

From Sloppy Usage to Asymmetrical Growth: The Case of Kiswahili in Kenya

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One of the factors that contributes to the widespread use of a language is the ease with which it can be adapted for use by different peoples. This can be said of Kiswahili, which is a lingua franca in most of the East and Central Africa region. The different varieties of the language, distinct from the standard variety, serve the day-to-day communicative needs of the inhabitants of the region. This fact has contributed to the elevation of the language to be one of the official working languages of the African Union.

In Kenya, the language is widely spoken as the national language. However, the variety commonly used in many areas of the country, apart from the coast region of Mombasa, is marked by one common feature: (willful) breaking of the rules of standard language. This is the norm rather than the exception in Kenyan spoken Kiswahili. This variety is spoken even in official functions where the standard variety is expected. Besides, it is widely acceptable to speak Kiswahili that is heavily accented or influenced by other languages. One who speaks Kiswahili sanifu (standard Kiswahili) markedly stands out. This situation has slowly but surely led to legitimization of this deviant variety. (On the contrary, utmost care is taken when using English, as speakers do their best to speak English 'correctly'.)

Ironically, the mass media which should play a modeling role as far as correct language use is concerned has now been immersed in language 'adulteration'. What at a casual glance resembles dialect humour is actually deviation from standard Kiswahili. The popularity of the programmes presented using Kiswahili in this manner attests to the wide acceptance of this variety. Listeners take a cue from the presenters and make their contributions on air in the same variety of Kiswahili.

Some Kiswahili teachers and authors have tried, through the mass media, to sensitize speakers on the need to use Kiswahili sanifu for clarity in communication. Several radio programmes have attempted to advocate for the use of 'correct' Kiswahili. These however do not seem to have borne much fruit. Political leaders and Kiswahili teachers, and the common man alike continue to speak the 'broken' variety liberally.

This paper argues that, though the laissez-faire use of Kiswahili in Kenya has led to a wide acceptance and use of the language, this situation does not augur well for the structural development of Kiswahili. The language is at the risk of being impoverished since it is perceived as a language in which 'anything goes'. The principle of least effort has been overstretched. This has led to an unproportional growth of the language: the increase in the number of people using a language should be accompanied by development in the structure of the language for optimum growth. Standard Kiswahili in Kenya might soon exist only in the written form.