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The Kenyan indigenous languages and the mass media: Challenges and opportunities

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Abstract

While it is officially recognized that Kenya is a multilingual state, necessary mechanisms for the effective management of this diversity have not been effected. With English and Kiswahili occupying the "official language" positions, the other more than forty local languages are excluded and have no "official" recognition. The relatively recent development of vernacular mass media has not only provided an impetus for the re-examination of the status of indigenous languages in Kenya, it has also brought with it opportunities and challenges which are yet to be critically examined. Many questions are being raised regarding the status of the vernacular mass media, their possible influence on the local languages, the possible challenges they raise within the national language policy, and their role in the public domain. This paper addresses these questions and examines the relationship between the vernacular mass media and the Kenyan indigenous languages.

Keywords: indigenous languages, language management, vernacular mass media

1. Introduction

In 1997, the Intergovernmental Conference on Language Policies in Africa was held in Harare, Zimbabwe. The general aim of this conference was to draw up strategies and define prospects for the political and technical management of the African linguistic context, primarily by arriving at a mutually agreed upon framework which could be used as a reference by the African states to develop clear and comprehensive language management policies (Chimhundu 1998). In 2000, African writers and scholars met in Asmara, Eritrea, for a conference on African Languages titled "Against All Odds: African Languages and Literatures into the 21st Century". The conference examined the state of African languages in literature, scholarship, publishing, education, and administration in Africa and concluded that African indigenous languages had, "against all odds", survived as media of communication and vehicles of knowledge in many parts of Africa. The conference led to the formulation of a ten-point declaration that included, among other things, the incorporation of African languages into formal education systems and the promotion of research on and in African languages.¹

Despite these positive developments, African indigenous languages remain in the shadows of the various "colonial", "official" languages. In my opinion, this situation – where African

indigenous languages are officially ignored – leads to indigenous languages remaining in the background and eventually being considered "dead". In Kenya the "officially ignored" indigenous languages are spoken by the majority of those with lower levels of education or no education at all. To this largely rural and less formally educated part of the population, the official languages are secondary languages which are very remote from their immediate needs and daily living. For this reason, it is not possible for them to participate in public discourse and public affairs which are conducted in the official languages. Public communications such as those referred to in the previous paragraph, therefore, do not reach their intended audience, namely speakers of indigenous languages.

The language handicap which results not only from the Kenyan "Tower of Babel" with its more than forty indigenous languages, but also from flawed national language planning and language policy, is worse for those with lower levels of education. This leads to a large section of the citizenry missing much of what goes on in the public.

In section 2 of this paper, I provide an overview of language management efforts being undertaken in Kenya as a framework for explaining the recent development of vernacular mass media, especially FM radio stations. Section 3 considers the development of these vernacular FM radio stations against the background of the general reformation of the mass media landscape in Kenya. It also considers the development of the vernacular mass media with reference to the various language management initiatives. Section 4 presents a deliberation on the relationship between the vernacular mass media and the indigenous language communities in Kenya, as well as the challenges and the future prospects for the mass media and the indigenous languages.

2. Multilingualism and language management in Kenya – an overview

Kenya is a multilingual state with more than forty languages of which two are "official": Kiswahili is the national language and English is the official language. Lacking within this "Tower of Babel" is proper language planning, as a government supported systematic exercise entrenched in the national language planning policies. Language management entails deliberate attempts to regulate or modify languages, as well as the positions of and relations between different languages in a multilingual setting, in view of certain clearly set aims. Language management could, for example, involve attempts to change the status and domain of approved use of a language or concerted efforts to make materials available for a certain language in order to equip it for the new and changing needs of its users. Language planning, therefore, involves policy making as the first step in a very long and complex process.

Kenya's current language policies are either based on concepts carried over from the colonial idea of managing Kenyan multilingualism (Muthwii 2004:34) or are merely piggybacking on some other national issues, mainly education policies or more sinister political issues. For example, the education reforms that introduced the 8-4-4 system² also placed emphasis on the teaching of local languages at the lower primary school level and led to the systematic management of the various local languages.

As shown by Muthwii (2004), educational reform, right from the colonial period to the present, seems to be the main carrier of language planning impulses in Kenya. The main ideology behind all of the various policies has been internationalization and containment. The

push for internationalization has afforded English a higher premium and prestige at the cost of the indigenous languages, Kiswahili included. By containment as an ideology, I mean the systematic process with which policy makers have largely blocked the promotion of indigenous languages into the public sphere. In Kenya, it has been argued, especially by the government, that the use of indigenous languages is likely to emphasise ethnic divisions and thus increase national disunity. It is supposedly for this reason that successive governments have deemed it better to contain these languages and banish them to the realm of private communication.

In the long process of the development of Kiswahili into its current national status, a balance of power vis-à-vis English was maintained in the country. Various commissions and Acts of Parliament made recommendations and legislations in favour of the development of Kiswahili without any attention to the (other) indigenous languages. Kiswahili was first officially introduced in post-independent Kenya, in the Kenya Education Commission Report of 1964, which recommended that Kiswahili be taught, but not examined, in schools. In 1972, the Report of the Training Review Committee recommended the use of Kiswahili as the official public language and the language of government. It was not until 1974 that an Act of Parliament declared Kiswahili a national language in Kenya, bringing it virtually on par with English. Subsequent reports also recommended the promotion and strengthening of Kiswahili – for example, the Report of the Presidential Working Party on the Second University in Kenya of 1984. It took twenty years before Kiswahili could be taken as a school subject which is examinable in national examinations, such as the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (K.C.P.E.) and the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (K.C.S.E.), thanks to the 8-4-4 education reforms of 1985 which finally brought it to that level. At present, the status of Kiswahili as a national language in Kenya is uncontested, even if there are doubts as to its teaching standards in the school curriculum.

The indigenous languages have not had much state promotion in public social spheres. In pre-independence Kenya, the missionaries' efforts at Bible translations into the various indigenous languages and, most notably, the Beecher Reports (1942 and 1948) recommended the teaching of indigenous languages at lower primary school level. The Report of the National Committee on Educational Objectives and Policies of 1976 also recommended the teaching of indigenous languages. The two Reports led to the promotion of indigenous languages in the education system, with the Kenya Institute of Education (K.I.E.) being mandated to manage the project through, for example, the production of standardised teaching materials. This project has, as far as I know, since collapsed.

I do not wish to disregard the heterogeneous contextual variables necessary for effective language planning in a multilingual state and I recognise the fact that it is virtually impossible to promote all of the forty-plus languages in Kenya to the levels of Kiswahili and English. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the indigenous languages have not received serious consideration in the government's planning. This lack of commitment to the promotion of indigenous languages, in essence, means that Kenya has neither seriously considered nor recognised the consequences, demands and challenges of multilingualism within its borders. Further, it has not recognised the various challenges this poses to its national development strategies. Effective language management will aim at developing languages and, as an extension, create an ideal environment for social, economic and civic development – an important point that Kenya's policy makers seem not to have grasped.

Language policy and planning decisions have mostly concerned the two official languages. However, language planning in a multilingual multicultural state should go beyond planning only for the official languages. It should consider "what the roles, levels of functions and domains of usage of the indigenous languages ... should be" (Adegbija 1991:2). The Harare intergovernmental conference on language policy was seeking to address African countries' failure to do just this. In this case, the task is not yet to undertake concrete language planning activities like the development of orthography or corpus planning. The important task is to firstly create facilitating infrastructure through which these languages could move beyond private domains into public domains. In effect, this would create the necessary impulse needed by linguists, concerned bodies and the language users themselves to partake in concrete development strategies for the languages.

Kenya's failure at systematically and positively managing this local "Tower of Babel", in its own right and not as a sub-item on another national policy agenda, has recently been complicated by developments in the mass media in the country, to which I turn in the next section.

3. The media policy, the mass media and the Kenyan indigenous languages

As is the case for language policy, the media regulation policy is not yet well articulated in Kenya. It is only the Constitution, and a range of Acts of Parliament, as well as civil and criminal law statutes, that provide for the regulation and management of both print and broadcast media (Moggi and Tessier 2001; Okello 2000; Mute 2000). The legislative framework for media policy is anchored in the Constitution of Kenya, section 79(1). Popular practice has been to appoint task forces to look into issues as a reactionary measure that, though not always successful, has led to some lasting positive changes in the media sector. The Kenya Broadcasting Cooperation Act (1989) provides the main regulatory framework. The Task Force on Press Laws (1993 and 1996), constituted to look into media ownership, licensing and development, among other things, resulted in the enactment of the Kenya Communication Act in 1998³ which, in turn, led to the creation of the Communication Commission of Kenya (CCK) as the media regulatory body.

Since the introduction of multiparty politics in 1992, Kenya has witnessed unprecedented growth in the media sector. From one national broadcaster in radio and television and three main newspapers up until the mid 1990s, the number of radio stations, especially FM radio stations, has grown exponentially. This uncontrolled growth can be confirmed from the government's claims that they have run out of frequencies to allocate to new applicants. The floodgates opened with the licensing of the first ever FM station in Kenya, Capital FM, in 1996. Since then, the number of FM stations targeting different age groups and classes has risen. Broadcasting in the local languages⁴ has also undergone the same kind of growth, with almost each of the major towns hosting FM stations broadcasting regionally or nationally (but mostly in the regional indigenous languages). For a very long time the local languages had to contend with limited air-time from the national government-owned broadcaster, KBC⁵ – approximately 4 hours daily, divided into two segments, for the approximately 18 local languages covered at the time. Today there are several FM radio stations dedicated mainly to broadcasts in the various local languages. Royal Media, a private media company, leads in this field with more than six FM radio stations broadcasting in various local languages:

Change FM, Egesa FM, Mulembe FM, Muuga FM, Inooro FM, and Ramogi FM. Other vernacular FM stations include Kameme FM and Cooro FM (Kikuyu), Lake Victoria FM (Dholuo), and Kass FM (Kalenjin). According to the BBC (BBC World Service Trust 2007), by 2007 the market share of these local language radio stations was 27% of the radio market, compared to 33% held by mainstream radiostations. Moreover, the vernacular radio stations keep increasing not only their number of listeners, but also their reach in the country, which has expanded from being concentrated in the urban areas to covering whole regions and, in some cases, the entire country.

Importantly, this boom is not a result of governmental efforts to promote the use of the local languages in broadcasting. These stations are in most cases private commercial ventures. As such, they are market oriented and their goal is primarily commercial. They have recognised, however, the fact that the indigenous languages are strong and play a key role in everyday communication in most of the communities in the country. While acknowledging this insight, it is also important to recognize the fact that any cultural promotion that the indigenous languages reap from the venture is purely accidental, an inevitable by-product. The current paper focuses on this by-product.

4. Mass media and indigenous languages: a symbiotic constellation

The aforementioned developments of the mass media, especially FM radios, in the Kenyan local languages have been received with mixed reactions from different quarters of the Kenyan society. While the ordinary Kenyans – the target population with none or little formal education, mentioned in the introduction – received them wholeheartedly, praising their presentation of the current affairs programs in more accessible languages, some in the ruling elite dismissed them as divisive forces that strive to highlight ethnicity and thus divide Kenya along tribal lines. The impact of the mass media generally on its target groups need not be reiterated here. To date there has been no research on whether or not the mass media in the vernacular languages is capable of exerting influence on the vernacular languages they employ. In this paper, I do not propose to evaluate the concrete impact of the mass media on the indigenous languages; my aim is to sketch the relationship between the vernacular languages, on the one hand, and the vernacular mass media, on the other hand. I call this a symbiotic constellation: the mass media have something to offer the target local language communities and, by extension, the indigenous languages used in these communities. Conversely, the local language communities have something to offer the producers of the mass media. In this constellation, I argue, the media need the language communities just as much as the language communities have learnt to rely on the mass media for services.

From every perspective, the Kenyan indigenous languages – including Kikuyu, Kalenjin, Luhya and Dholuo with their more than 2 million speakers each – are minority languages. The minority status of these languages refers to their numbers of speakers, as well as their general position in Kenya. As mentioned above, due to the extent of illiteracy in Kenya, there is a large population whose relationship with the two official languages is remote. Moreover, were one to carry out a head count, one would probably find that there are more Kiswahili and English speakers, separately, than in any of the indigenous languages.⁶ Therefore, by conferring minority status onto these languages, I would like to draw attention to their poorly recognised place in the communication structure, especially in relation to Kiswahili and English, and the fact that they do not otherwise have official sanction for use in public

spheres. Kiswahili and English are the most widely used languages in communicative situations in Kenya. Considering their favoured positions and the prestige attached to them, these languages could be considered major, if not hegemonial.

In discussing the symbiotic relationship between the mass media and the indigenous languages, a number of pertinent questions need to be asked: What is the role of the mass media in relation to the indigenous languages? Where are the possible convergent zones for the emerging mass media and the local languages? And, what could be gained, or lost, by the indigenous languages? These questions address what I consider to be the core of the symbiotic relationship. I do not propose to look at them systematically, because they tend to overlap and pre-empt each other. Instead, this paper outlines the symbiotic constellation in order to give an impression of the challenges and the options that this development poses for the mass media, the vernacular languages and the language planners, as well as the government, as an important role player in language management.

Vernacular media could play several roles within the target local language communities, of which economic gain is the most obvious one. Significant for this discussion, however, are two specific roles namely (i) developing a public sphere within the given language community, thereby allowing the community to participate in creating its own news agenda, and (ii) providing an indication that the indigenous languages are sufficiently developed to cope with a fast changing world and, therefore, to effectively cater for the communicative and social needs of their speakers. The latter has been referred to by Cormack (n.d.) as the symbolic role of the indigenous mass media. It is also a very positive result of market-sensitivity to linguistic resources of otherwise underrepresented and perhaps neglected communities – a positive by-product, as mentioned above.

To elucidate the roles of vernacular mass media mentioned above, following Cormack's (n.d.) definition of the symbolic role of the mass media in the indigenous languages, it is noteworthy that in this role the vernacular mass media could offer the indigenous language some prestige. In a country such as Kenya where the younger generations from many language communities are ignoring their own mother tongue, this could, even if only marginally, help restore this much-neglected part of the language community. The use of the local language and the airing of local language programming give considerable prestige to the local/regional popular culture by publicly recognizing the dignity of its medium of expression. Furthermore, vernacular mass media are exerting a big influence on most local language communities who have few or no opportunities for geographical or social mobility. The vernacular mass media, therefore, play a significant role in shaping language pride and language choice, also in the process bringing these communities in touch with various socio-economic innovations. They could thus be considered the trendsetters after which target groups may fashion their language.

In spite of seemingly supportive effects of the use of vernacular languages in local radio broadcasts, a number of questions arise regarding the usefulness of the local languages in a rapidly developing world (with new terms in politics, economics, and every social sphere), and whether they can be effective as means of communication, especially regarding speedy global developments and innovations. Questions also arise regarding how the media cope with the dilemma of having to relay information about things and concepts for which the target language community might not have equivalent terminology.

Like all languages, the indigenous languages in Kenya are dynamic and in interaction with other languages, and they modify themselves. Adaptation to a changing context is illustrated in the wide use of loanwords in the local languages in Kenya which is, of course, a universal trend. In an effort to represent the technological and cultural changes among and around the language community at large, the mass media has resorted to calquing, direct borrowing, compounding and semantic extension, processes that have effectively added to the lexicon of the indigenous languages. Some terms and concepts are nativized – phonologically modified to conform to the local language conventions (e.g. *mobile phone* has been nativized in Dholuo to *mobael*) – while others are adopted wholesale. These newly created words sometimes quickly gain wide acceptance within the target language community, tremendously expanding the lexical plane of the local languages.

However, the above-mentioned gain also has a downside. Language researchers are now worried that the uncontrolled introduction of unstandardised words and terms could do so much damage to the language that it could negate the gains that the vernacular media could bring in this regard. An illustrative example is another term used to refer to a mobile phone in Dholuo – *ong'we yamo*, which alludes to the fact that a mobile phone receives waves, thus the reference to wind (*yamo*) and smelling/receiving (*ng'weyo*). This colourful word is gradually being replaced by the nativized loan word *mobael*.

Nevertheless, it would be safe to assert that, overall, the vernacular mass media have brought the local languages several critical steps forward towards their usage in the public sphere. Their importation and use or creation of loanwords has helped the various language communities name foreign concepts and, by extension, take part in national and public discourses of interest. The vernacular mass media have stepped in to address the gaps created by the changing linguistic realities due to changes taking place in the language communities themselves and, more importantly, also in the outside world. When one is able to name something – like an idea or a concept – it is demystified and thus brought closer to the everyday communicative purposes of a language community. In this way, the language community moves a step forward towards participating in public discourse.

It would be naïve to assert that these indigenous languages have, as a result, attained a status that equals that of the official languages for communication or trade purposes. Nevertheless, their development – the expansion of their lexicon and the improved status they have gained – has helped to ensure that they are used in the public domain, albeit still in a restricted sense. They are no longer confined to the private domain. Vernacular radio has, therefore, opened up new avenues and opportunities for the development of the various local languages.

Listening to the FM stations in Kenya, one is confronted with numerous interactive shows that are on offer. The programming ranges from breakfast shows (with news and political commentaries and live call-ins) to those dealing with any number of interesting social issues of the day. That these are undertaken in the indigenous languages, which for a long time had been condemned as being unfit for public communication, exemplifies the way the mass media have created new opportunities for collective participation and have redefined the resources for self-definition. The increased role of the vernacular mass media can be read from the reactions to and accusations leveled against their role in the early 2008 ethnic violence in Kenya. Being conscious of the deep connections between political, economic,

historic and symbolic orders in Kenya, I view the mass media as a significant apparatus for the development of the various indigenous language communities. They have the capacity to ensure a continued cultural flow beyond language borders and are thus capable of connecting language communities beyond their ethnic boundaries.

The developments sketched above show that with proper infrastructure, the indigenous languages are also in a position to develop to the point where they are usable in public interaction. The relationship between the mass media and the local Kenyan music industry presents an encouraging case. Since their inception, the FM radio stations and the locally owned television channels have been on the forefront of promoting local Kenyan (and East African) music. Apart from the debates regarding policy-backed stipulation of time allocation for the locally produced media content on Kenyan mass media, the FM stations themselves recognised not only the gap that existed for local music due to the KBCs concentration on western music but also the profitable venture that existed in partnerships with local musicians and producers. This marketing insight has ensured that both parties – the FM stations and the local music industry – have developed based on a symbiotic relationship. The insights and infrastructure that have promoted local music could (with guidelines formulated to address the issues raised above by the linguists and language researchers) also promote the various indigenous languages employed by the mass media.

Having examined the roles that mass media play in promoting and developing the indigenous languages, I come to what I refer to above as the convergent zone, i.e. a place where the media and the languages meet in a symbiotic constellation in which both have something to offer. I believe that this is important because, as mentioned above, these FM radio stations are commercial ventures that are distinguished clearly from the public service broadcaster KBC and the community radios, and therefore aim at economically exploiting a market and making a profit. Their continued services to the indigenous languages are on condition of assured financial profit.

This commercial venture leads to the first convergent zone: survival. In a multi-ethnic society such as Kenya, where politics of ethnicity (and therefore ethnolinguistic) rivalry abound, many local languages see the need to assert themselves. In Kenya in the recent past, the vernacular mass media have become further arenas for politics and ethnic self-assertion. The mass media provide one very important avenue for this self-assertion via interplay of the mass media, politics, and ethnicity or "ethnic journalism" (Omwanda 2000:220). The mass media, on the other hand, see their survival in tapping the mostly "virgin" resources of the indigenous languages. With the high number of FM stations targeting the youth, and therefore broadcasting mostly in English and *Sheng*,⁷ the vernacular FM radio stations target the rural folk in their own languages, therefore claiming a niche that is likely to ensure their economic survival in the competitive field.

5. Conclusion

As mentioned above, the most significant gain for the indigenous languages is the fact that the mass media afford them an opportunity to move from the private domain (being restricted to private use) to the public domain (turning into languages of public use). What are apparently not properly provided yet, are frameworks and regulations that will protect local languages and local communities against possible infringements and abuse by the vernacular mass

media. African linguists and researchers have expressed concern in this regard: on the one hand, there is concern for the integrity of the languages themselves and, on the other hand, there is concern for the ways in which people can be incited to violence, as is claimed to have been the case during and after Kenya's general elections of 2007. These frameworks and regulations should, of course, primarily ensure quality and ethical journalism. As Omwanda (2000:222) suggests "in an ethnically diverse society such as Kenya, the state must still play an important role in assuring a level playing field for all groups to equitably participate in the mass media market." This should, however, not be seen as advocating for state control of the mass media. The institution of an independent, legally-mandated media oversight body (like the Kenya Media Council) ought to ensure that the development of the mass media operates within stipulated ethics.

Notes

1. Downloaded from <http://www.outreach.psu.edu/programs/allodds/declaration.html> on 12 March 2009.
2. The 8-4-4 system – eight years primary education, four years secondary education, and four years university or higher education – was introduced in 1985 to replace the then 7-4-2-3 system – seven years primary, four years secondary, two years higher secondary and three years university education. The 8-4-4 system was meant to focus on vocational training to provide the skills required for self-employment or employment in the informal sectors of the economy.
3. This has been amended in the Kenya Communications (Amendment) Act 2008, which came into force in January 2009. Of note in this amended Act are Section 5(a) (which gives the minister of communications the power to issue policy guidelines) and Section 5(b) (which states the independence of the communications commission). In essence, the communications commission remains a political body, which is vulnerable to political manipulations from the government.
4. It is important to note that this is not the first time in Kenya's history that there have been vernacular mass media – cf. Karanja (2000).
5. KBC's programming for the local languages is divided into Western Service (for the western regions of the country), Eastern Service (for the eastern regions) and Central Service (for the central regions).
6. Important in this consideration is the fact English is not only the official language but also the language of instruction in the education system. Kiswahili, on the other hand, enjoys the status of the national language. The two languages thus command more speakers than any other indigenous language in Kenya.
7. Originating from the slums of Eastlands in Nairobi, *Sheng* has developed into a sociolect very common in many Kenyan urban centres. In its many varieties, it consists mostly of modifications of combinations from English and Kiswahili. Depending on the locality of the urban centre, it is also laced with borrowings from the surrounding language communities. Thus, standard *Sheng* as such does not exist. In fact, even in Nairobi alone one tends to note differences depending on which part of the city the speaker comes from. See Githioria (2002), Mazrui (1995) and Ogechi (2005).

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Biographical note

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