

# Can a Foreign Language be a National Medium?

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

'The forces of conservation and change (may) have to be reconciled, and stability achieved, by deliberate policy decisions. It might, for example, be decided to have the mother tongue used as a medium of instruction in the primary school so as to ensure that the child's educational development is rooted in his own cultural heritage, and then transfer to a foreign language as the medium for secondary education' (Cripser and Widdowson, 1975)

The situation described in this passage is approximately that which has prevailed in Tanzania for the past twenty years, except (i) that the terms 'authenticity' and 'modernity' (e.g. Whiteley, 1971:156) might be more apt than 'conservation'

might be more apt than 'conservation' and 'change' since in Tanzania the 'authentic' language - Swahili - is, or has been, the one associated with change, while use of the language of modernity - English - may be, or has been, more readily associated with

certain sort of conservation; (ii) Swahili, though the language of all, is mother tongue, in a strict sense, for relatively few; (iii) the distribution of educational functions between Swahili (primary and teacher training) and English (secondary and tertiary) is not, and never was intended to be, 'stable'; and (iv) the use of the term 'foreign' in this context begs a rather crucial language planning question which it is my purpose in this paper to

examine. In undertaking this examination, I shall address first the general issues, then the particular case of Tanzania.

## 2. LANGUAGE STATUS AND LANGUAGE-MEDIUM

### 2.1. What should a national medium of education do?

It is noted by Bull (1964) that 'while getting educated is a personal matter, in contrast, providing education is a social enterprise.' A medium of education, therefore, as an essential part of the larger process, must (a) enable learners to get educated and (b) enable society to educate. In the former capacity it should, ideally, adequately fulfil each of the four functions of language for the individual described by Le Page (1964). These are (i) communion, (ii) expression, (iii) conceptualisation and (iv) communication. Getting educated is not just a matter of receiving and imparting information (iv), but also of learning to think and thinking (iii), reacting demonstratively to experience (ii) and relating to teachers and fellow learners (i). As a medium of educating, it should (i) make attainable the educational objectives - political, cultural, economic, ideological, religious - of society; (ii) do so universally, and equally for all; and (iii) do so efficiently and economically.

### 2.2 If so, what should a national medium of education be?

We may usefully distinguish (in line with Stern, 1983:9) between those characteristics of a language which are relatively objective (or constant) and those which are subjective (or variable). The objective characteristics required of a medium of education fall under the general heading of standardisation. The language should be 'codified' (to minimise non-functional variation), 'elaborated' (to enable it to cope with as wide a range of functions as required) and 'written' (so that people should have something to read in it). In general, the higher up the education system a language is to be used, the more 'standardised' it needs to be.

The subjective characteristics required of a medium of instruction are: (i) that it should be accepted by all concerned (parents, teachers, pupils and society at large) as suitable for its assigned role and of such functional importance as to be worth the effort of acquiring. This is the attitudinal factor and, as frequently observed, has an important bearing on motivation; (ii) that it should be teachable to the required standard. This is dependent partly on (i), partly on the availability of competent teachers, proficient in the language and equipped with suitable methods and materials; and partly on: (iii) that the language should be experienced in use. This 'experience' should, if possible, be prior to as well as concurrent with the use as medium, and the 'use' should involve functions additional to the function as medium. The most energetic arguments for the necessity of such experience have been made in connection with the case for the use of the mother tongue - the language most intimately experienced - in the early years of schooling (UNESCO, 1953, etc) but the experience of a 'natural language environment' is a demonstrable **pre-requisite** for 'optimal language acquisition' (Burt and Dulay, 1981) and as such is plainly what is called for whenever progress in the other spheres of education is immediately dependent on satisfactory acquisition of the language as medium. Burt and Dulay define a natural language environment as one which exists 'whenever the focus of the speaker is on the content of the communication rather than on language itself' as for example in seeking directions or listening to the news (cf Gorman's 'situation of interaction and reception' in Whiteley (1971)). This is the kind of setting, or 'condition', which in Krashen's terms, favours 'acquisition' - informal, free, undirected, naturalistic - over classroom 'learning' (Stern, 1983:392).

### 2.3 When is a language 'foreign'?

Any language which is non-indigenous to a particular speech community may be called foreign. However, 'the term is usually applied only to languages spoken outside the boundaries in which one lives, or, more crucially, to languages learnt only for communication with those living outside one's own community and not used for everyday communication within one's speech community' (Brumfit and Roberts, 1983). A language which is used within the speech community, but which is not the mother tongue of its speakers, is a 'second' language. The three most important possible functions of such a language are (i) as a language of wider communication between speakers of different vernaculars, (ii) as an official language used in public administration, the law and political activity, and (iii) as a language of education (i.e. a medium). A language not fulfilling the first or second of these functions but intended, within the scope of some national language plan, to fulfil the third, would be in a plainly anomalous position: its use as a medium underpinned by no second-language function other than itself, and its status therefore, effectively, from the point of view of the educational system, that of a foreign, not a second, language. It is this situation that I have in mind in asking:

### 2.4 Are there any a priori reasons for doubting the efficacy of a foreign language as a national medium?

Since it is improbable that a nation would select as its national medium a non-standard foreign language, we may direct our attention to the subjective characteristics required. From 2.2 (above) we would be led to hypothesise that a foreign language could be rendered inefficacious as medium by (i) its not being accepted (because it is 'foreign' - - it lacks authenticity - and because, outside the educational system, it is functionally unimportant); by (ii) its not being teachable (because, by the nature of the situation, no strong

2.6 Can the predicted deficiencies of a foreign language medium be planned for and overcome?

Since the predicted deficiencies arise from the subjective characteristics of foreign languages, not those of second languages, a plausible strategy for remedying the problems associated with a foreign language medium could be as follows: create for the foreign language a second-language-like environment so that, in short, it becomes more accepted, more teachable, more experienced in use. This solution, however, may be (a) very costly (in time, money, social effects) and (b) not practicable (because of the persistence of attitudes and habits, and because of underlying weaknesses in the educational system as a whole).

3 ENGLISH MEDIUM IN TANZANIA

3.1 The status of English

A visitor to Tanzania in 1986 will see English (in the daily newspaper, along shopping streets, on some notices and signs) and could use it (in some shops, hotels and public offices) but would not hear it spoken between Tanzanians (except in the presence of foreigners) even if he visited the University (unless he happened to overhear a lecture or a seminar or a departmental, faculty or senate meeting). In this respect (leave aside the departmental meetings etc) the visitor's experience in Tanzania would be more similar to what he might encounter in Belgium or Sweden than to his likely experience in Kenya or Uganda.

The broad sociolinguistic picture in Tanzania still, it is true, fits approximately into the three-language structure (Nida and Wonderly, 1971) of 'in-group language' (the vernaculars), 'outgroup language' (Swahili) and 'language of specialised information (English), described by Whiteley as 'linguistic

trifocalism'; but as Whiteley points out (e.g. 1971:151) there has been some reallocation of settings, largely at the expense of English (but also at the expense of the vernaculars) and in favour of Swahili, to the extent that it has been frequently observed that, e.g., 'English for us is becoming daily more of a foreign language, spoken by very few people' (newspaper article of 1967, quoted in Mlama and Matteredu, 1978) or, a less extreme view and probably closer to the true situation, 'English is assuming a position somewhere halfway between a second and a foreign language' (Mbunda et al., 1980:294). A Handbook for English Teachers, issued by the Institute of Education in 1969, observed: 'For the time being English is still used as a medium of communication in Tanzania, although on an ever decreasing scale, for a limited number of purposes.' In 1986, except where contacts with non-Swahili speakers are involved, and except in one remaining major second-language function, these purposes are virtually extinct. The remaining function is: to be medium of secondary and higher education.

I shall not here explore the origins of this shift, except to note that for the historian of sociolinguistic change, the events of 1967 - the year of the Arusha Declaration and of Education for Self-Reliance - provide a fascinating focus of interest. The National Swahili Council was established, for the purpose of promoting Swahili in all spheres of national life. The Second Vice-President declared that 'Swahili should be used for all government business and the use of English or any other foreign language unnecessarily is to cease forthwith' (Mohamed, 1975). And Swahili was made the medium of instruction throughout primary education (it had previously been used in the first four years) with the clear expectation and intention that it would eventually replace English throughout the educational system. Voicing the spirit which motivated these decisions, the Dean of the Faculty of Law (no less - law being perhaps the least mutable domain of language use) had written:

'In order to unite the people under a single language tied in with their common culture it was essential that Swahili should become the national language in every aspect of national life' (Weston, 1965 - my emphasis).

### 3.2. Collapse of English as effective medium

The period from the mid 60s to the mid 80s during which the shift in status of English in Tanzania from second to foreign language has been taking place has also witnessed a catastrophic decline in standards of English in the educational system leading to the virtual collapse of English as a viable medium of education.

#### 3.2.1 The present standard of English

The most recent, and the most systematic, account of present standards of English is contained in a Report prepared for the Tanzanian Ministry of Education and the British Overseas Development Administration (Criper and Dodd, 1982). On the basis of a heavily graded cloze proficiency test which was administered to 2410 pupils at all levels of the educational system the authors made the following observations:

Throughout their secondary careers little or no other subject information (i.e. apart from English) is getting across to about 50% of the pupils in our sample. Only about 10% of form IVs are at a level at which one might expect English medium education to begin. (p.14).

Only a handful of pupils are at a level adequate for English medium education - 1% of Form I, and the same figure for Form IV. (p.23).

The proportion of (Form V) pupils at level 'A' (nearing but not at independent reading level) is still small - 17% (p.14).

(University) students' level of English is substantially below that required for university English medium study. (p.15).

Less than 20% of the sample tested were at a level where they would find it easy to read even the simpler books required for their academic studies. (p.43).

The current average level of those qualifying to teach, while higher than the level of those they will teach, is not very much higher. (p.15).

Though many people concerned with education in Tanzania at present would probably respond to these statements with renewed alarm and dismay, they might well not find them particularly surprising, since the figures given, though chilling enough, do little more than provide a hitherto lacking exactness to the quantification of the latest stage of a progressively deteriorating state of affairs that has for long, and by many, been observed, described and bemoaned (Mlama and Matteredu, 1978; Hill, 1980, etc, etc.).

### 3.2.2. Causes and effects.

These are not always easily distinguishable. Declining standards, for example, are a consequence of the L2 -FL shift and, in their turn, a further impetus to its eventual completion. Broadly, however, the principal causes of the present low level of English, specifically at the secondary level, may be grouped as follows:

(i) the low level of achievement at primary level. (For a summary of reasons for this see Hill (1980), based on Trappes-Lomax (1978).)

(ii) difficulties in the way of remedying this at secondary level associated with (a) lack of learner exposure to English except in class, 'the actual amount of English that pupils in Form I to IV are exposed to (being) more similar to the situation occurring in countries where English is being taught as a foreign language rather than as a medium of instruction or as a second language' (Criper and Dodd p.35); (b) levels of linguistic and methodological competence of many teachers though, at secondary level, by no means all - being insufficient to cope with the overwhelming difficulties of the situation; this in turn having a depressing effect on morale; (c) shortages and other deficiencies of materials.

(iii) the apparently short, but in fact indefinitely long, life expectancy of English as medium. For almost twenty years, it has been national policy to replace English by Swahili medium at all education levels. Reaffirmations of



this policy, and plans for its implementation, have been made at more or less regular intervals - 1969, 1970, 1974, 1979, 1982 - the latest of these being contained in the Report of the Recommendations of the Presidential Commission on Education (sec. 4.1981). This proposed 1985 and 1992 for, respectively, the initiation and completion of the changeover, the object being 'to enable as many people as possible to pursue their studies beyond the primary level without the obstruction of a foreign language (p. 200: my translation). A decade or so previously, 'the most optimistic projections expect that by 1973 all subjects will be taught through the medium of Swahili up to School Certificate level. This seems very unlikely, but certainly by about 1976 nearly all pre-Form IV teaching will be in Swahili' (Mbunda et al. 1980, written much earlier). The consequence of this prolonged indecisiveness - a classic case indeed of Whiteley's 'conflicting claims of authenticity and modernity' - has been to drain all attempts to do something about English (or language in education generally) of any lasting vigour. There has been stability of a sort, but the debilitating stability of tendencies in unresolved opposition, not that of languages in a harmonious state of functional complementarity.

As to effects, the decline in standards of English has, more or less, resulted in the extinction of English as a living medium of secondary (Form I to IV) education (the situation at senior secondary and university levels, however, because of the effects of selection, being far less serious than this). 'Extinction' here covers both degree of use and degree of usefulness.

(i) The prediction, quoted above, that Swahili would certainly take over from English at secondary level has, some years later than expected, come true, but in a way that was certainly not expected at the time: 'A mixture (of English and Swahili) is almost universally used, the only exception being schools where the headmaster is

consciously and actively trying to ensure that English is used for all purposes throughout the school. In other schools, we estimate that perhaps up to 75% of teaching, at any rate in Form I, is being done through Swahili' (Criper and Dodd, p.34).

(ii) Were it not for the use of Swahili, 'it is hard to see how any genuine education could take place at secondary level' (Criper and Dodd, p.16). The research of Mlama and Matteru (op.cit) showed plainly that pupils did not understand their subjects as they should, could express themselves adequately neither in speech nor writing, and indeed were unable, many of them, to participate in an English medium lesson at all, avoiding the eye of the teacher if a question were asked in English (but rushing to put up their hands, and producing an intelligent answer, if the same question were repeated in Swahili). Mlama and Matteru unequivocally concluded that the time had come for the medium of education to be (officially) changed. This has not, however, been the decision of the Tanzanian government.

### 3.3. Remedial measures

Notwithstanding the recommendation of the Commission on Education (quoted above) the Government has indicated that the medium of education at secondary and tertiary levels will continue to be English. It follows that English medium has to be rehabilitated and, from this, that standards of English must drastically and speedily be raised. The Criper-Dodd Report contains proposals (accepted by the Government) for achieving these ends:

- (i) to introduce, throughout the secondary system (Form I to IV) a graded extensive reading schemes;
- (ii) to produce and implement a six-month immersion programme for the beginning of Form I, as a way of introducing English into subject teaching at an early stage;
- (iii) to stimulate the use of English in the out-of-class school environment;
- (iv) to foster extra-curricular activities involving the use of English.

The rationale behind all of these proposals appears to be the same: that the only way of restoring English at secondary school to 'a level at which it could be properly used as a medium of instruction' is for pupils to receive 'a massive increase in their exposure to English and their use of English' (Criper and Dodd). Mlama and Matteru (op. cit. p. 31), in considering the option of taking remedial measures, observe that 'though it is thought that using English as medium helps students to know more English, investigation shows that this is not so' (my translation). The Criper-Dodd proposals, however, clearly go beyond this minimal remedy, both qualitatively and quantitatively. They can be summarised as an attempt to provide 'more formal instruction' (i.e. more of it) - especially in (i) and (ii) - and 'other measures' - especially in (iii) and (iv) - 'compensating for the lack of environmental support' which is characteristic of foreign language as opposed to second language learning situations (Stern, op. cit.: 16). Whether the measures will suffice for the achievement of the stated objectives is a matter about which, provided we are prepared to be patient, we do not really need to speculate. The answer will be known in about five years time.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

A foreign language - i.e. a non-indigenous language which is not used, outside the classroom, for day-to-day communication within the speech community - lacks the subjective characteristics requisite for viability as a national medium of education. Over the past two decades, English in Tanzania has, to a significant extent but not yet wholly, acquired the characteristics of a foreign language. During the same period a very marked and serious decline in standards of English has taken place. In part, this decline may be attributable to non-linguistic causes, indeed to causes outside the educational system altogether. But other causes, in

particular the insufficiency of learners' exposure to the language, and the long unresolved issue of the choice of medium of instruction, are plausibly subsumed under what has been suggested as being the major, overarching, cause - the change of status. The nature of the present proposals - they amount to a compensatory scheme, designed to give second-language features to a foreign language situation - gives support to this analysis.

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