

Language and Political Economy: A historical perspective from Kenya¹

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The abstract

The disproportionate use of English, during and after colonisation, has had some consequences on the development of Kenyan indigenous languages. Indeed, the English language has a lion's share in the school curriculum to the detriment of other languages. As a result, the scenario of the 1920s, where English was the idiom for the privileged minority, seems to persist today.

Kenya has 42 ethnic communities with Kiswahili emerging as the most widely-accepted language for national unity. However, the political elites continue to favour the development of English without due attention to Kiswahili and the indigenous languages.

The Sheng language, spoken and popularized by the youth deserves special mention. It is argued here that it has its place in the linguistic lay-out of Kenya.

The paper reviews the languages of Kenya and underscores their relevance in the political economy of pre- and post-independence period in Kenya. It further seeks to lay bare the rationale behind the inordinate usage of English in Kenya by bringing in a historical perspective.

Finally, the paper proposes a framework for the co-existence of local and foreign languages in Kenya as a prelude to the development of a language policy in Kenya.

Keywords: language, politics, resources, identity, hegemony, culture ethnicity, co-existence

1.0 Introduction

It is noteworthy that the dearth of information on pre-colonial Kenya may be attributed to the lack of a writing culture. Indeed, traditions, history, collective memory depended exclusively on oral transmission thanks to the works of griots, sages and older persons, hence the expression "When an elderly person dies in Africa, it is a precious library that burns down".

The gift of the garb within the traditional African framework was highly prized and its proud owners had a prominent role in the affairs of the ethnic group. Griots and sages were admired not only for their awesome mnemonic prowess but also for their verbal facility and flowery expression. In other words, mastery of language was associated with great intelligence and wisdom, the very antechamber of power. Leaders were expected to be eloquent and verse in culture since language summed up a people's history and value systems (Bloch 1975 cited in Gal (1989). It seemed that language and culture were each dependent on the other for survival.

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The literature available on pre-colonial Kenya (Cagnolo 1933/2006; Kenyatta 1938; Mutongi 2005) indicates that the peoples of Kenya lived in scattered clans governed politically by a Council of Elders. For instance, the Gikuyu community was under the *Kiama* in all adjudications over land, personal relationships and war with neighbours. In brief, Kenya was not a nation but panoply of ethnic communities living in relative harmony. Some like the Maasai, Luhya, Luo and Kisii lived across the current geographical confines. In fact, what the boundaries of 1884 and later 1919 did was to artificially lock communities in one area and also separate others from their kith and kin. What is of interest here is an appreciation that pre-colonial Kenya was diverse, loose (i.e. no nation) and relatively independent from political, economic and cultural (read linguistic) hegemony that was to come later with colonialism.

2.0 Colonial history

The advent of Europeans, we argue, impacted the Kenyan traditional life in many ways, especially the use of language as an instrument of power. The British annexed Kenya subsequent to the "Scramble for Africa" after the Berlin Conference in 1884 (Pakenham 1991). The British protectorate was later declared Kenya colony in 1920. The British were to use the English language to administer their new colony.

The arrival of the British had been fore-grounded and rationalized by a racist discourse propounded by European scholars in the 16th century (Mudimbe 1994). In a nutshell, the "savage", wherever he was, had but basic intelligence that hardly distinguished him from the animal world. As a result of this intellectual deficit, the savage or primitive man had no culture worth mentioning. In the same logic, the British explorer, John Hannington Speke in the 1860s is quoted in *New African*² as having described the African thus:

As his father did, so he does. He works his wife, sells his children, enslaves all he can lay his hands upon, and unless fighting for the lands of others, contents himself with drinking, singing, and dancing like a baboon, to drive dull care away.

Once the justification had been provided, there was no longer any guilt or compunction on the part of the Europeans as they occupied African lands and seas in the name of God and King or Queen. Africans had to be civilized which meant giving them a god and a culture. More to the point, it meant economic and political exploitation.

2.1 Entrenching the inferiority complex

British imperial interests presented a fresh language, English, whose hegemonic influence over the peoples of Kenya would be felt for a very long time indeed. Franz Fanon's treatise on language and power relations in *Peaux noires masques*

²Article entitled *Reporting Africa* by Baffour Ankomah. June 2008 issue.

³Black skin, White masks

*blancs*³ points to the fact that the subdued person aspires to master the language and culture of the conqueror. To achieve this, the oppressed person denigrates his own culture and historical experience and adopts the oppressor's perspective as his new point of reference. Within this convoluted logic, the oppressed person is very contented when he "speaks like a white man".³

Mutongi (2005) captures this admiration for white men and their language among the Maragoli people of Kenya. She describes how her people were intrigued by and later enamoured with the white man's culture.

Again, Franz Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre*⁵ evokes a powerful psychological dilemma. The oppressed has internalized the image of the oppressor as his only reference. This means that once the oppressor exits, the oppressed looks around for someone to oppress in turn.

From a linguistic standpoint, the oppressed is trapped in the language of the oppressor and now prefers to express his experience and history through the lenses of the master's language. More specifically, in Kenya, the oppressed peoples aspired to master English as a way of modelling themselves along the frame of reference of the British colonialists. Local indigenous languages had crashed out of the race to leave English as the dominant language in power discourse. Put simply, English was the language of the ruler and therefore highly desirable among the African elites. The ensuing inferiority complex foisted on or subliminally assumed by Kenyans vis-à-vis the British found expression in the inordinate use of the English language as the official medium of communication.

As Kenya became a colony in 1920, it was clear that the country would be ruled in English. However, the hyphenated rapport between language and power (economic and political) was not lost to the British colonialists. Neither was it to the nascent African elite. Kenyans were to be exposed to minimal English, just enough to follow instructions from the master⁴. This situation was to bring issues of language, culture and politics into sharper focus.

2.2 Language, culture and political power

Kenyatta (op. Cit) and Gatheru (2005) describe the demand for English among emerging African elites. Harry Thuku, an eloquent man in English and also a man of great economic means, was among the Africans who demanded that English be taught to Africans as a way of understanding the thinking of the white man. Black consciousness would be enriched by an understanding of English since this idiom emblemized political and economic power.

³ In the best case scenario, the oppressed can exercise more power over the oppressor since now he knows two languages, his and the oppressors. We are grateful to the reviewer for this insight.

⁴Jomo Kenyatta, who later became Kenya's first president, was trained as a water meter reader.

⁵Wretched of the Earth

Gal (1989) argues that "because linguistic practices provide access to material resources, they become resources themselves in their own right".

To compound the language issue, there arose in the 1930s the thorny issue of female circumcision among the Bantus of central Kenya (Gikuyu, Embu and Meru communities). Thomas (2003) delineates the vicious diatribe between European missionaries and colonialists on one hand, and the Africans on the other. The missionaries, adamant on exterminating the practice, put pressure on the British administration to proscribe female circumcision. But the unrelenting Africans insisted that the missionaries should not meddle with African culture.

In circumcising cultures in Kenya, there is a linguistic distinction between the circumcised and the uncircumcised. Among the Bantus of Central Kenya, *kihii* and *kirigu*⁵, refer to boy and girl respectively, whereas *mwanake* and *muiritu* describe a young man and young woman respectively, after they had undergone the circumcision ceremonies. Once circumcised, a person was now initiated into adulthood and can marry and move away from the maternal abode. In other words, the circumcision was an empowering ceremony guaranteeing certain social and symbolic benefits to the initiate. The circumcised males were ready for the warrior class and the females for marriage and motherhood. The rite gave the initiates power and responsibility.

It was unconceivable for Bantus to endure life with the two appellations, *kihii* and *kirigu*⁵, since culturally, they connoted a puerile, infantile and irresponsible state. As a result, the cultural conflict led to the exodus of Africans from missionary schools to Independent Schools where their culture could be respected, while learning the English language more seriously.

2.3 Independent schools

Gatheru (op.cit.) notes that Mbiyu Koinange was one of the most visible proponents and founder of independent schools in Kenya. The institutions were a loud protest to the cultural imperialism of the British. They defended female circumcision and sought to promote African scholarship by encouraging the study of the English language. The realization was that although the protection of African culture was a paramount issue, there was need to master the English language as a way of understanding the thinking of the British. In fact, Kenyan languages were seen as repositories of cultural information while English was the language of political and often economic power. The cultural protest would soon assume a political dimension in the 1930s as Africans began to demand more political representation in the Legislative councils, the organs of governance in colonial Kenya (Thomas, op. Cit).

⁵ The term is now almost obsolete since female circumcision is frowned upon today by the Gikuyu. All young girls are now referred to as *muiritu*.

2.4 Language & governance in the Legislative assembly

Although arguably there were more speakers of Kiswahili than English in colonial Kenya, it was the latter that ruled the land. Initially, the Legislative council in Kenya had no African representation but after years of conflict and diatribe some symbolic representation was conceded. However, the first African representative to the legislative body was a white missionary! (Gatheru, op.cit). Later, Eliud Mathu, a Kenyan, would become the first African in the council due to his great influence and oratory skills in English.

2.5 Language in the Liberation discourse

The returning African soldiers from the Second World War (1938-1945) would add impetus and colour to the nascent struggle for political representation in the Legislative Assembly and cultural recognition. Further, the Kenyan political class including Thomas Mboya, Jaramogi Oginga, Jomo Kenyatta, Paul Ngei, Achieng Oneko, Argwings Kodhek, Muindi Mbingu, just to mention a few, had become extremely eloquent in admonishing the British for maintaining Kenya under colonialism. The freedom discourse was conducted largely in English both on local and international stages. The Kenyan elites had matured in the language of the colonizer, mastered it, and now could, on equal linguistic and intellectual terms, demand the dismantling of the British stranglehold on Kenya. This led to the Mau Mau⁶ uprising, among other revolts.

2.5.1 Ethnicity and politics

The British devised ways of applying the divide-and-rule principle on Kenyans. For starters, they balkanized the country into “reserves” where each community would be kept under the watchful eye of British collaborators (home guards). The City of Nairobi was divided into sections with the two troublesome communities (Luo and Gikuyu) being relegated to the East of the City, the Asians in the northern fringe and the Europeans in the loftier and leafy western part of the city. This ethnic segregation was enhanced and promoted by the British as a way of controlling rebellion and the demand for political independence (Anderson 2006).

Anderson (op.cit.) and Elkins (2006) are quick to note that the British perceived the Gikuyu community as the most recalcitrant people during the Mau Mau war. As a result, anyone who spoke the Gikuyu language was considered suspect and dealt with ruthlessly. It is clear here that the British considered the Gikuyu language as the medium of expression of its Nemesis, the Gikuyu people. In other words, the speakers of the language were perceived as a threat to British hegemony over Kenya.

In 1952, Sir Evelyn Baring, Governor of Kenya, declared a State of Emergency and put the putative Mau Mau leaders in jail. The main culprit was Jomo Kenyatta, a Gikuyu, and one of the proponents of Independent schools and a fierce defender of

⁶ The origin of the term is not clear to us. However, the author was informed by local old men who were young and lucid then that it means *Mzungu Aende Ulaya, Mwafrica Apate Uhuru* (Let the white man return to Europe so that the African can get freedom).

African culture and heritage. Kenyatta (1938) challenges the white man's idea of the Kenyan people, in particular the Gikuyu. He defends the Gikuyu world view and extols the virtues of the traditional life, chief among which is mother tongue.

3.0 Language and political independence

In 1963, Kenya freed herself from the yoke of British colonialism to join the ranks of free nations of the world. During the inaugural address, Jomo Kenyatta, then Prime Minister of Kenya, interrupted his speech in English to switch to Kiswahili. He justified the code-switch claiming that English was a *colonialistic* (sic) *language*. Thereafter, Kiswahili became to be viewed as a national language capable of embodying the spirit and character of the new Kenyan nation.

The Kenyan Constitution⁷ (1964) delineated Kiswahili as the National language as opposed to English, the official language. In effect, this meant that English maintained its hegemonic grip over Kenya as the national language of the putatively independent people of Kenya remained in the shadows (Iraki 2003). All official documents were first and foremost written in the *colonialistic language* before any translation into Kiswahili could be countenanced.

Studies conducted in the Lusophone and Francophone countries indicate that normally less than 30% of the population can be said to be sufficiently literate in the colonial languages. The great majority of the people are more versed in local African languages. Despite this reality, official communication is relayed in the colonial languages.

It can be argued that the same situation prevails in Anglophone Africa, especially in Kenya. In the latter case, the majority of urban people understand and use Kiswahili very well while in the rural areas people use the local language⁸.

Similar claims have been made by Dua (1993) with respect to the language conflict in India. He argues that it is mainly the central English-speaking elites who control the national resources. These include "politicians, scientists, bureaucrats, intellectuals, and business and industrial managers."

The Ominde Commission recommended instruction in local African languages⁹ for the first three of so years of primary education (Mbaabu 1996). This was the first attempt at crafting a national language policy. While commenting on nascent nations, Fishman (cited in Dua 1993) notes that "developing nations have been unable to develop their own models of planning." In Kenya, the new leaders replicated the language policy of the colonizer that placed English at the top of Kenyan languages.

⁷ The draft Constitution rejected by a referendum in November 2005 had proposed to have Kiswahili and English as official languages.

⁸ Ominde Commission of 1964.

⁹ Kenya has 42 African languages.

3.1 Language of the National Assembly

In 1974, eleven years after Independence, Kenyatta declared that Kiswahili could now be used in the National Assembly alongside English. Nevertheless, the business of the House continued unabated in English. Since then although members of parliament could make their contributions in Kiswahili, the official language of the House remained English.

3.2 English and National language in the Kenyan curriculum

After independence, English (excluding Literature) had 7 periods¹⁰ per week while Kiswahili, the national language had 2. The disproportionate allocation of contact hours underscored the attitude of the Kenyan political elite toward English, the language of power and influence.

The situation changed in 1985 when Kiswahili became an examinable subject in both primary and secondary schools. Now, it had 5 periods while English had 6 per week. Evidently, English was still more valued than Kiswahili.

In many instances, success in Kenya is determined by the level of mastery of English. This is partly the case since all instruction is in English and the national examinations are in English.

4.0 Language, politics and identity

4.1 Language of politics

There is no gainsaying that the prevalent political discourse in Kenya is in the English language for reasons described above. Indeed, this is the primary language of political manifestos and party constitutions. However, in recognition of the importance of Kiswahili, politicians struggle willy-nilly to speak the language as a way of attracting votes from ordinary Kenyans. More uncannily, Kenya's first two presidents¹¹ always pronounced two speeches during national days. The first speech was in English while the second was in Kiswahili¹².

The vernacular languages became a potent political tool in the rural areas where culture is more entrenched. At this level, verbal skills are greatly valued and politicians invest heavily in order to get votes. In recent times, there are many FM stations in Kenya broadcasting in vernacular. This had had the desired effect of promoting the use of vernacular languages, even in the cities, the fief of Kiswahili. Nonetheless, the vernacular languages are yet to enjoy the privileges of English and Kiswahili since most of them have no written code. In addition, the youth are not particularly keen to employ vernacular languages.

¹⁰ A period lasts for 40 minutes.

¹¹ The current president speaks almost exclusively in English during official days.

¹² To most Kenyans, it was the second speech that mattered as it addressed them directly in a language they could understand. Invariably, the content of the two speeches was markedly different.

4.2 Youth language and identity: The rise of Sheng

In this discussion, we have attempted to review the critical role that language plays in matters of culture and politics. In the early years, Kenyans fought hard to defend what they perceived to be their culture and birthright against the cultural imperialism of the British colonialists and missionaries.

In subsequent years, we see an African political class that is striving to place English above all Kenyan languages. English enjoys a predominant position in the country's school and political landscapes. But Kiswahili, especially after 1985¹³, enjoys some relative respect as it is the main language in the urban centres in Kenya. However, a new idiom, Sheng, has begun to send ripples across the linguistic topology of Kenya.

4.2.1 Sheng

Although the emergence of a language cannot be dated with certainty, scholars argue rather convincingly that Sheng was noted in the early 1960s in Nairobi, especially in the Black neighbourhoods popularly referred to as Eastlands (Abdoulaz-Azziz et al 1996, Mbaabu 1996, Githiora 2002, Iraki 2004). However, it was only in the 1990s that researchers began to explore the language.

According to Mbaabu (1996), Sheng emerged due to lack of a language policy in Kenya. In contrast, Sheng does not exist in Tanzania to the same extent as in Kenya since the country is unified by the Kiswahili language. In fact, Kiswahili is both the national and official language in Tanzania. Such a situation, Mbaabu further argues, leaves no room for a language like Sheng.

Githiora (2002) explains that Sheng appears to be more of a peer language among the youth, an idiom that defines the identity of a youth that wants to share its secrets and exclude the adult world. The search for identity seems to be the biggest driving force in the emergence of Sheng.

Iraki (2004) delves into the cognitive realm to wonder whether the emergence of Sheng could not be further explained by a cognitive model. In the model inspired by cognitive linguistics, he proposes that the mind of a young person in Nairobi is confronted with several languages at the same time which leads it to create another idiom from the mix. The emergent idiom is simpler in structure, and more picturesque. Indeed, the languages the mind is exposed to include mother tongue, Kiswahili, English, other local Kenyan languages such as Luo, Kamba, Luhyia, etc. Sheng, the language that emerges from the crucible, has essentially a Kiswahili syntax and a motley lexicon from all the languages in Nairobi (Iraki 2004).

¹³ Kenya embraced the 8-4-4 system (8 years primary, 4 in Secondary & 4 in the University) in 1985. In the new system Kiswahili became a compulsory and examinable subject in primary and secondary school.

4.2.1.1 Sheng and politics

Since its emergence, Sheng evokes different reactions from Kenyans. The youth love it, which explains why it has spread like a bushfire into the rural areas of Kenya. It has also spread, though to a lesser extent, to Tanzania, where Kiswahili is both official and national language.

But because of its origins¹⁴ Sheng suffers an image problem. The elite frown upon it, the intelligentsia consider it crass, and the educationists view it as a threat to the purism of English and Kiswahili. However, despite the negative publicity, Sheng has had some rare moments of glory.

In 2002, Kenya had a momentous General Election that ended KANU's 40-year rule since independence in 1963.¹⁵ During the election campaign the NARC¹⁶ party employed the Sheng word *unbwogable*¹⁷ to very good effect. Similarly, the Head of State used the term even in his official speeches. Also in his limited Sheng repertoire, the President would end his official speech by urging Kenyans to go home and *kuji-enjoy*.¹⁸

The use of Sheng by the politicians was a ruse to win votes from the youth. By speaking one or two Sheng words the politicians seemed to be saying *hey young guys! We are pulling together!*

Commercial advertisers have also recently turned to Sheng to market their products.

4.2.1.2 Sheng and economics

The entrepreneurial class in Kenya have now woken up to the economic advantages that Sheng presents as the language of the youth. With more than 60% of Kenyans being young persons, the advertising industry has turned to Sheng to lure the youth. In particular, the two competing mobile phone service providers, Celtel¹⁹ and Safaricom²⁰, have continually used Sheng in their advertisements. Some soap manufacturers also use *lifebuoy kadonye*²¹ to market their products.

Publishers too have expressed an interest to publish books in Sheng. A recent debate between scholars in Kenya concluded that Sheng should have a place in the publishing world²².

In the just concluded General Election in 2002, politicians were very keen to use Sheng to woo votes from the youth. However, the huge billboards only displayed messages in Kiswahili and English, an indication that the main protagonists²³ did not belong in the youth culture. Nevertheless, Sheng remains a powerful weapon for creating the illusion of solidarity with the youth.

¹⁴ Eastlands are economically poorer neighborhoods compared to Westlands, the abode of the wealthy in Kenya.

¹⁵ KANU –Kenya African National Union.

¹⁶ NAtional Rainbow Coalition.

¹⁷ *Bwog* is *fear* in Dholuo; the two suffixes *un-* and *-able* add the meaning of *invincible, unbeatable*.

¹⁸ Sheng for *relaxation*. In other instance, it can mean *to mock*.

¹⁹ *Bei poa* (cool price)

²⁰ *Bamba finje* (Take 50 shillings!)

²¹ Sheng for *small lifebuoy*.

²² Kwani? Is a book series that publishes a number of articles in Sheng. The debate was published in the Daily Nation of 5 February 2006.

²³ Raila Odinga and Mwai Kibaki are both elitist.

5.0 Language and internationalism

5.1 Language and regional integration

As stated elsewhere and in Iraki (2008), Kenya, unlike Tanzania, is grappling with the concept of nationhood. In the wake of the 2007 general Elections in Kenya, the country witnessed ugly scenes of ethnic cleansing where many Kenyans lost their lives and property²⁴. The fact is that Kenya remains a divided country, polarized along ethnic/linguistic lines (Karega 2003).

The inward-looking nature of Kenyans conflicts with their outward-looking desire to embrace nationhood, regionalism and even globalization²⁵.

The idea of an East African Community (Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania) dates from the late 1950s but it became a reality in 1967. Due to many factors chief among them the Cold War,²⁶ the evanescent Community collapsed in 1977 with bitter exchanges between the three presidents over the sharing of the spoils.

In 1999, the East African Community²⁷ was created replete with a regional parliament and passports. There is no gainsaying the political, economic and social benefits of such a regional authority. Similar blocs exist in Europe, Asia and America. This brings us to the linguistic dimension.

The language of the Community is mainly English since it is argued most of its members are familiar with it. Kiswahili, an African language spoken not only in the concerned Region but all the way into the Congo and down to northern Mozambique plays second fiddle to a European idiom. One would have hoped that Kiswahili would be the unifying glue among East Africans on the political front. Not the case. In fact, Ugandans for a long time resisted Kiswahili since they viewed it as linguistic imperialism from Kenya.

Economically and socially though, things seem to be different. Kiswahili remains very influential in business transactions alongside English, especially in the transportation sector. The East Africans also employ Kiswahili in social settings such as marriages, religious functions, informal discussions, etc. In the proposed free flow of goods and peoples across the East African countries, Kiswahili will no doubt compete favourably or even outpace English in the economic and social arenas.

At the continental level, the colonial languages (English, French and Portuguese) have a field day to the detriment of local national languages. These languages, in

²⁴ Raila, leader of opposition, rejected the results of the election claiming that Kibaki rigged the poll. About 1,000 lives were lost.

²⁵ After the announcement of the presidential poll in December 2007, Kenya was rocked by ethnic cleansing for two months claiming an estimated 1,000 lives.

²⁶ Tanzania was on the *ujamaa* (collectivization) path while Kenya and Uganda were pro-West.

²⁷ Now it includes Rwanda and Burundi.

most cases, serve as the only national languages in view of the linguistic diversity within the countries. Put in another way, the Africans do not have a consensus around one language that could become the national language. For instance, the Republic of South Africa has about eleven national languages.

The African Union (AU) has for some time now accepted Kiswahili as one of its languages. Such a political perch affords an African language the opportunity to shine and radiate the majesty of African people. Indeed, some scholars and politicians, especially from Ghana- the home of Kwame Nkrumah the Panafricanist – had proposed Kiswahili to be the basis of a continental language to be known as *Afrihili*.

5.2 Language and Globalization

At the global level, English rules supreme in all areas of life: political, economic, jurisprudence, and social. The uneven linguistic phenomenon became apparent shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. America became the only world power and wasted no time in asserting her superiority. The English-speaking nations of US and Britain became the new visible leaders of the world.

Like we analyzed here at the national level, other countries are now experiencing the effects of a dominating (at times domineering) language at the global level. France has for a long time been reluctant to encourage the speaking of English for fear of cultural and even political domination. Just like European and Asian languages, African languages also are imperilled by the domination of English, the global language.

In Kenya, there are more and more young people, mainly from towns, who are not conversant with their mother tongue. They speak Swahili, Sheng and English; some only English. This situation may threaten the survival of other African indigenous languages. To remedy the situation, entrepreneurs have launched vernacular FM radio stations that also promote ethnic solidarity among other things and Ghetto FM to promote Sheng.

Power relations in Kenya can be viewed along language lines. Whereas in Kenya, Kiswahili and English enjoy special political perches, the ethnic communities play a crucial role in determining who rules the country. The Gikuyu community, accounting for 20% of the population²⁸, has had the presidency twice since 1963 in a country with 42 ethnic groups (Iraki 2008). Currently, the government is led by a Gikuyu president and a Luo Prime-Minister. The Luo are the third-largest community in demography in Kenya.

²⁸ Kenya has a population of about 30 million people.

6.0 Framework for co-existence of languages

Politics is about how people are governed and how resources are distributed within the polity. In Kenya, English is manifestly the most powerful language in matters relating to officialdom and elitism. English is the medium of instruction, and the language of administration and justice. This might mean that all one needs in Kenya is English. Indeed, there is a growing number of Kenyans who only speak and understand English. But we argue that the other languages are also important.

Kiswahili plays a crucial role in provincial administration, especially in the rural areas. Although the administration documents are drafted in English, the administration officers distil it in Kiswahili before addressing the rural folk. The ordinary people would otherwise be completely excluded by the official documents.

Further, Kiswahili participates actively in the social area where they are mixed languages, for instance in the towns and cities. City residents invariably use a mixture of Kiswahili, Sheng and English.

However, in the comfort of rural homes and in many of the urban ones too, Kenyans indulge in mother tongue from among the 42 in the country. These indigenous languages are the repositories of time-tested wisdom, lore and value systems of the Kenyan people²⁹ as superior to the rest.

Business and politics in the rural scene are dominated by the indigenous languages. The rural chiefs administer justice and order via the ethnic language. Similarly, traders employ the same on market days until they encounter someone unfamiliar with it. In such an instance, they naturally turn to Kiswahili, the lingua franca of Kenya.

Besides English, Kiswahili and indigenous idioms, there is Sheng. Since politics, local and national, is dominated by sexagenarians in Kenya, the youth have little if any significant role away from election periods³⁰. The youth account for more than 60% of the population, which means they can be a formidable force in influencing political voting.

In business, Sheng has already earned its spurs, especially in the informal sector. Public transportation uses Sheng as its main language of communication. The sector includes buses, minibuses and trucks.

Socially, Sheng's image has improved tremendously to the extent of attracting membership from the elite classes. There are many up-market youths who are

²⁹Recent experience in Kenya during the General Elections of 2007 shows that when uncontrolled, the promotion of ethnic languages can lead to ethnic chauvinism.

³⁰ Kenya votes once every 5 years.

now using Sheng as their preferred language of communication among themselves.

In sum, an urban Kenyan can manipulate a rich patrimony of at least four languages: mother tongue, Sheng, Kiswahili and English. He may in addition know other African languages (Kamba, Maasai, Giriama, etc) and European languages (French, Spanish, German, etc). Multilingualism is a reality in Kenya.

In the absence of a clear language policy in Kenya, it might be desirable to envisage a harmonious and complementary co-existence of Kenya's languages since each one of them seems to cater for a specific category of people. They are all important, relevant and useful as proposed in Figure 1 below.

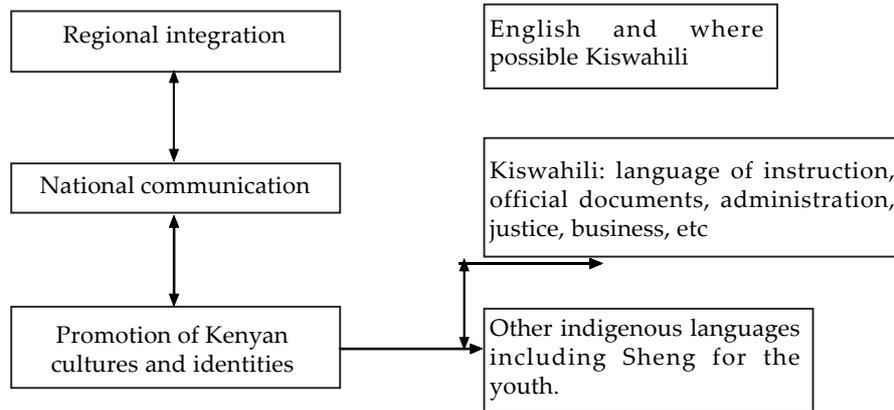


Figure 1. Proposed structure for linguistic co-existence in Kenya.

The figure proposes a structure that might inform the language policy of Kenya in future. Four levels of interaction are envisaged, namely local (promotion of cultures and identities), national, regional and global. We argue that English can be promoted as the international language connecting Kenya with the rest of the world at a global level. However, national issues such as politics, education, administration and justice could be dispensed in Kiswahili, the national language. Finally, the cultural patrimony of Kenya could be promoted through the development and usage of local indigenous languages. Sheng will continue to serve the identity issues of the youth. In this framework, Kiswahili, English, indigenous languages and Sheng have clear and very important roles. It is not desirable that English should dominate all spheres of life in Kenya to the detriment of the other languages.

7.0 Conclusions

Kenya's linguistic topography is an important pointer to power politics in the country. The historical reality of Civilization via Pax Britannica continues to have relevance as English dominates other languages in all sphere of life. English is perceived as the language of the master and therefore adulated in the extreme. Conversely, African languages play second fiddle and lose their place in the sun.

Since each of the four levels – indigenous languages, Sheng, Kiswahili and English – has its own distinctive role, it might be desirable to promote all of them instead of focusing inordinately on English. The vernacular will enhance cognitive development and serve as a repository of age-old values; Sheng will include and exclude and serve as the identity of the youth; Kiswahili will radiate within and across the country to embrace the East African family; English will be the language for international dialogue (Iraki 2003).

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