

The Lexicographical Challenge to Kiswahili as Meta-language: Adoption and Incorporation of Specialised Terminology into Linguistic Scholarship

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Abstract

The study, inquiry and scholarship in Kiswahili Language and Literature in East Africa, and elsewhere, continues to develop rapidly. Two disparate strands of scholarly interest, one linguistic, and the other literary, seem to proliferate. And as the Linguistics of Kiswahili grows, the challenge of the choice and expansion of a concomitant meta-language with which to describe and explain the facts of the language, becomes a matter of concern. How can the academic centres or universities in East Africa possibly establish standard Kiswahili linguistic terms, just like the European languages were able to develop cognate terminologies? Without well entrenched language policies, and without early focus on linguistic scholarship, there has not been an oversight authority, at least in Kenya, to formalise and control the development of referential terms. The result has been a repertoire of multiple terms coined by individual scholars, who continue to use them rather casually. Since most of these terms are premised on hitherto known "Eurocentric" concepts and lexicon, with Kiswahili morphological customisation applied in different ways, there is need for authentic conventional terms, or, at least, home-grown procedure for the establishment of vocabulary. This paper is focussed on this challenge: It is the authors' intention to draw the attention of Kiswahili scholars to the seriousness of the issue, and to suggest a way forward out of this quagmire. First, the growing importance of Kiswahili as an international language is highlighted, and then the evolution of Linguistics as a sub-discipline within Kiswahili Studies, with its attendant problem of the proliferation of terminologies, is addressed. Finally, suggestions on how the problem could be confronted are given.

Introduction

The growth and development of Kiswahili from a minority language in eastern Africa in early nineteenth century, to a *lingua franca* in the twentieth century, and an international language towards the close of the latter century, is attributable to many factors. In an interesting turn of events, colonialism – the *bible* and the *gun* – contributed to the "intra-national" establishment and use of this language, which, in default, was used by the nationalist movements in the unification of the colonised against foreign domination (Mazrui and Mazrui, 1995; Chimera, 1998):

Upon flag independence, Kenya and the then Tanganyika discovered that the language, which was associated with the definition of the peoples' African-ness across different ethnicities, was an important tool for unification. Indeed the historic emergence of Tanzania through the political merger of the mainland and the Islands of Zanzibar and Pemba was undertaken in the context of a "national" culture expressed through the Kiswahili medium. The fathers of independence in Kenya also used Kiswahili for national mobilisation and for the establishment of a united "political" culture in the nascent body politic; it is through this medium that the gap between the educated "elites" and the majority of the population could be bridged, at least for communication and understanding. These early efforts have paid off in Kenya and Tanzania significantly, given that Kiswahili is regarded as "neutral" – not associated with any contending ethnicities. Uganda is now making a conscious and bold step towards adopting Kiswahili as a national language; it remains to speculation what this effort will amount to with the new East African Federation in the making.

Kiswahili language has steadily gained international recognition. It is among the few African languages that may be used in international forums, such as the UN General Assembly, and the international courts. As Mukuthuria (2006) notes, the language has been declared the *official* language of both the East African Federation and the African Union. Kiswahili language and literature are taught in more than 150 universities all over the world, and adopted for use in the "African" broadcasts of many reputable international broadcast stations (Chimera, 1998). With the foregoing, it becomes clear that the language requires the expansion of its vocabulary and focus so that it is able to meet these new communicative functions and usages.

Tanzania's Taasisi ya Uchunguzi wa Kiswahili (TUKI), or Institute for Kiswahili Research, has commonly been regarded as the leader of the formalised effort towards the establishment of conventional terms for Kiswahili scholarship within the country itself, and beyond its borders. TUKI was established in 1964 through a well organised language policy, with a robust *corpus planning* component. In Kenya, there is over-reliance on TUKI's efforts, with what is done locally largely seen as uncoordinated, individualised, and confused attempts to outdo one another. We briefly critique the development of the linguistic study of Kiswahili.

The Linguistic Study of Kiswahili

Early Approaches

The documented study of the Kiswahili language is traceable back to the nineteenth century. Classical literary texts such as *Al Inkishafi*, or "The Soul's Awakening," *Swifa ya Nguvumali*, *Utendi wa Ngamia na Paa*, and *Utendi wa Mwanakupona*, preceded attempts to study the structure and form of the language (Wa Mlamali, 1980; *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). It was not until 1844 that John Ludwig Krapf, a missionary pioneer with the Church Missionary Society, made an effort to write a formal account of the structure of the language. The book, titled *The Outline of the Elements of the Kiswahili Language with Special Reference to Kinika Dialect* was first published in 1850, and has recently been reprinted (2008). These early attempts were based on the cross-cultural discursive situation that was informed by the presence of Muslim Arab traders who roamed the East African hinterland for ivory and slave products, and who adopted Kiswahili as a transactional code; the result was a hybrid form of Kiswahili that was significantly infused with Arabic borrowings.

Edward Steere was able to document the Kiunguja dialect of Kiswahili in *A Handbook of Swahili Language as Spoken at Zanzibar* in 1870. This work, together with Krapf's, may be regarded as the earliest grammatical description of Kiswahili. In the early years of the twentieth century studies were extended to Kiswahili lexicography, with Madan (1903) coming up with the first *Kiswahili-English Dictionary*. It is on the basis of this dictionary that it was possible for Frederick Johnson to compile *A Standard English-Swahili Dictionary* and *A Standard Swahili-English Dictionary*, published in 1939, and both of which are still regarded as authoritative sources today.

Just as the development of Linguistics as a discipline took shape in early twentieth century, significant publications related to the study of Kiswahili were undertaken. Notable amongst the works that mark this period include Ashton's (1944) detailed grammar of Kiswahili and Guthrie (1948), a general work on Bantu languages, which also provided insights on the structure of the language. Loogman (1965) and Polome (1967), both published in the second half of the century, are also regarded as part of this pioneering attempt.

Post-Independence Kiswahili Scholarship

Upon independence in the second half of the twentieth century, Kiswahili was in the unenviable position of having to compete with English language in the East African academic and intellectual milieu. Except in Tanzania, where the *Ujamaa* Socialist philosophy held sway, and the political fathers insisted on the use of Kiswahili at all levels of national life, including the academia, the language and its study was relegated to the back seat in Kenya, while it was totally avoided in Uganda.

In the Kenyan school system, Kiswahili study was regarded as optional, together with Fine Arts, Music, and Physical Education. For a significant period, the language was not examinable in the national examinations. The language of instruction and intellectual involvement in school was exclusively English, and the use of Kiswahili was regarded as informal and "un-intellectual."

Though Kiswahili Studies date back to the 1970s in the East African universities and colleges, apart from a few courses meant to hone the competence and speaking skills of the graduate users, practically all matters of theory and research into the language were conducted in the English language. It was not until the early eighties that a wind of change was in the offing: all teaching and intellectual discourse was now conducted in Kiswahili, although academic research theses were still written in the English Language. Gibbe's (1994) was the first full-fledged doctoral thesis written in Kiswahili from a Kenyan university. This seminal work, it would seem, opened the floodgates and more publications followed. As policy framework, it soon became mandatory for the Kiswahili Studies scholar not only to be instructed in the source language but also to engage in research and publish in the same language.

The challenge in this new scenario was that there was a proliferation of new coinages and the use of hitherto unknown terminologies to account for linguistic concepts and ideas which had been couched in the foreign idiom. The fact that Kenya, unlike her neighbour, Tanzania, did not have an institution vested with the authority to regulate and control the development of terminologies in the language compounded the problem in many ways. The university lecturer and scholar has to read texts written in English, understand the concepts and ideas, then attempt to give appropriate translations of the same. This becomes a rather tedious and cumbersome exercise. Furthermore, since the translations are individual at best, it becomes increasingly difficult to standardise scholarship within and across institutions of higher learning.

Search, Regularisation and Appropriation of Terminology

Literature Review

Save for attempts by the early missionaries (Krapf, 1844; Steere, 1870), and Madan's (1903) work on a dictionary which culminated into Johnson's two (1939) landmark dictionaries, Kiswahili lexicography is a fairly recent development. While the initial work by Madan (1903) was propelled by the desire to enable the missionary quest to learn the language to be used as a tool for communication, Johnson's effort emanated from the recommendations of the Inter-territorial Language Committee for the East African Dependencies, 1930, a body formed by the colonial authorities and vested with the authority to oversee the standardisation of the language, among other related matters. Furthermore, though Madan's dictionary was based on the Kiunguja dialect, it was especially meant for reference along the Mombasa coast, where the Kimvita dialect was spoken. This may be regarded as an early sign towards the establishment of a standard.

Johnson's dictionaries were based on the Kiunguja dialect spoken in Zanzibar and on the Tanganyika coast. Given the authority of the Inter-territorial Language Committee for the East African Dependencies, Kiunguja had the socio-political backing to become the authorised standard. The dialect has continued to enjoy this status to date.

These early dictionaries contained terms of communicative general usage of the language, although they were able to include elementary and advanced forms of the language for all levels of language learner-speakers. The main domains that were addressed included commerce, administration, politics,

religion and culture. Though certain grammatical aspects were included together with the entries, this was meant to elucidate how the forms could appropriately be used. Very little, if any, linguistic detail or terminology was explicated in these dictionaries, and, since the works were regarded as a bedrock of Kiswahili grammar for a significant period, from the 1930s to the 1980s no formalised linguistic terminologies were established. By the mid-1980s, debate regarding the "liberation of Kiswahili from foreign expropriation," had reached a point where Kiswahili scholars in academia were engaged in individualised and uncoordinated efforts towards the identification, establishment and development of authentic terminologies parallel to Western scholarly terminologies.

King'ei (2000: 55) observes, "Kenya badly needs a forum for discussing Kiswahili technical vocabulary." This is because the language is relatively young in education and scholarship; since it lacks literature even in the most basic aspects, this "... forces lecturers in the universities teaching Kiswahili to undertake translation of concepts or even loan words (*sic*) in order to communicate with their students."

Mukuthuria (2000; 2001) considers the double-edged problem faced by Kiswahili scholarship in regard to the development of appropriate terminologies. Terms for some concepts are largely lacking because the language has not enjoyed meta-language status in the academies, even in its own study. When scholars are able to identify requisite terms, they lack the resources, means, wherewithal or strategy to propagate, broadcast, and, therefore, standardise them. This leads to the development of competing or parallel terms, which may lead to confusion rather than a situation of acceptable freely varied forms.

Sewangi (2000: 61) laments that despite the fact that TUKI has been charged with the responsibility to uplift Kiswahili to a level similar to the "scholarly" languages of the West for over thirty years, "... no efforts have been made in circles of the language experts to compile terms that are developed by practitioners in their areas of specialisation." Sewangi's (2000) work recommends and demonstrates the use of compilation techniques which are applied to given domain-specific corpora to expand, enlarge and increase their numbers. The technique, which is formulated on the basis of computation tools developed at the University of Helsinki, may be criticised for being rather mechanistic and, therefore, artificial or not based on genuine and acceptable sociolinguistic discursive principles. Be that as it may, the

technique may be regarded as an existing alternative that ought to be employed together with other strategies.

Critiquing the use of linguistic terms in local East African universities, Massamba (1989) paints the desperate picture in the use of Arabic as a meta-language in academia in Arabo-phone countries; he demonstrates that the variation is so chaotic that even the same publisher of books or dictionaries produces differing terms for purportedly similar concepts. A similar scenario obtains in the Kenyan universities where even lecturers within the same academic department use different and competing terminologies to instruct linguistic courses. Though this type of situation may be blamed on the local academic leadership, it shows that there is a general lack of uniformity, regulation or standardisation of the communicative mode in the nascent Kiswahili scholarship.

Were-Mwaro (2000) did extensive research on the scientific terms used in Kiswahili; the study used a set of communicative and global-contextual parameters as yardstick on which the efficacy and appropriateness of the selected terms is measured. The scholar's recommendation that terms that may not be considered economical and appropriate in their use should be discarded outright is debatable. However, the study is indeed a credible attempt towards the solution of the problem. This effort is lauded by Marani (2002) who also emphasises on the need to standardise Kiswahili terms, if the language is going to be propelled to its rightful place in the international arena. In a rather generalised clarion call, Marani argues that the authenticity and efficacy of selected terms may be gauged by scrutinising their internal and external structure to ensure that they are in conformity with Kiswahili structure. Above all, the definition of similar terms must formally be recognised in order that confusion is minimised.

Theoretical Background

Muyachina (1981) has addressed various levels of Linguistics: phonetics, morphophonemics, morphology and syntax, among others. Of particular interest is a section in that work which covers vocabulary and word formation processes. The author highlights derivation, use of periphrases, compounding, borrowing, and transfer of meaning. Delving into the brief history of the processes that have traditionally been employed towards the development of vocabulary forms in Kiswahili, Muyachina posits that research into such home-grown strategies must be continuously and consistently conducted. This

is in order that authentic means be harnessed towards the establishment of appropriate terminologies in all requisite technical and scholarly fields, Linguistics included.

Following Muyachina's argument, this paper demonstrates that the development of robust vocabulary at all levels of use in any given language must first rely on the contemporary synchronic "internal" resources before moving to the respective traditional, diachronic and "external" sources. Ideas and knowledge are not totally independent of the structure of the language or the channel through which they are conveyed. It is because of this that any meaningful translation or transliteration of linguistic continua must consider the drawing site and the landing site – what the borrowed term means at the original site, and what it is expected to convey at the new site.

Dieterlene and Mabile (1961) recommend and use a more or less similar approach in their *Sotho-English Dictionary* project. They underscore the procedure of having a committee of experts to source for terminological data from the field of use by conducting interviews and consulting library texts in circulation. The data collected thus may then be analysed in regard to their definition, internal and external structure, and such other matters that the analyst may deem to be of practical significance or importance.

Discussion

Progress Made So Far

TUKI, which has been the only formally established authority charged with the development of the language in the region, published the first linguistic dictionary, *Kamusi Sanifu ya Isimu na Lugha*, in 1990. Unfortunately, this publication was based on localised Tanzanian data; no attempt was made to consult scholars in the other East African universities, and, therefore, the resultant text may not be easily acceptable in the region. However, this is a ground-breaking effort at the use of standard linguistic terminologies. In 1992, Tumbo-Masabo and Mwansoko came up with a guide on how to develop specialised terminologies in Kiswahili scholarship; this guide hinted at the issues related to authenticity and choice on the basis of interfaces between ideas and concepts in Western scholarship and those in the Kiswahili socio-cultural and intellectual tradition.

Following on the heels of the TUKI dictionary, Massamba (2004) wrote a dictionary on the philosophy and linguistics of language, *Kamusi ya Isimu na Falsafa ya Lugha*, using Kiswahili as a meta-language. This effort was largely individual and localised within Tanzania, and, like its predecessor, was exclusive of the Kiswahili scholarly and intellectual discourse in the other parts of the region where the language is in use in academia.

In Kenya much energy and effort has been expended in what may be criticised as an uncoordinated “seemingly” scholarly enterprise. With no formally recognised authority charged with the direction of growth and development of Kiswahili, the legally established national language, the scenario that obtains is largely confusion; individual scholars and academic institutions appear to pull in different directions. For instance, the following linguistic terms are used differentially by individual lecturers as free translations from English Language terms:

Psycholinguistics→	<i>Isimu nafsia, Isimu akili</i>
Applied Linguistics→	<i>Isimu Tekelezi, Isimu Tendakazi, Isimu Tatuza, Isimu Suluhishi</i>
Discourse Analysis→	<i>Uchanganuzi (wa)usemi, Uchanganuzi (wa) Uneni, Uchanganuzi-neni, Uchanganuzi Gumzo, Uchanganuzi wa Mazugumzo, Lugha ya Mazungumzo, Lugha katika Mazungumzo, tathmini ya gumzo/uneni/mazungumzo</i>
Critical Discourse Analysis→	<i>Uchanganuzi hakiki wa gumzo/uneni/mazungumzo, tahakiki changanuzi ya gumzo/uneni, Uchanganuzi wa ndani wa gumzo/uneni/mazungumzo, uchanganuzi wa kina wa gumzo/uneni/mazungumzo</i>
Transformational Generative Grammar→	<i>Sarufi zalishi geuza umbo, Sarufi geuza maumbo, Sarufi zalishi, Sarufi maumbo, Sarufi ya Kuvyaza Umbo, Sarufi badilishi umbo, etc.</i>
Semantics→	<i>Semantiki, Mpangilio maana</i>
Pragmatics→	<i>Pragmatiki, Maana Mukstadha</i>
Phonetics→	<i>Fonetiki, Mpangilio Sauti</i>
Phonology→	<i>Fonolojia, Sauti maana</i>
Morphology→	<i>Mofolojia, umbo la maneno</i>

Departments of Languages and Literature within the public and private universities have not been involved in well planned collaborative activities; however, recently lecturers and students have established chapters of *Chama*

cha Kiswahili cha Taifa, CHAKITA, a national association for Kiswahili language whose terms of reference are all matters concerning the development and growth of the language. It remains to be seen whether this nascent association will gain any formal recognition, or whether its efforts might pave the way for a formally established authority.

Publishing in Kenya, Mohamed and Mohamed (1998) wrote a Kiswahili dictionary of synonyms, although the authors are originally from Zanzibar; this publication may be critiqued as an attempt to standardise the terminologies used across the Kiswahili speaking world. This may be considered rather prescriptive, given that the language is now used in multifarious contexts and situations. Wamitila (2003) published a dictionary of literary Kiswahili terminologies and theories. Ndalu and King’ei (1989) wrote a dictionary of proverbs, out of which the lexical basis of some terms has been derived, while Chimerah and Njogu (1999) wrote an exclusive guide to the teaching of Literature in Kiswahili Studies which has won acclaim across Africa. These efforts, therefore, are in themselves not to be belittled.

Way Forward

Considerable individualised effort has been made towards the establishment or formation of Kiswahili linguistic and literary terms. Attempts have also been made in the use of new terms and coinages in the formal scholarly settings. Such efforts have mainly served to complicate a worsening scenario of confusion. Of course, it may be argued that *standard* language is a rather elusive sociolinguistic category; that it all depends on who is deemed to be in control of power and dominance at a given communicative situation. It then follows that the localised competition in the use of technical terminology in Kenya, and generally in East Africa, will lead to a “natural selection” of appropriate terminology; all that is needed is a healthy, vivacious and all-inclusive academic discursive practice or involvement across academia in the region.

Since the *corpus planning* dimension of language requires that formalisation of selected elements is done through orthography, scholars should engage in the following activities, in order that the process is completed:

- There is need to investigate multiple Kiswahili linguistic terms that are not standardised and documented in the current linguistic dictionaries in order to formally recognise them through proper procedures.

- The current published Kiswahili linguistic dictionaries may not be adequate for advanced linguistic study. There is need for the establishment of an all-inclusive dictionary based on the Muyachina (1981), and Dieterlene and Mabile (1961) model.
- As requisite terminologies are developed at all levels of linguistic study, there is need to keep cross-checking Kiswahili linguistic studies with the trends and novelties occurring in the general world of scholarship in Linguistics. Kiswahili scholars must be both partakers and contributors in this wide arena.
- The integration of East Africa into a single body-politic will offer fecund ground for the establishment of standard referential terms in the world of scholarship. The proposal in the offing should make scholars to establish meaningful linkages and joint ventures towards the development of robust standard dictionaries to be used in the region.

Conclusion

There is no gainsaying that the Kiswahili language has now come of age. From its sprouting, through the itinerant slave trade and Islam, the missionary crusader, the musketeer and coloniser, to post-independence East African cooperation, the language has encountered differing sociolinguistic statuses. Kiswahili attained full scholarly meta-linguistic status in Kenya's academic discourse with the formal presentation and defence of Gibbe's (1994) research work. Since then, however, no formalised attempt to establish a befitting corpus for the function of Kiswahili as a *meta-language* has been made.

Authentic academic research is required in order to pave the way for the establishment of a repertoire of working terminologies for use in Kiswahili Linguistics. Such research will invoke traditional sources of Kiswahili scholarship in a bid to bring erstwhile developed ideas to the Linguistics table, to draw parallels with the theories and ideas garnered from the Western scholarly tradition, and then seek ways of accounting for all representations through identification and formalisation of requisite terminologies. This will engender an updated, current, well-established and open-ended scholarship in Kiswahili Linguistics that will occupy its niche in the theoretical and applied study of language.

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