majority and as a result only a small section of society follows issues through the media. The language used in the media must be accessible to as many people as possible. The current situation, in which only a few are informed of important issues and their (already privileged) opinions sought, while the rest, the majority, remain in the dark, enabled only to follow orders from 'above', needs to be changed. The general public has a right to information in languages they understand and use.

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