

## THE METROLINGUAL USE OF SWAHILI IN URBAN UGANDAN LANDSCAPES AND EVERYDAY CONVERSATION [1]

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### **Swahili in everyday conversations – metrolingual practices**

Despite the use of Swahili for official purposes over several decades, it has never fully become a 'Ugandan language', according to the inhabitants of Kampala, in terms of identification and unification. It was introduced into the army in colonial times and more widely established since Obote's presidency (from 1966 on), then propagated under Idi Amin Dada's dictatorship. Often perceived as a potential threat to Luganda as the predominant language of Buganda Kingdom (and thus, the capital city Kampala) (Pawliková-Vilhanová 1996: 169), it has spread more in the northern (non-Bantu-speaking) parts of the country than in the southern parts. Today, Kiswahili still serves as a *lingua franca* throughout large parts of the West Nile region (Nakao Shuichiro, p.c. 2015), through Acholi-land and adjacent areas, and is also much more prominent in Karamoja (Steffen Lorenz, p.c. 2015) than for instance in the areas surrounding Lake Victoria.

However, Swahili has become an integral part of communicative practices in the capital Kampala and can be heard in conversations between Swahili-speaking and non-Swahili-speaking inhabitants all across the city. Rather than classifying the use of Swahili as cases of borrowing, or codeswitching, the notion of 'metrolingualism' is suggested here, as defined by Pennycook & Otsuji in their theoretical approach to language entanglement and dynamic language practices in the city.

Rather than the demolinguistic enumeration of mappable multilingualism or the language-to-language focus of translingualism and polylingualism, however, metrolingualism focuses on everyday language practices and their relations to urban space, on the ways in which the spaces and rhythms of the city operate in relation to language. [...] While not rejecting

the ludic possibilities of language play, metrolingualism takes seriously the everyday language practices of people in cities, which may be playful and convivial or divisive and contested. (Pennycook & Otsuji 2015: 57)

Kiswahili in 'everyday language' in Kampala is usually not used by speakers in isolation over long stretches of speech, but is rather intertwined in Luganda and/or English utterances; nor do speakers have extraordinary proficiency of the language (as assistants would frequently emphasize). The sometimes playful and creative ways in which Swahili is employed in conversations among speakers of multiethnic and multilingual backgrounds in their urban encounters in Kampala adds to current theoretical aspects of metrolingualism. Otsuji & Pennycook (2010: 240) see metrolingual practice as exactly that, as a "product of modern and often urban interaction, describing the ways in which people of different and mixed backgrounds use, play with and negotiate identities through language", while they also confirm and perform identities. As stated by both authors in their groundbreaking seminal paper, 'languages' here are not considered as systems but more as something emerging from 'contexts of interaction', which makes use of fluid language, but also of a concept of 'fixed' language. Kiswahili has always been part of the capital Kampala ever since the establishment of the King's African Rifles (the British Protectorate's soldiers) in East Africa in 1902, and has served a number of official as well as individual functions. Various lexical influences in languages such as Luganda are a testimony to constant language contact in the area, and to overlapping language practices that reveal a certain kind of 'fixity' of language, since speakers still clearly distinguish between *olulimi yaffe luganda* ('our language Luganda') and 'those Swahili words' that have entered over time. Swahili has always had a place in interaction in Kampala and speakers are aware of carefully and consciously employing it, rather like a cook using certain spices to season the dish.

Kiswahili is either used as an emblematic trigger and initial element in conversations (with a phatic function, as when friends address

each other with *wewe...*! 'you, guy...!'), or as an expression of personal stance in the speech act, when the expression of authority, determination and decisiveness are indicated by the speaker through the use of Swahili. The latter could be witnessed when I repeatedly spent time in a multilingual Ugandan family, where Acholi, Luganda, English and Rutooro were spoken, and where little children were often disciplined by adults with a harsh command in partial and "incorrect" Swahili, for instance when told to get off the chairs (*wewe, toka huyo! I will beat you!*, meaning 'get off over there! I am going to punish you!'). Grammatical 'correctness' in terms of standardized ECS is not an essential condition in the dynamic practices of Swahili when entangled with other languages, since its mere use is already expressive enough. Speakers themselves would, when asked how they acquired their Swahili resources, in most cases emphasize that they "don't speak it but everybody knows some of it" (Ivan Dean Ochan, p.c.). This is a very European, and a very academic definition of 'speaking' and 'mastering' a language, aimed at the goal of overall proficiency and 'correct speech'.

Kiswahili can often be heard in Kampala's larger markets such as Owino Market, Nakasero Market and Nakawa Market, and also when street vendors communicate with passersby in cars. The use of Swahili creates a certain intimacy in the act of trading between customer and vendor. In various situations I witnessed potential customers addressing the vendors with *boss wangu, mmeka?* ('my boss, how much?'), wherein the English *boss* is followed by the Swahili possessive *wangu* and the Luganda quantifier *mmeka*.

While collecting data on Swahili in 'everyday language' in Kampala, various inhabitants with different linguistic backgrounds were asked where, according to their own view, Swahili plays a role in Kampala nowadays. In most cases, Swahili was described as a 'language in uniform', often considered as not very prestigious and mainly used by policemen, soldiers and security guards.

A lot of people who speak Swahili are people in the military in Uganda, people who have military background, or... it's very rare finding

ordinary people speaking Swahili. Nowadays people are taking it in schools, people learn it as an additional language in secondary schools... yeah. Guards... but that's more or less like military, soldier backgrounds. Well, today musicians are beginning to sing in Swahili because they want their music to go outside their country, to be listened to in the whole of East Africa, [...] they are picking the culture of speaking in Swahili, of singing in Swahili. (Vivianne Lindah Lamunu, p.c. 2015)

The use of Swahili is, as well as embodying authority and being useful in trade, of emblematic value when dealing with policemen and security guards at the entrance to night clubs and bars, and also to supermarkets. Because Kampala citizens assume that Swahili is the appropriate language in which to address a uniformed person, and to express respect, Swahili becomes the marked linguistic choice (and thus a kind of register) in the range of speakers' broad communicative repertoires. However, in many cases, supermarket guards have very limited knowledge of Swahili, while soldiers or policemen (usually all addressed as *afande* in Kampala) really do know the language and use it for purposes of in-group communication. The fact of being addressed in Swahili, or encountering Swahili-speaking customers, is in generally accepted by security personnel all alike and evaluated as a sign of respect, as becomes clear in the following conversation that was witnessed at the entrance of Tusky's supermarket in Kampala-Ntinda.

Customer 1: Yes, *afande?* (while being checked) ('yes, chief?')

Guard: Gyebaleko... ('hello'; Luganda)

Customer 2: *Abali abali? Pole pole...* ('what's up, what's up? Slowly...')

Customer 2: *Niko muzuri sana...* (while entering) ('I am very fine')

The metrolingual use of Swahili in the example presented shows that both customers apparent-

ly do not actually speak the language but that they combine the resources to which they have access despite their limits and potential shortcomings. In this sense the metrolingual use of different fragmentary resources that one acquires through ‘encounters with language’ (Blommaert & Backus 2011) are “part of a complex and densely woven fabric, with holes in it and changing colours and embroidery” (Lüpke & Storch 2013: 346). This is certainly true of the emblematic use of Swahili in Kampala. The Luganda realization of *habari* (‘news’) as *abali* is part of the colorful and complex fabric that makes up a speaker’s multilingual repertoire.

The second example illustrates the use of Swahili in situations with clear power imbalances, used in the Kampala context by the conversational partner at the higher end of the power gap, which also has a warning function. I took notes of the following conversation while seated in a taxi coming from the airport and entering Kampala city, when the taxi driver began to interact with begging street children in the traffic jam on Jinja Road.

Taxi driver: *Wewe! Unajua kiswahili?*  
(‘You! Do you know Swahili?’)

(A girl looks at him without moving.)

Taxi driver: *Unajua kiswahili?*  
(‘Do you know Swahili?’)

*Unataka nini – pesa?*  
(‘What do you want – money?’)

(The girl keeps staring at him without moving or replying.)

Taxi driver: What do you want? Money?

(He holds a coin up but she first seems scared to take it; he then places the coin on her palm.)

*Kwenda huku!* (in a loud voice)  
(‘Go there/Leave!’)

When asked how he learnt Kiswahili, the taxi-man answered me “you know... people from the north often speak Swahili”. I asked him whether he originally came from the north, to which he replied “no, I am from the west”. When asked if he had travelled to the north, he denied it but replied “I was among the SF, special forces...”. Here the use of Swahili thus stands as indexical of a certain regional identity, or, when this condition is not fulfilled, of a military education. In

the example presented, Kiswahili serves furthermore as an initial admonishing expression of power and dominance, in rather as species of frogs and lizards make use of specific warning colors that are recognized as dangerous by potential predators. The performance of a certain military/authoritarian identity is verbally expressed by the Swahili-speaking person, and affirmed by the hearer who perceives it as a warning. It is particularly interesting that Swahili – as the language of the British army and the colonial hegemony – still represents this covert prestige, whereas languages such as Acholi or Karamojong, that have played a salient role in the armed conflicts in northern Uganda in the past decades, do not. Since its colonial foundations, the social role of Swahili in Uganda has generally maintained its stigma and performative power.

### ***Linguistic landscapes – Metrolingual resources on billboards and warning signs***

Kiswahili has, apart from its use in everyday conversations for various pragmatic reasons, made its way onto billboards and banners that advertise restaurants, bars and special offers, as part of the linguistic landscape, understood as “the scene where the public space is symbolically constructed” (Ben-Rafael, Shohamy & Barni 2009). As shown in Fig. (1), the proverbial Swahili expression *hakuna matata* (‘no problem’) is used to emphasize the comfort of the restaurant ‘Rhino 1 Pork Joint’, and potentially also the chef’s mastery of (and authority in) the good East African *muchomo* barbecuing tradition.



**Fig. 1:** The ‘Rhino 1 Pork Joint’ in Nakulabye neighborhood



The second example of the prominent use of Swahili in the urban linguistic landscape is the sign attached to power distributors that can be found all across Kampala, which is presented in three languages, namely Luganda (*kabi*), English (*danger*) and Kiswahili (*hatari*). Again, as is also the case in everyday language, Swahili is employed to underline the danger and severity (due to the high voltage) associated with the act of trespassing in the marked area. The indexical function of Swahili as a language of authorities and ‘uniforms’ also operates here.



Fig. 2: A power distributor in Makerere-Kivvulu

The third photograph was taken at one of the side entrances of Bugema University (Kampala-Makerere), where nocturnal thieves are warned against trespassing by indicating the presence of *mbwa kali* ('tough/hard dogs'). The bold printing of the Swahili warning after the English equivalent, even preceding the Luganda one, and also the use of an exclamation mark, illustrate the emblematic use of Swahili on signposts when a specific authoritative effect is intended.



Fig. 3: The use of multilingual signposts to warn against dogs at Bugema University

Kiswahili is also known for its use in orature in the form of proverbs, *hadithi* ('stories') and poems. Proverbs, particularly, have spread from the East African coast into the hinterland, and can be found on Ugandan (taxi)buses, motorbikes and trucks (see Fig. (4)). The widely known proverb *haraka haraka haina baraka* ('too much of a hurry does not bring blessings') is used as a polite warning to the following vehicle not to speed or tailgate. As has been pointed out before, Swahili is often perceived as a language of 'authority' and 'order'. In the example presented, the use of Swahili expresses both an idiomatic cross-reference to a hegemonic and standardized language from the East coast, and as an educative appeal to other road users.



Fig. 4: Kiswahili proverb on a truck in a Kampala traffic jams

### Popular culture and online practices

In Uganda's music industry, too, Kiswahili plays a significant role, both as a commercial strategy and in the quest for a feeling of unity across music genres, languages and styles. The popular musician 'Dr.' Jose Chameleone, who spent a considerable part of his early career in Kenya, sings entirely in Swahili, which has become both his personal trademark and a general popular feature of Ugandan music. The use of Kiswahili has become indexical of the city's music industry and its contemporary popular culture, and is also used in social media. In 2013 and 2014 I usually crossed paths with Jose Chameleone at least once a month in one of the crowded Kampala bars such as 'BBQ Lounge' or 'Bubbles', and he would be noticeably happy when I addressed him with "*mzee, habari za leo? mambo vipi?*" ('Old man, what's the news today? What's up?'). The encounter with strangers who address him in Kiswahili in the evenings confirms the success of his professional choice of languages, and serves as a recognition factor of his label as a 'Swahili artist'. The advertising of his upcoming single *Maali yangu* ('my property/my wealth') has led to a multi-faceted and metrolingual exchange of comments on Chameleone's Facebook page (see Fig. (5)).



**Fig. 5:** Online advertising for Jose Chameleone's upcoming single

Among the 'language'd comments are statements with intertwined English and Luganda words (*we love you so much gwe asinga*; '(...) you are the one who wins'), emblematic lexemes from Swahili (*aficaz number moja*; 'number one' with Luganda-like geminated consonants) and others. Swahili in Ugandan music unifies listeners with divergent linguistic backgrounds, and equally serves as a powerful commercializer, aiming to connect Kampala's music scene with the vibrant East African metropolises of Nairobi and Dar es Salaam.

Altogether, Kiswahili has become an everyday component in multilingual and metrolingual communication among Kampala citizens, despite its changing anchoring in the country's language policy over time, and has equally become a powerful resource with many different functions and modes of employment. It is also an urban trademark in linguistic landscapes, soundscapes and semioscapes – in most cases serving as a metrolingual register of power and order in the public space.

[1] This Paper is based on research conducted in July 2015 in Kampala/Uganda. The Photographs were taken in September 2015 by Paulin Baraka Bose, and provided as a courtesy.

[2] See  
[<https://www.facebook.com/josechameleone/photos/a.540328369377551.1073741825.105660196177706/824584454285273/?type=1&theater>]  
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