

THE OFFICIAL LANGUAGE ISSUE

A look at the Uganda Experience

By Douglas Mpuga, MA

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Background.

Uganda occupies an area of 236, 040 square kilometers and lies along the equator in the eastern part of Africa. Neighboring countries are Sudan in the north, Kenya in the east, Tanzania in the south, and Rwanda in the southwest, and Democratic Republic of Congo in the west. It is the cradle of the river Nile, a river that runs for over 6000 miles through the Sudan and Egypt to the Mediterranean Sea. A country of 25 million people (Uganda census, 2002), Uganda gained independence from Britain in October 1962. The people identify with one of about eighteen ethnic groups and learn corresponding ethnic varieties as first language or mother tongue. English is the official language while other widely spoken languages are Luganda and other Bantu languages, Swahili, and Nilotic languages. With the imposition of European colonialism in Uganda, like in many other countries in Africa, Asia and the Americas came the imposition of European languages as official languages of the colonies. After attaining political independence, however, Uganda retained the language of the former colonial power as the official language.

Introduction.

This paper explores how Uganda, a country with nearly twenty indigenous languages came to retain English, the language of the former colonial power, as the official language. The paper discusses the official language policy in Uganda, examines

the role of a "foreign" language (English) as the official language of Uganda and its impact on the social -economic development.

Before colonialism Ugandans were organized and lived within communities of their ethnic groups or kingdoms each with a social setup complete with a language system. The colonial boundaries that setup the present Uganda, as we know it today, were drawn arbitrarily bringing together people of different ethnic groups. In the process some ethnic groups were divided and shared -geographically- among two or more countries. For example, it is not unusual to find languages that are spoken across national borders or people of the same ethnic group living in different neighboring countries.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the British imperialists did not have a common language to use as a tool of governance in Uganda. It was difficult to learn all the eighteen local languages. In addition, no ethnic group would or was willing to surrender her language for another language. Hence, in quest for a common language, English was introduced as the official language of Uganda.

English as the official language

The introduction of English as the official language of Uganda although inevitable was not easy to implement. Language is fundamentally social and it is not easy to merely introduce a language among a community. As Stuart Hall (1980) observed the individual can only think and speak by first situating himself within the language system. That system is socially constructed; it cannot be elaborated from the individual speaker alone. Thus, speech and other discourses institute systems of signs which objectivate and intermediate thinking. They speak as much as we speak in and through them.

Furthermore, according to Hall "to express ourselves within this system of signs we must have access to the rules and conventions which govern language-speech articulation; to the various codes which vary from one linguistic and cultural community to another through which social life is classified out in our culture" (Hall, 1980, p. 238).

The British colonial administrators were faced with a language problem that involved, among others, the language(s) used by the mass population in informal everyday interaction, on one hand, and the official English language, on the other. This kind of language situation prompted the British to use certain institutions to teach and popularize the English language. Among the institutions they used were the education system and religion (or more precisely Christianity).

English became, and still is, the language of instruction in schools in Uganda. It was thought that the use of English in the education process as a medium of acquiring literacy would establish the validity of the language in the eyes of the students as well as society as a whole. Thus, for one to advance in the academic one had to have a working knowledge of English. This practice led to the marginalization and at times denial of vernacular languages in schools. Students were strictly forbidden to use their vernacular at school. However, learning and speaking English improved one's chances of getting employment in the public sector. Today, almost forty years after independence knowledge of English is still a prerequisite for employment in the public sector.

Similarly, the principal tool of Christianity, the Bible was at the time available only in English although now it has been translated into the vernaculars. It was necessary, therefore, to recruit local catechists who could read and understand English. As a means of popularizing the use of English both the education system and the institution of

religion started a massive adult literacy campaign through out the country to teach people how to read and write English.

The other reason why English had to become the official language is that none of the ethnic groups would accept any other language -apart from theirs- as the official language. Each ethnic group believed that their language was 'developed' and 'rich' enough to be the official language of Uganda despite the fact that some of the languages, especially those used in urban centers, had gained a certain degree of acceptance since they were widely spoken even among other ethnic groups.

For the colonial ruling class, the various local languages of Uganda represented an obstacle to the integration of local communities into the national economy and national political system, both of which were under the control of the colonial master. Just like colonialists, the present leaders view national unity as possible partly through a national language.

Consequently, the use of English has taken root in official domains. As earlier mentioned, it is the language of instruction in schools, it is used in judiciary/court system, on national television and radio, and in all official documents. Although the National Radio transmits in all the local languages, transmission in English takes the lion's share of programming airtime. On National Television, apart from English, Luganda and Kiswahili are the only local languages used. However, with the liberalization of the airwaves, regional radio and television stations now broadcast more in local languages although all of them still carry some programs in English.

In the related area of public information about major political, economic, and health issues of the day, English is used as the language of public information although it

is increasingly necessary to translate the same messages into local languages. Likewise, in courts of law interpreters are hired to provide translations from English to the local languages.

It is important to point out that quite a number of Ugandans do not understand or speak their official language- English. Efforts to improve literacy rates have been geared more to teaching people how to read and write in their respective local languages. However, the elite in Uganda tends to have code-switching behavior- operating in local language for private, informal interactions and in English for public, formal and official purposes. Most people, on the other hand, are monolingual operating in their indigenous languages although some do speak several local languages due to intermarriage, trade, or travel.

The main reason why English is still the official language in post independent Uganda is the need to have quick and efficient access to modern science, technology and information, all of which can only be accessed in English. No wonder then all these field are only accessible by the elite - those who are literate and can read and speak English. Conversely, many ordinary Ugandans who have little or no knowledge of the official language are excluded from access to modern science, technology, and information transmitted in this language.

The official language policy

The official language policy, which involves the retention of English as the official language in Uganda, serves to consolidate control of the machinery of state in the hands of the new local elite. This group of people are able to monopolize the control of

stets power and hence at times the retention of English as the official language has been described as elitist and undemocratic.

Indeed, in the mid-seventies there were attempts to make an indigenous language the national and official language. There was a lot of pressure to 'decolonize' society, remove the symbols of colonial domination, and assert the national identity. However, there was no consensus on which local language to replace English as the official language. Advocates of 'decolonizing society' proposed Kiswahili - a language spoken in many parts of east and central Africa. Others proposed Luganda - spoken in most parts of Uganda.

Kiswahili was also deemed not to be indigenous enough and a big proportion of Ugandans do not speak the language (perhaps fewer people than those who speak English). In addition it is a language with less literature than English. Another obstacle was the choice of a variety of Swahili to adopt since Kenya (to the east) and Tanzania (to the south) has different varieties of Swahili. Rwanda and Uganda have yet another version of Swahili although the Kiswahili spoken in Tanzania is deemed to be the standard.

In addition, there was the issue of resources required to make a transition from English to Swahili. It would involve mass teaching of Kiswahili in all schools and adult literacy campaigns, printing of books and so on. There was no willing donor to fund the project of this magnitude. Besides Kiswahili could not be used in international fora let alone in the teaching of science and technology.

Luganda had more or less similar disadvantages although it had a lot of literature and newspapers. Ethnic rivalry and imagined and a real threat of undermining other local

languages if chosen over the rest of the indigenous languages did not help the cause of Luganda as a national/official language. Coincidentally English was found to be neutral and was therefore maintained as the official language.

The influence of English on the local languages

Although English is their official language, Ugandans are not native speakers of English. English is spoken as a second language and people learn and speak native languages from their ethnic groups. Many Ugandans speak more than one local language since some of the languages are similar. However, in urban centers where there are people from different ethnic backgrounds, and where intermarriage is more common, English is widely used. Children who attend school in cities and towns and interact with others from different areas also tend to communicate more in English.

Further, because of intermarriage, many couples communicate among themselves and with their children in English; also, others learn and speak all the relevant languages. Some children actually do learn languages of their parents although it is more common to learn their mother's language and the local language spoken in the area where they live (if it is different from their mother tongue).

Many words in English have also been added to the local languages and they are commonly used. A few examples will illustrate this point.

English	Vernacular
Coat	koti
Shirt	saati

Motorcar	Motoka
Train	Train
Speech	Sipiki
Ticket	tikiti
School	Sukulu
Christmas	krismas

In addition, all days of the week and the months of the year have almost the same pronunciation in vernacular as in English, although the pronunciation may vary slightly in some cases. On the other hand, I know of only one word that the English language has borrowed from the local languages. That is safari (which means trip or journey in both Kiswahili and Luganda).

There is also a tendency for people to speak a mixture of their local language and English, especially in informal conversations

CONCLUSION

To summarize I will borrow the words of scholars who assert "language plays a vital role in the process of production in any society. It is the medium by which production is organized and coordinated whenever more than one producer is involved. Language is also the medium by which the technological know how used in production is stored and passed on to others in the production process. Thus, language is the key element in the economic base of the society. According to Person (1973) language is also a vital ingredient of the institutions which society erects to maintain the prevailing social relations and to protect these social relations. Government administration, religious or

political institutions all need language to function. It is clear, therefore, as Balibar (1994) notes "language is so central to the superstructure of society" (p. 13-14).

Finally, as Uganda advances economically and technologically and as the literacy levels continue to rise, English will be widely learned and spoken in that country.

Similarly, because culture and cultural institutions have to be promoted and sustained the local languages will keep in use and also continue to grow. It is not farfetched, therefore, to assume that Uganda will remain a country of many languages with English as the official language.