

“You Don’t Know Kiswahili!” – reflections on a student’s comment

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“You don’t know Kiswahili” said the student to me, in the course of discussion in class at KIST (Kima International School of Theology) in Kenya. I froze in my tracks, for what seemed like an age. She had spoken with gusto. The other students seem to perch on the edge of their chairs, awaiting my response. My mind was in a whirl.

Seven years previously we had introduced a new course. Because the vast majority of church activities in Kenya are conducted in Kiswahili or Mother Tongue languages, it seemed good to explore what happens to theology and church teaching when expressed in these languages. The course was taught in the Kiswahili.

Our teacher for the first year (2001) was studying for her PhD in Kiswahili at a local government university. Nevertheless, and I was the KIST academic dean at the time, some students refused point blank to do the course! They marched into my office, sat down, and said they would not take a course taught in Kiswahili under any circumstances. We had never before (or since, and I have been at KIST for 12 years) had such opposition to a course that I am aware of. We told the students they had no choice in order to get their BA. This was one factor contributing to the strike we had that year, that forced us to close school a month early.

The above (Kenyan) teacher refused to teach the course again because our rates of pay were too low for her. The course was dropped in 2002, then in 2003 and subsequent years it fell to me to teach. It was an incredible experience; as almost without fail as we approached the beginning of the course, tension would rise amongst potential students. Letters were written by them to the head of the school pleading for the course to be removed. Some refused point blank to take it, only to be told that they had no choice if they wanted to acquire their BA.

At the same time, once begun the course was amongst the most enjoyable I have ever taught at Kima. Once into the second week, students fell over one another with interest, often sitting almost spell-bound as we considered with them the importance of the use of African languages in church and society, and the vagaries of translation to and from English that they experienced every day but had never examined in a formal setting.

Now a year after the discontinuation of the course I brought it up in discussion in another class. Tensions immediately rose. Feelings were already high because our topic was ‘African identity’. Every student who had spoken on ‘identity’, mentioned the importance of the use of African languages in forming and retaining an identity as African people. So, I had asked myself; why did they not like being taught in Kiswahili?

The broader implications of being told “you don’t know Kiswahili” were eating me. The accusation came after living in East Africa for 15 years, using Kiswahili daily in formal and informal settings. My Kiswahili is learned from the people, in interaction with African Kiswahili speakers, and I find myself complimented on my knowledge of it on numerous occasions.

I thought carefully for a moment. My response to the student was “you do not know English.” In many ways of course I had to accept that “I do not know Kiswahili.” I am not, after all, a native speaker. But I have learned what I know in interaction with native speakers contexts whereas my students had learned their English 2nd, 3rd or 4th hand from non-natives and in non-English contexts.

Here is the problem. When it comes to formal education, East African students value only English, even though they do not know English well, yet they do know Kiswahili much better, and their own languages even better. To them that is not the point. Is it *because* they know those languages better, that they do not want to be taught using them. They were refusing a foreigner like myself, but even an African (as in 2001) to teach them in ‘their’ language. That to them is a waste of time, or a humiliation, or unhelpful. What they value is English.

This course could have been taught in English, but teaching using an African language helped to illustrate issues concerning African languages. In the very same class on this very day another student had stated emphatically that “a Westerner can never understand an African”. I was forced to realise that, despite my efforts that included learning and using three African languages on a daily basis while living as a part of local African communities for 15 plus years, these 3rd year BA and diploma students of theology, considered that I had nothing to teach them about *their* context. I could never understand them, and my role (and the reason they were ready to listen to me) was to add to their knowledge of ‘the West’.

This was not the first time this realisation had come to me. I have seen it many times over the years. But on this occasion it was blunt, striking and clear. I had seen it already in the context of running extension Bible classes. Local people in Western Kenya always express great interest in joining classes taught by this white man (myself). But when they find that instead of English I preferred to teach in a language that they know better than me, and that I was not handing out either money or prestigious career ladders leading to salaries, their interest died. The thought that I could contribute to the functioning of their church or to their knowledge of the true God, for them it seems, is hardly in the picture.

It seems that African people (at least in Western Kenya) consider themselves more intelligent and capable than Euro-Americans who come and set up schools, hospitals and projects in their homeland. This was expressed in this very class, as it has been to me on many occasions: Westerners (Brits and Americans) usually know only one language, whereas in addition to mastering ‘their’ language (i.e. English), the African people also know their own and often many other languages. Who then is intelligent? Certainly not the foreign missionaries who operate in ignorance of their surroundings. African do not want to go to a school set up by Westerners to learn about *their* thing. That they already know, and that they know the Westerner does not know. Instead, they go to school to learn the White man’s thing.

Unfortunately, there is a sad ending to this story. The corollary to my being told “you don’t know Kiswahili”, is for them to admit that, “we don’t know English”. And for all the billions of dollars invested into English education in Africa, unfortunately that is true, and will always be true. My students (as other African people) know this, but don’t know what to do about it. English is given to them as a finished product. Their task is to learn it the way it is used by others. Yet the others who so use it are not even there – all they get is books, and teachers who were taught by someone who was taught by someone, who was taught by someone. The thing they seek to learn does not stand still. It is constantly changing. After having learned it, it becomes out of date. To get an up-to-date copy, one has to pay again for a fresh version from the West. Because invariably the English taken to Africa is influenced, phonetically but also semantically and pragmatically by local African languages, it is almost impossible for people who are born and raised in Africa to speak English to a Western standard. If I, who live amongst Kiswahili speakers daily, am told after 15 years “you do not know Kiswahili” then what hope for them with English?¹

¹ My reader may object in saying that it is perfectly legitimate for Kenyans to have and use Kenyan English. Yes it would be, if Kenya was to function cut off from the world of native English speakers. But this is becoming less and less practical or even possible in the current globalising world. Unless they get ‘Western’ English, they cannot ‘get’ the global discourse that is increasingly penetrating all corners of Africa.

Even should they get a good grasp of Western English, this does not help our students to encourage their own people to bring lasting beneficial changes to their communities. At best it can help them to get money, that perpetuates dependency. A prerequisite for bringing helpful change to their communities is a close knowledge of how what is foreign can fit into it. One could even say, that long-term exposure to English can add to incompetence in functioning in one's own community.

My students realised that they are on a hiding to nowhere, while knowing also that there is little they can do about it.

While being the way up and out, English is also a trap into perpetual subservience. Students (from Uganda and Kenya) have been told (implicitly) that their own languages are second class. Now the thing they have strived to acquire for decades is found to be out of reach for all but a privileged very few, while in striving for English much of what they had is being lost.²

My response to this dilemma in Africa is to refuse the rebuttals of those who have been taught to hate their languages, and who are thus being guided on a path to economic and cultural slavery to the West. For the time being I cannot teach in Kiswahili at KIST, as our Kiswahili course has been removed from the curriculum. But as a Christian missionary to Africa, I will continue to do all that I can to encourage African people to know that they are valued by God, that their languages are not primitive and dirty and they do not have to depend on foreigners for everything. I will not cease to value the African people, that includes to value African languages, and to use them when and where I can.

² It is hard for outsiders to realise how severely people have been taught to despise their own language in formal circles. Even today throughout Africa children are beaten for the offence of using their mother tongue in school. In addition to being beaten, they are humiliated. A school child I know was recently given the assignment of making cardboard masks in the shape of a cows head. "What are these for?" I asked him. "The headmaster told me to make them" he said "they are to be worn by those children who use their vernacular language in school."