
Lexicography in Kenya: A Historical Survey

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Abstract: This paper traces the historical development of lexicography in Kenya. Attempts are made to show that although Kenya's linguistic landscape boasts with about 50 indigenous African languages, very little has been done in the field of compiling their dictionaries, especially by Kenyans themselves. Particular attention has been paid to the works done so far on the main African languages spoken in Kenya. It is argued that in the past five years Kenyan scholars have started to take considerable notice of lexicography as an academic subject. I have briefly focused on the language situation in Kenya, Swahili lexicography, professional literature and seminars. It is proposed that more efforts need to be advanced, in updating the already existing dictionaries as well as venturing into specific genres of lexicography like dictionary criticism and dictionary use.

Keywords: KENYA, DICTIONARY, SWAHILI, LEXICOGRAPHY, DICTIONARY USE, LINGUISTS

Muhtasari: Katika kazi hii, tunajaribu kumulika maendeleo ya taaluma ya leksikografia nchini Kenya. Ingawa kuna takriban lugha zaidi ya hamsini nchini Kenya, hakujakuwepo na jitihada madhubuti za kutungia kila lugha kamusi yake hususan na Wakenya wenyewe. Baadaye makala yanaonyesha kuwa kumekuwepo na mwamko fulani kwani wataalam wengi wa Isimu sasa wameanza kutambua taaluma hii nchini Kenya. Kwa ufupi tumetaja historia ya leksikografia ya kiswahili, semina na hali ya utungaji kamusi kwa sasa hapa nchini.

Maneno muhimu: KENYA, KAMUSI, KISWAHILI, LEKSIKOGRAFIA ISIMU, MATUMIZI YA KAMUSI

Introduction

Lexicography has witnessed tremendous changes particularly in the past two decades. In Europe and America, for example, there have been deliberate endeavours to improve it academically and as a professional discipline. Unfortunately, apart from the past five years or so, the same efforts have not been registered in Africa. Hartmann (1990: 71, 72) catches this mood in Africa when he writes that there are still very few monolingual dictionaries for the official and national languages, very few African nationals are engaged in dictionary making and a negligible number of countries have a professional body specializing in lexicography.

This is the same picture in the Kenyan scene. Most dictionaries available

now were written by missionaries and colonial administrators initially as wordlists, glossaries and supplements to grammars. The national policy on language is to a great extent dependent on the one inherited from the colonial government. In this regard, English as the official language remains the dominant language at the expense of the innumerable indigenous languages in Kenya. This means that there have been very little efforts connected with the general improvement and researching of the "local" languages, both in terms of compilation of their vocabulary as well as designing their grammars.

On the other hand there is the Swahili language. This is the national language of communication. There have been discernible attempts to map it as a *lingua franca* in East and Central Africa. It has benefited more from the Tanzanian scene than from Kenya. Most of the works available in Swahili now are as a result of the input from the Institute of Kiswahili Research in Dar es Salaam University in Tanzania. This is why this paper occasionally will traverse and enter into the Tanzanian scene.

Language Situation in Kenya

Kenya is a multilingual country. It is not yet very clear how many languages are spoken in Kenya. Estimates put the figures at about 40-50 languages. These languages can broadly be categorized into 3 elaborate groups: Foreign languages, e.g. English, French, German, Lingala, Swahili, and indigenous languages, such as Kikuyu, Luo, Kalenjin and Luhya.

As mentioned earlier, English is the official language. It is becoming increasingly important for our communication needs. This is because it is the sole language of instruction in the schools, the language of communication in the courts and a language through which government business is conducted. It is also seen as the language of the elite. Ironically, most of the young people in Kenya today would like to associate themselves with the English language more than Swahili or their first languages (mother-tongues). This therefore means that the indigenous languages are being sidelined further and further.

In the same breath, a new scene is developing in Kenya. Due to the insurmountable dependence of our economy on foreign aid, languages such as German, French, Japanese and Italian are now taking the centre stage. Most people are enrolling in foreign cultural centres like Goethe Institute, French Cultural Centre, Alliance Française and Japanese School. This is as a result of seeking employment in multinational firms, tourist companies or migrating to those countries, which necessary means ushering in better living standards.

Although Swahili should historically be grouped with the other indigenous languages, synchronically it deserves a special mention. It is the fastest growing language that has continued to serve as a viable political vehicle for nation building.

It is spoken extensively in Kenya as well as the whole of the East and

Central Africa region. In 1969, the ruling party in Kenya declared Swahili the official language of the country. But there were no concrete policy actions that supported this decision. Recently the government has realised the importance of Swahili and it has been given a higher status in the new educational system.

It is a compulsory subject examinable up to the secondary level. It is also used in parliament and political public meetings. According to Heine and Möhlig (1982: 61) Swahili is the most widely used spoken language in Kenya with a 65.3% figure compared to English 16.1% and vernacular second languages 13.7%.

With the advent of multiparty politics in Kenya ethnicity has continually threatened the unity that was hitherto seen in the country. This means that the government is not very keen on supporting the indigenous languages that exist. Numerically, the number of speakers of each of these languages corresponds to the demographic size of the ethnic community where they are spoken as first languages. In this regard Kikuyu, Luo, Kalenjin and Luhya are the largest in this category. Very little deliberate efforts are being made to augment their status in the country. As it is now, these languages are seen as the most divisive catalysts in the country. This is the reason we find a negligible number of recent publications that cover their vocabularies or grammars. These languages are therefore threatened with extinction since the younger generation is no longer interested in their acquisition nor are the policy makers enthusiastic about dealing with them.

Swahili Lexicography

Swahili has few monolingual dictionaries but many bilingual ones. This is because the avant-garde of Swahili lexicography were foreigners who came to East Africa as missionaries or colonizers. Basically they needed bilingual dictionaries which would help them to communicate with Africans. Kabalimu (1993: 1) writes:

Swahili lexicography can be traced back to the year 1811 when travellers and adventurers were compiling English-Swahili word lists. These works were fragmented and lacked linguistic sophistication and standard orthography.

As Swahili was used more and more in business administration and Christian evangelism, there was need to compile its lexicon and in 1882 Krapf published his collection of extensive Swahili vocabulary and grammar for missionary use. Later we find works by Madan (1894, 1903), Sacleux (1890, 1939 and 1959), Velten (1910), Johnson (1939). [See Kabalimu (1993) for full bibliographical details of these references].

Recent lexicographic pursuits have recorded works done by Africans

themselves. Of great significance is the monolingual *Standard Swahili Dictionary* (1981) published by Oxford University Press and compiled in Tanzania by Kiswahili scholars at the lexicography section of the Institute of Kiswahili Research, Dar es Salaam University.

This monumental step in Swahili lexicography was motivated by pragmatic reasons. After independence, Tanzania placed a lot of importance on self-reliance. Swahili was declared the official language. This meant that there was need for updating the existing Kiswahili literature. Khamis (1987: 194) claims that this dictionary, initially meant to be a bilingual piece, was compiled in order to "help supplement its (Tanzania's) egalitarian adult programme". It is instructive to note that only one Kenyan was involved in its compilation compared to 13 Tanzanian scholars. Ironically, this dictionary has sold more in Kenya than in Tanzania (in 1989, 13 editions were published in Kenya and only one in Tanzania). The Institute has also published several specialized dictionaries such as a dictionary of science, a dictionary of linguistics and language (1990), and a Swahili-English slang pocket dictionary (1978).

In Kenya, a new education system implemented in the late eighties gave special status to Swahili. There was need to change the syllabus in order to meet the stated goals of education in the country. Dictionaries have thus been published in order to meet the specific needs of the new system. Bakressa's *Dictionary of Meaning and Usage* (1992) best explains this situation. Despite its shortcomings (see Mageria 1995) this dictionary is a turning point in Swahili lexicography as far as the Kenyan scene is concerned.

Dictionaries

Dictionaries are regarded as language banks. They play an important role in preserving and registering the vocabulary of a language. Dictionaries also help to enhance the standardization of a language.

As already said, the category of foreign language has been given great importance in Kenya. It is not surprising to find that most dictionaries available in the country are those written for learners of English, French or German as foreign languages. They are the most expensive but the most used dictionaries. We are not going to deal with these types of dictionaries in this article.

Most of the dictionaries available to the third category of languages in our dichotomy were written by foreigners who visited Kenya. They came and stayed amongst the indigenous people, learnt their language and culture and hence used their vast lexicographical experience to compile dictionaries in these languages.

For example, Dr A. Barrett, a native of Ireland, worked for 16 years among the Turkanas of northern Kenya before compiling the *English-Turkana Dictionary* (1988). He says that he hoped "the dictionary will help preserve some of the wisdom of the Turkana themselves, benefit those (foreigners) who work in

Turkana ...". He therefore gives an introduction on the language and uses examples extensively and grammatical information to help those learning the language. English is used mainly as the source language, meaning that such dictionaries are geared towards those who already know English and are trying to learn Turkana. For example:

flight, n akerit, aporet; erot; to put to flight, akisur; flight of birds, a siriit a ngikuni.

We also find the *Kikuyu-English Dictionary* compiled by T.G. Benson in 1964. Mr Benson was given permission by the School of Oriental and African Studies in London to undertake the work of editing a standard dictionary of the Kikuyu language in 1954. This project lasted for over six years.

As far as we are concerned this is the most comprehensive dictionary ever, dealing with an African indigenous language in Kenya. It gives notes for the user of the dictionary. It uses Kikuyu language for illustration purposes, it gives the pronunciation of the Kikuyu alphabet and an in-depth guide to pronunciation indicators prepared by E. Sharp, a lecturer in phonetics at SOAS. The introductory matter takes 20 of the over 400 pages of the dictionary.

There is a detailed treatment of lemmata. For example:

Mumenyi, a — n, well informed, knowledgable, skilful person, an expert, if nyamenya, njorua kimenyi; — (in sarcastic sense) one with a special knowledge, a know-all.

~muno ndaturaga one who thinks he knows everything lives but for a short while.

This kind of explanation benefits both the learner of English as well as Kikuyu. There is the use of usage notes, grammatical information and illustrative examples all under one lexeme.

Multilingual dictionaries seem to be the predominant feature of Kenyan lexicography. In 1972 T.P. Gorman, an accomplished educationalist in East Africa, helped to prepare what he called *A Glossary in English, Kiswahili, Kikuyu and Dholuo*. He acknowledges that this was actually a very ambitious attempt. He wrote: "The matter of finding equivalents for English terms in the three vernacular languages is complicated by the fact that each (language) has a number of dialects; each language is also undergoing a rapid expansion in certain lexicon fields ..."

The issue of dialects is a tricky one and many lexicographers who associate themselves with Kenyan languages find themselves facing profound problems. Most of these languages do not have a standard structure or orthography. Towett's *English-Swahili-Kalenjin Nouns Pocket Dictionary* (1979) elucidates this fact. "Kalenjin" is not one particular language, it is a conglomeration of several languages namely Nandi, Tugen, Marakwet, Kipsigis and Elgeyo.

Although their level of intelligibility is high, they are mostly distinct languages. What Towett records in this dictionary is his own Kipsigis dialect which may not be very clear to a Nandi or a Tugen for that matter. The same can be said of the Luhya language which has Kabaras, Marogoli, Tiriki, Bukusu, Tachoni among other subdialects.

The Summer Institute of Linguistics has had its share of contributions. *A Tharaka, Swahili and English Dictionary* (1993b), *A Pokomo, Swahili and English Dictionary* (1993a), and a preliminary wordlist for *Duruma-Swahili-English* edited by Raphael Mkala in 1988 are some of the works compiled at their various stations in the country. These works are supposed to help in Bible translation and general literacy projects.

Recent Trends in Kenyan Lexicography

In the light of the foregoing, we have seen that for a long time Kenyans have not actively participated in their lexicographical orientations. This is true in respect of both Swahili and other vernacular languages.

Although we cannot claim that there has been much change in dictionary making, we have witnessed considerably more interest being shown in dictionary research.

When the Institute of Kiswahili Research (IKR) in Dar es Salaam in conjunction with Oxford University Press decided to review the *Standard Swahili Dictionary* 1981 edition, they decided to incorporate the views of the Kenyans. Two renowned Swahili scholars in Kenya were initially recruited to compile words peculiar to the country's Swahili speakers. These were Professors Ileri Mbaabu and Jay Kitsao. Consequently, there have been two lexicographical seminars held in Tanzania to discuss the intended new face of this dictionary. At each of these meetings, Kenya scholars have actively participated. Some of the papers presented by them have been the subject of two resultant lexicographical books edited by Dr J. Mdee and Dr J.G. Kiango at the Institute.

In 1995, for example, at a seminar held in Arusha, Tanzania, seven Kenyan scholars and publishers were involved. These included Prof. M. Abdulaziz, Prof. Okoth-Okombo, Prof. Bakari, Mr J. Habwe, Mr Mbatiah and Mrs E. Gatao, who works at the Oxford University Press. They looked at what was involved in the "publishing, marketing and distribution" of such a dictionary.

With regard to the training of lexicographers, very insignificant attempts have been made so far. Lexicography is now taught as a unit to the fourth year students of linguistics at the University of Nairobi. The course CLL 404, is meant to assist students to acquire basic skills in lexicography. It begins with a historical survey of lexicography then goes into the theory and practice of lexicography with an attempt to relating it to the African context. Due to this introduction we find some postgraduate students writing their M.A. theses in this area, for example Mageria (1995) and Iribe (forthcoming).

We have not been able to find the exact data on the state of actual involvement in dictionary making by Kenya publishing houses.

As seen in this overview, there remains a lot to be done especially in the training of lexicographers in Kenya. Unless this is done, the gap portrayed between the interest shown in dictionary criticism (theory) and in dictionary making (practice) will continue to widen in the country.

Conclusion

The art of dictionary making in Kenya is still at its nascent stages. Previously seen as a preserve for foreign visitors, now more Kenyans are developing a keen interest in lexicography. Unfortunately this is more evident when it comes to English and Swahili languages. Most of the indigenous languages have been neglected due to political and social reasons. There is a need to train more people in this craft so that they may do research and be involved in projects intent on writing dictionaries for Kenyan languages.

Of paramount importance is the establishment of closer co-operation with other institutions that deal with lexicography, particularly in Africa. A lot could be learnt from the lexicography division at IKR and the Bureau of the WAT at Stellenbosch. But this is only possible if we establish our own language research station in this country. Otherwise lexicography will remain an elusive art in Kenya.

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