

# EFFECTS OF GOVERNMENT LANGUAGE POLICY: THE CASE OF KISWAHILI IN UGANDA

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## **Abstract**

*The main thesis of this paper was to examine the effects of government language policy in relations to the Kiswahili in Uganda. The historical background to the language policy in Uganda is explored. The causes of failure of implement the language policy are discussed. The roles of Christianity and Islam in the language questions are outlined. The colonial perspectives and political role in the language matters in the country are discussed. The paper proposes the training of those who train the young ones so that the Kiswahili language is mastered at an early age.*

**Keywords:** *Language Policy, Kiswahili, Political and Religious Roles*

## **Introduction**

Is the sole responsibility of every sovereign country in the world to have a running language policy its governance? A family, compared to a government is the smallest administrative unit in a country. If the head (government) of the family relaxes on the leadership strategies he himself set up and declared to all family members, then some sectors of the family are likely to keep lagging behind. Those sectors ignored in a family eventually may grow and bear consequences that may kill the whole family setup. The language policy implementation in Uganda leaves much to be desired for no government since Obote I (1962-1970) ever cared enough to put in effect what is described as policy on language. Uganda like many African countries is endowed with numerous minority languages where the natives suffer from lack of coercion hindered by effective language policy. The language of Kiswahili which has always been proposed to take the place of lingua franc little or nothing has been done to promote it.

## **Language Policy for a country**

Language policy, which is part of language planning typically at national level is a statement or written document by the government which stipulates how, when and where language(s) should be used in a society. Language policy should be in line with the political, social and economic aims and objectives of the society where it operates. It is therefore desirable

and possible to plan, effect, modify and systematically change the status of a language(s) within a policy.

The whole idea of a language policy therefore is to solve language problems such as maintenance of one language, which has a superior status compared to other languages in multilingual speech community associated with the communication pattern. Language policy assigns language roles such as medium of instruction in different educational levels, and for administrative and judicial purposes among others in a country.

### **Uganda's language policy**

During the regime of Idi Amin former president of Uganda/ (1971-1979) Kiswahili, the east African lingua franca (Mulokozi, 1995; Kiango 2002), became the second official national language, but lost its official and national status in the 1995 Uganda constitution. The 1995 Uganda constitution states that; and The official language of Uganda is English and subject to clause (1) of this article any other language may be used as a medium of instruction in schools or other educational institution, or for legislative, administrative, judicial purposes as may be prescribed by law (section 6).

In September 2005, the Uganda parliament voted to once again make Kiswahili the second official language together with English. Consequently in 200 the ministry of gender, labour and social development, declared Kiswahili as a second official language of Uganda (UNCP, 2006). Since the time of its introduction, Kiswahili as a language has faced a blockage among the citizens of Uganda. Up to now, its promotion is still a challenge to the government. Kiswahili domains are not stipulated, there are no Kiswahili newspapers, while political meetings are conducted either in English or in other indigenous languages like Luganda and not Kiswahili. Thus the roles of English have always taken precedence over other indigenous groups of languages, Kiswahili included.

### **Historical background**

From June 1894, Uganda began to be administered on a British protectorate according to Ladeformed (1971) the signing of the 1900 agreement known as the Buganda agreement, between the British government and the Buganda kingdom, gave rise and root of linguistic inequality in Uganda. The government favoured some language and marginalized others. For example; Luganda as a language gained prominence and use compared to other languages spoken in Uganda like Runyankole, Rukiga and Lusoga. In many ways, Uganda's language

problems are similar to those faced by many developing countries, especially those in Africa. The existence of many groups (usually referred to as tribes) which speak different languages complicates communication and each tribe agitates its language to have a higher status, which in turn increases the difficulties of political and cultural integration (Nsibambi, 1967).

Like in many African countries, English was introduced in government and public life in Uganda by means of missionary work and the educational system. English has been the medium of instruction from nursery level to the higher institutions of learning, used in public offices, Parliament, in the higher courts of law, the media, and political gatherings among others. During the first decades of the twentieth century, Kiswahili language gained influence as it was not only used in the army forces, prisons and police forces (Mazrui and 1995), but was also taught in schools as a subject. However, the Baganda, who were the majority stakeholders in the government, viewed the introduction of Kiswahili as a threat to their kingdom's political power and partly through their influence they made Luganda the medium of instruction in lower primary classes, mainly in Buganda region. Since then, Luganda was used in news papers and program in Luganda language both on national radio and television among other uses (Nsibambi, 1967). With all these development, English remained the only official language at that time. When Luganda become independent in 1962, English was maintained as the official language, as it was already rooted deeply in administration, media, and education. In addition, Uganda's ethno-linguistic diversity made it difficult to choose another language as the official language of Uganda. Although Luganda was the most geographically spread language, people from both inside and outside Buganda kingdom opposed to having it as a national language, because they felt other tribes, mispronunciation and grammar errors would ruin their language, henceforth, English remained the official language. In addition to this problem was that of promoting Luganda at the expense of other Ugandan languages and making the Baganda proud.

### **Causes of failure to implement language policy**

English is an official language of Uganda yet it is spoken by a small group of people (elites). It is the language of administration, public offices, courts of law Parliament and medium of instruction in the education circles among others. Kiswahili which in (2006) achieved its status of being an official language second of English, is spoken by a small number of population as a second language (L2) due to massive resistance it faced

from the time it was introduced in Uganda (Ladefoged, 1971), but used widely in east Africa as a lingua franca (Mulokozi, 2002).

'O' Grady (1996) provides different variations of language and he asserts that language is a system of communication, medium for thought, a vehicle for literary expression, a social institution, a matter for political controversy and a catalyst for national building. Since language encompasses all the above aspects, it has to be taken into account to be planned and policy formed for implementation. Language policy and planning are intertwined fields that came up as a branch of social linguistics in the 1850s and 1960s. The question of language policy has been a focus to many linguists and language experts in order to analyze and solve problems related to language planning of different countries, especially the developing countries.

Language policy is categorized in two types, namely; exoglossic and endoglossic language policies. According to Adulaziz (1993) and Mekacha (2000) a country is said to operationalise the exoglossic policy when it directs a foreign language to function as a formal, national and official language in that particular country. Abdul-Aziz adds that, very few masses in the entire population can hardly speak it as their first language. Such countries in Africa include Zambia and Uganda (English), Ivory Coast (French), Mozambique (Portuguese) among others.

On the other hand, endoglossic language policy favours indigenous languages within a nation to be used formally, as a national as well as an official language of a given country (Mekacha, 2000). Few countries in Africa with successful endoglossic language policy, include; Tanzania (Kiswahili), Ethiopia and Somali (Amharic) among others. However, Abdul-Aziz points out that, the possibility of promoting an indigenous language in African states is always accompanied by constant threats of rivalry between the various language groups. This is in evidence in Uganda too. The rival between Kiswahili and Luganda might be the blockage of the promotion of Kiswahili as an official language.

For language policies to be well implemented according to Bamgobse (1991) as cited in Karl (1999) series of factors have to be positively considered as listed below;

- Attested language(s) must have a base of potential speakers.
- Existence of political will to enhance linguistic tendencies in the country and

- A country must have a very strong government support to implement language policy decisions.

There are very few countries in Africa, which have fulfilled the above factors, such countries according to Karl (1999), include Tanzania and Somalia. However, those that are a failure include Kenya, Senegal as well as Cong Brazzaville. To attest the above criterion, Uganda as a country has potential speakers of Kiswahili language, the table below exemplifies this.

*Table 1: Shows percentages of Ugandans able to hold conversations in Kiswahili, Luganda and English*

	Kiswahili	Luganda	English
Men	52	51	28
Women	18	28	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>41</b>

*Source: Ladefoged (1971:25)*

The above figure includes the 16% of the population that speak Luganda as their first language. As a second language, Kiswahili doubles the number of English speakers. According to the data above approximately, 38 years have passed. Bamgbose (1991) last two factors (refer to Bamgbose (1991), Table 1 would be applicable in this context, if language planners and policy makers observed and recommended for implementation of the Ladefoged (1971) findings as shown above. The Kiswahili percentage rate might have even gone higher in Uganda by now, as that of east Africa, due to stigmatization and awareness on the promotion of indigenous language worldwide. Kiswahili has witnessed a rapid growth regionally (Amidu, 1995; Mazrui and Mazrui, 1995 as cited in Ogechi, 2002 and in Mwananchi (9 December, 2009:3) compared to international languages such as English, Spanish and French among others. As shown below;

*Table 2: Shows percentage of Kiswahili and English in East Africa*

Countries	Kiswahili	English
Kenya	80	20
Tanzania	100	10
Uganda	50	20

*Source: Kiango (2002:190)*

There have been in massive promotion programmes of Kiswahili language even in Francophone countries that share borders with Uganda like Rwanda and DRC. This has been evident in Burundi, Kenya and Tanzania.

In spite of what has been outlined above, Uganda's language policy has never had serious implementation while several countries in Africa have stated their language policies clearly and are seriously implementing them. Uganda only stops at constitutional level, and radio announcements. Uganda had no alternative but to take the Endoglossic language policy where a foreign language is taken to serve as an official language. The choice of Kiswahili as a second official language has also come as pressure from the East Africa Regional Cooperation (Nsookwa, 2007), on one hand and Uganda's existence of numerous minority tribal languages on the other. Several reasons hamper the implementation of Uganda's language policy:

### **Christianity versus Islam**

Religion is playing its role very silently in checking the development and implementation of Uganda's language policy. At the very mention of Kiswahili most Christians in high offices relate the language to Arabic. To them anything Arabic is Islam and Islam is taken as an arch rival of Christianity. In this case any planned strategy to spread Kiswahili is silently killed. Some of the high ranking offices are over heard vowing that Kiswahili will be taught to their children on their dead bodies. Since some are in big offices that would implement policy, this is one of the reasons that have made Kiswahili to stay on paper and to be denied entry in schools.

### **Colonial infiltration in government ministries**

The East African Community offices in Arusha asked the member state to form Kiswahili councils in their countries. The name of the council for Uganda would be; Bakiu; Baraza la Kiswahili, Uganda; Bakike, Baraza la Kiswahili Kenya and Bakita, Baraza la Kiswahili Tanzania. Arrangements were made to enable Uganda form this council through the Ministry of Gender and Culture. Commissioners in this ministry involved themselves in several meeting to draft the constitution for Bakiu. All arrangements were made culminating into a committee constituted by representatives, the constitution of the East African Kiswahili council was agreed upon in Nairobi. After that the Ministry of Gender, was supposed to take the constitution for Bakiu to Parliament which would pass a minute to allow the council to acquire offices and spread the language of Kiswahili. Without this council Uganda cannot have a representative in East African Kiswahili commission/council. But to our surprise nobody in the Ministry of Gender wants to hear anything about Kiswahili. The Ministry abandoned Bakiu council and anybody who talks about it is ignored. It is

true there is something sinister hampering the language of Kiswahili in Uganda. "There is a conspiracy with colonialists that is bent to kill the only wide spread African Language." Someone said.

### **Perpetual lack of planning for Kiswahili**

Despite declaring Kiswahili as a national language or second official language to English, there has never been a plan to teach it to the population. The proven plan to spread a language in a country is to teach it in primary schools. Since there has never been, it is illogical to expect the members of Parliament to pass a bill of a language they do not know. To say that Kiswahili is a second official language in Uganda is to make fun of the language. For example, when the politicians go out to solicit for votes, they speak either English or Luganda/or other local languages. There are very few places, may be in the far North, where can be used. Yet still the listeners find it difficult to understand the vocabulary used by the speakers because standard Kiswahili has never been formerly taught to them.

Instead of planning positively for the language and promote it, the education officials plan negatively to kill Kiswahili. When they saw Kiswahili spreading rapidly in secondary schools they distorted the syllabus by putting Kiswahili optional and not among the subjects that would be considered in grading the candidate. This was very serious and it is the last straw that will see Kiswahili out of secondary schools in a few years. Records show that in 2007 the candidates at 'O' and 'A' levels had gone up to over nine thousand but in the recent 2009 exams, candidates dropped to four thousand only. This is the beginning of the decline that will see Kiswahili out of the system.

The primary school syllabus also leaves much to be desired. It promotes only 2 hours of teaching Kiswahili a week. Yet it gives 3 hours for indigenous languages like Luganda to be taught a week. If the teaching of Kiswahili begins in primary schools, will the two hours give the pupils ample time to master the language? The syllabus also is unpredictable. At one instance one hears it must be changed, while others do not support it all saying it has to begin in senior one. With all these ups and downs, it should be noted that Kiswahili is in danger in Uganda.

### **Political corruption**

Uganda Government has more than five small kingdoms operating beneath its power. Each kingdom has its own language which is used as identification for the kingdom. Strong language divisions have persisted

from the colonial era up to today since they have never been interrupted by any strong language policy.

Buganda which is one of the kingdoms uses Luganda as its language. With its central position covering the capital city, the city dwellers had no alternative but to learn Luganda. Traders, who came from all directions of the country, have to learn to speak Luganda as they buy and ferry their merchandise back home. This has made the language so strong and wide spread and now most people term it lingua franco of Uganda. A big debate during the time of Idi Amin Dada had always to decide which language between Kiswahili and Luganda would be made the second official language of Uganda. A strange circumstances has for a long time hindered the two languages, whenever Kiswahili and Luganda to enter the fray. In this case all the kingdoms could rally behind Luganda and call Kiswahili a foreign language. Yet whenever Luganda was sighted the kingdoms (except Buganda) would disintegrate and each one asked for its language. (Holger, 1984) to be taken as a second official. It so happens that the Baganda have the biggest population in the country. The politicians then feel that while the Baganda as an ethnic group have the biggest population in the country, to introduce Kiswahili would result in denial of their votes. And for the last 20 years (1990-2010) nothing serious has ever been done to promote Kiswahili. Uganda therefore is responding to political demands of every ethnic group for linguistic recognition (Nsibambi, 1967). There has been a failure to copy a good example from Tanzania and elsewhere. There is no way you can eradicate tribalism in multi-lingual societies if the country does not have a strong policy base.

### **A ray of hope.**

Uganda is a member state of East African Community Regional Establishment. All states have it that for matters of language policy in the region, Kiswahili will be the official language for the East African Community. Since Uganda is a member state, decisions decided on language policy directly affects it too. There are so many Tanzanians, Kenyans, Rwandese and Burundians flocking into Uganda and the languages they use mostly is Kiswahili. This has excited Ugandans and they no longer feel or take Kiswahili to be a foreign language. While at business, different people try to speak Kiswahili and both languages Kiswahili and Luganda exchange words depending on the fluency of the speaker in both languages.



## **Training of Primary School Teachers**

The Ministry of Education and Sports has for the first time made some steps to prepare teachers that will teach Kiswahili in primary schools in about two year's time from now. Already sets of Kiswahili books have been written by different writers and are just waiting for government vetting.

## **Conclusion**

The paper has elaborated what a language policy for a country is supposed to mean for a particular country. The importance of a language policy cannot be over emphasized. The Ministry of Education in any country plays a big role in promoting the spread of the nationally targeted language. When the children at school are taught a language they spread it faster than when it appears only at higher institutions. The Baganda have a proverb which is translated in English; The young trees make the forest thicker.

Table 1 which shows the percentage of Ugandans able to hold conversations in Kiswahili, Luganda and English; and table 2 which shows the percentage of Kiswahili and English in East Africa by 2002, give an encouragement to the government of Uganda that there is a big number of people of Uganda who are already aware of the use of Kiswahili in uniting Ugandans and East Africa as a whole. Implementing the policy actively and spread the language in schools will see Kiswahili catching on like fire.

Yet reliable sources say that Kiswahili would be started in primary schools in Uganda but the snag is that even by now the country cannot have enough teachers that can start the language to run continuously for a reasonable period of time. The start may be done but maintaining the pace that can cope with difficulties like stocking books and resisting them careless talk about Kiswahili; However since the teachers will be scarce, it may take the Ministry another five years to start properly.

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