

English language and education in Kenya

TEKSTI | Jarmo Mikkonen

Kenyan English is a dialect of English spoken in Kenya. It has features that differ from Standard American English and British English. This brief text provides background information on the development of education and use of English in Kenya which may prove useful to teachers of Kenyan students at Laurea.

Colonial period

The involvement of Britain in the area of present-day Kenya started in 1886 when Britain and Germany signed a treaty in which they agreed to divide eastern Africa between themselves. In the beginning Britain gave the responsibility of administering their area to a private company, the Imperial British East Africa Company. However, the company failed to achieve many of the goals set for it and in 1895 Britain declared East Africa Protectorate under formal British government rule. In 1920 it became the crown colony of Kenya.

The education in Kenya started with missionaries and they established mission schools before the British colonial period. During early colonial period the schools were divided according to race and their running was trusted to missionaries. These evolved into three different school systems based on race: African, Asian and European. The

purpose of education of Africans was to provide labour to white settlers. Higher education was seen as promoting radicalism and hence education of Africans was strictly vocational.

There was a notable divergence concerning which languages should be used in education of



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Africans. Local languages, Kiswahili and English had all their promoters. The white settlers wanted to have one language to ease trade and business, the missionaries emphasized the local languages as a tool to spread religious ideas. Some government officials regarded teaching Kiswahili as a waste of time and promoted vernacular (local languages) for early education and English for further education.

One should bear in mind that these were the views of white settlers, missionaries and government officials and reflected the interests of these groups and the British government, not the Africans. The British government had competing interest regarding education: business interests that often encouraged education, and political interests focused on perpetuating British hegemony and keeping the Africans subservient.

The system that evolved as a result of these competing interests was a compromise with varying standards. Early education was carried out in vernacular, Kiswahili was introduced later and English was used after primary education. The composition of the languages used in education varied geographically due availability of textbooks in vernacular and Kiswahili due to lack of qualified teachers in English. The recommendations of various committee shifts in political priorities also affected changes in the system and the role of English.

The education in English expanded as Africans quickly realized that English skills were necessary to obtain better-paying white-collar jobs. Independent African schools were set up where the main subject was English. However, standards varied from school to school for various reasons and school enrolment remained low.

After the Second World War the British started a push to make English the language of all education as African nations scrambled towards independence.

Post-independence

English was declared an official language as Kenya became independent in 1963. There was widespread support for this move as adopting English was seen as an advantage in business, commerce and economic development. In the 1960s Kenya adopted the 7-4-2-3 system: 7 years of primary education, 4 years of lower secondary school, 2 years of advanced high school and 3 years of university studies. This system followed the British practice. In 1985 the 8-4-4 system was introduced with 8 years of primary education, 4 years of secondary school and 4 years of university studies. English is the main language used in teaching from grade three onwards, with Kiswahili as a compulsory subject and student's mother tongue is used from grade one to three. Kiswahili was made into official language of Kenya in 2010.

Kenya is linguistically a widely diverse country. It has many languages with large numbers of native speakers: Kikuyu (over 8 million speakers), Kamba (5 million), Dlohuo (5 million), Kalenjin (5 million), Oromo (over a million), Luhya (3.3 million), Borana (over 3 million), Somali (3 million), Gusii (about 3 million), Meru (2 million), Maasai (over a million) and many smaller languages. There are over 40 languages in total.



The education system in Kenya was beset from the beginning by lack of resources and qualified teachers. It was expanded enormously in 1970s and 1980s but education was not universal, nor free. In 2003, free primary education was introduced. It increased school enrolment but teacher/pupil ratios increased, and claims have been made that this led to lower standards.

Situation today

Quality of education has been widely discussed in Kenya. In 2009, Uwezo (a five year initiative to improve literacy and numeracy) tested schoolchildren aged 6-16 in Kenya. One of the findings was that 1 out of 4 Standard Seven (grade 7) pupils did not have Standard Two (grade 2) literacy or numeracy skills. On the other hand, best schools, usually in wealthier neighbourhoods, produce students with excellent skills.

Kenyans are aware of the shortcomings in English skills among some students. The Kenya National Examination Council carries out Primary Education and Secondary Education Certificate examinations and publishes reports on the results every year. The reports tell of inadequate English skills as one reason why some students fail to give correct answers to questions.

The reasons behind poor English skills are well-known. Varying levels of schools (especially between public and private schools), poverty, chronic lack of teachers and lack of reading materials in English besides textbooks have been mentioned. Another reason is that despite its status as a language of learning, English is rarely used by many Kenyan students outside school. Kiswahili and Sheng are used instead as lingua francas by the young people. Sheng is an informal or slang language that combines words from Kiswahili, English and other languages while using Kiswahili grammar and syntax.

On a more fundamental level, the use of English as language of learning has also been criticized. It is generally acknowledged that children learn more easily to read and write using their mother tongue. In Kenya, most children learn to read and write an unfamiliar language, English. When you consider that they also have compulsory Kiswahili classes, the amount of learning they are supposed to do is considerable. Learning experiences have not always been positive and rules have been strictly enforced. One research paper mentioned that some senior Kenyans remember how they were subjected to corporal punishment when they used their native tongue instead of English at school.

Features of Kenyan English

There is no standard of Kenyan English, its features vary depending on location and the education of speakers, especially when vocabulary is concerned. In a rural setting, Kenyan English may include code mixing, i.e. using local language words frequently when speaking English.

The most notable phonetic feature is the use fewer vowel sounds. Kenyan English uses only 5

vowel sounds, the same as Kiswahili, whereas English has 20 vowel sounds. Some consonant sounds in English are replaced by similar sounds which is usually caused by interference of local languages.

Grammatically Kenyan English includes non-standard omission or addition of articles, pluralisation of uncountable nouns, use of adjectives as nouns and rare use of pronoun whose.

It should be noted, however, that there is a degree of difference between spoken Kenyan English and written Kenyan English. Written Kenyan English tends to follow the norms of Standard English more closely than spoken language. Again, this also depends on the educational background of the speaker or writer.

Future challenges

The standard of English skills has been widely discussed inside Kenya. EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) attempts to rank English as a second language skills among countries based on EF EPI adult test results. In 2021 Kenya ranked 21st, the second best African country after South Africa (12). For comparison, rank of Finland was 9, Sweden 8, Norway 5 and Denmark 3.

It is probable that a test which basically measures a person's English skills vs. a native speaker of British or American English may be problematic for speakers of Kenyan English. The grammatical features of Kenyan English, such as simplified grammar, omission of articles and use of adjectives as nouns, may count as mistakes in tests.

The textbooks in Kenyan education usually follow Standard British English. Spoken Kenyan English differs considerably from it. Some argue that it is impossible to change the spoken language as it reflects the history, culture and social environment of the speaker. There is no agreement about the status of Kenyan English and whether it should be standardized.

As far as English skills are concerned, British English still remains the ideal in Kenya and English skills form a social divide. Higher education and wealth correlate closely with English skills which is also true in Europe. It also applies when one compares countries: EF noted that its English Proficiency Index correlates with GDP per capita and education.

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