WHOSE ENGLISH IN KENYAN SCHOOLS? A CASE FOR A NATIVIZED VARIETY

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Abstract

The question, "whose English in Kenyan schools?" would generally elicit two polarised responses. Language planners and some educators would not hesitate to give the British Standard as the variety taught in our schools while researchers sensitive to the local sociolinguistic reality would argue that indeed the variety of English taught and used in our schools is significantly different from the British Standard variety. The existence of varieties of the English Language, different from the native speakers' varieties, is now generally accepted by linguists (see Bamgbose, 1982; Kachru, 1985, 1987; Bailey & Görlach 1982). In recognition of this fact and its implications for the teaching of English, there has been an outcry for the adoption of local varieties of English in the education systems of particular geo-political regions (Schmied, 1990; Platt & Weber, 1984). Scholars with this persuasion insist that when the localised norm is recognised by contextualizing the teaching materials to fit the local socio-cultural situation, the theoretical norm and actual language behaviour show less discrepancy (Kachru, 1990). In the Kenyan situation it is clear that "local creative writing" has been incorporated into the mainstream literary teaching materials in the education system. However, the internal local norms of correctness and appropriateness with regard to either pronunciation, grammar, or semantics have never been seriously considered, acknowledged or publicly recognised in the same way as has happened in local creative writing. This creates problems for English language teachers who are not only non-native speakers of English but are also expected to harmonise the disparity between the nativized language of creative writers and that of grammar books, in the teaching of English. This paper, in examining English Language education in Kenya appraises the relationship between the theoretical norm and the actual language behaviour, and then discusses the advantages of teaching and examining a nativized educated variety of English.

Introduction

The English language as used in the Kenyan community, and in particular the education system, has had to co-exist and interact with the African languages within the repertoire of its speakers. This contact and dynamic interaction, though not unique to the Kenyan situation, has produced very interesting sociolinguistic phenomena. For example, English has not only been made to acquire a local social meaning distinct from those of the African languages in Kenya (Myers-Scotton. 1993; Muthwii. 1994a) but it has also undergone certain structural changes at all linguistic levels - phonological, lexical, morpho-syntactic and semantic (Angogo & Hancock. 1980; Ogutu. 1993). It has been argued that English in its non-traditional bases like India and Africa is being ‘nativized’, that is, it is being adapted to the local or regional sociolinguistic conditions that it finds itself in (Kachru. 1985,1990,1994, 1997; Strevens. 1982; Coelho. 1997; Meshrie. 1992). Moreover, some of the innovations, adaptations, or deviations from British/American Standard English are not haphazard but are aspects of a more general phenomenon that has been taking place with regard to the interaction of English and other languages and cultures in non-native contexts and situations (Zuengler. 1982; Kachru. 1990,1997; Bailey & Görlach. 1982; Bamgbose. 1994; Meshrie. 1992).
In these ‘New Englishes’, the structural changes or systematic deviations from the standard dialects may be traced to factors that have to do with transference from a speaker’s native language, innovations and creativity in using English or ‘unsuccessful’ analogical derivations based on structures in standard English itself (Ellis. 1986, 1994; Bokamba. 1994). With regard to some of the deviations, however, it should be noted that it is difficult to determine with any certainty their main source (Ellis, 1994). In addition, it has been found necessary in discussing New Englishes to distinguish legitimate features of a local English from imperfectly learned English (see Hancock & Angogo. 1982; Bamgbose. 1982, 1994; Kachru. 1990; McArthur. 1994). The legitimate features are seen to form the common core in that they do not include what is stigmatised but the linguistic features that are common to the majority of educated speakers (that is those of the acrolect). Ethnic marked varieties, for example, have been shown to belong to the basilect or imperfectly learnt English (Kachru. 1985).

‘Errors’ and the Characteristic Features of Kenyan English

Like the other New Englishes, the English spoken in Kenya differs from native speakers’ standards at all linguistic levels. At the phonological level, there are phonemes that are distinct in native speakers speech but which are not in the Kenyan variety of English. These are mainly to do with the vowel system (Schmied. 1990; Angogo & Hancock. 1980; Muthwii. 1994b). A classic example of this is the nearly total absence of the phoneme /r/. Thus, the majority of Kenyan speakers’ of English do not show a distinction between the following pairs of words: fast/first, farm/firm, bad/bird. Most Kenyans also have difficulty distinguishing the following pairs: sit/seat, live/leave, bit/beat, fit/feet. As concerns prosody, Muthwii (1994b) shows that the intonation patterns are not always identical to those of native speakers’ varieties. Certain recurring patterns exist whose communicative value appear to be different from those of native English.

At the lexical level, there is no doubt that if one were to write a dictionary of Kenyan English there are words that would be included that are not part of the native speakers’ variety. These include commonly used words such as kiosks, harambee, ugali, jiko, jembe, bwana, safari, jambo, panga. Lexical items like these have become part of English as used in Kenya and are used to express socio-cultural experience of its users. Indeed, some of these words have already found their way into English dictionaries and international currency.

Apart from constructions which many people use but still regard as ungrammatical (e.g. Me I can’t stand that. They went where?), there are many other syntactic constructions commonly used by educated speakers and/or writers of English in Kenya. These deviate in certain ways from the British norm. For illustration, a few are given below with a brief comment that identifies their point of departure from British standard English:

1. I did a mistake that made my boss very angry. - (choice of verb)
2. She won by overwhelming majority. - (omission of article)
3. It is something to do with ten shillings. - (peculiar Kenyan construction)
4. Mukenyi was heavy but she has delivered, hasn’t she? - (use of the adjective ‘heavy’ and the verb, ‘delivered’)
5. My brother lives those sides of Kibera. - (peculiar construction)

At the semantic level, common features include the transfer of meanings from Kenyan languages to English or extension of the meaning of an existing English word/phrase. The meaning of the word girl, for example, includes “unmarried” in the Kenyan context, a feature that is not part of the dictionary
meaning. To many Kenyans the sentence “I slept outside” means ‘I spent the night outside a home/institution’ or ‘I was out all night’. Consider also ‘The clothes slept outside’ to mean ‘the clothes stayed out all night’. The word sleep thus is not limited to the meaning of ‘to get into a natural, unconscious state’.

The aspects described above constitute some of the features which have been identified as being “formally and contextually deviant from the norms of the users of the inner circle” (Kachru. 1985:17). They not only characterise English as used in Kenya, for example, but most such usages cut across all first-language backgrounds of its users. Unfortunately, many of these features have been discussed as errors by scholars who proscribe to an exonormative description of English in Kenya (Hocking. 1974; Nyamasyo. 1992; Njoroge. 1996). Hocking, however, notes that what he discusses as errors are commonly used constructions in Kenya and comments:

The mistakes we are dealing with in the book are all mistakes in any accepted variety of English [...] it is possible that we may eventually develop a local [...] form of English [...] and, if we ever do, it may be, some of the mistakes we are dealing with in this book will be part of it. (Hocking. 1974:59-60)

The important question, then, is whether Kenyan speakers of English consider the list of linguistic items discussed above as mistakes; or are they legitimate deviations, that is, common features of the English spoken by the majority of Kenyans? Views like those of Hocking (1974) can be interpreted as a way of teaching the Kenyan élite (whom he is writing for) how to stigmatise the incorrect forms. This is likely to bias Kenyans against the English they speak. According to Angogo & Hancock (1980), if this is done deprecatorily for long enough, one begins to accept it as part of the nature of things. In addition, it can be argued that forcing a people to view their variety of language as inferior to another causes some of them to undergo a psychological crisis that has to do with self-worth and identity (cf. Kachru. 1982).

Exonormative Standards and Sociolinguistic Reality

According to Schmied (1990), the norm or target in Kenya, at least theoretically, is the British Standard (see also Zuengler. 1982). This variety of English has been described extensively at all linguistic levels and these texts are available in most libraries. These descriptions are seen as the yardstick or target in the teaching of English in institutions of higher learning. Moreover, most of these language texts at the teacher training and university degree levels have been written by native speakers of English and therefore, they represent the native speaker norms.

Where English language textbooks have been written by Kenyan writers there is strict adherence to the British Standard variety. A good example of this is the Kenya Institute of Education’s Handbook for Teachers of English in Secondary Schools in Kenya (1987). On pronunciation, the teacher is given a list of the 20 vowels in RP and is informed that “the confusion of vowels occurs with practically all the ethnic groups... The teacher should watch out [...]”. The methods suggested for teaching pronunciation assume that the teacher is a speaker of the model variety of English and is therefore capable of “watching out”. Our observation, over the years as we interacted with schools especially in the supervision of Kenyatta University students on the teaching practice exercise, is that most teachers are not confident to teach pronunciation. This aspect of learning is ignored altogether in the teaching of language.
Studies that have been done by Kenyan scholars on English as used by Kenyans have also focused on the British standard as the norm and thus they have mainly looked at ways in which the English used in Kenya falls short of the British standard. Studies of this nature include Njoroge (1987), Nyamasyo (1992), Njoroge (1996). These studies scan performance in certain levels of the Kenyan educational system and describe the various structures as errors with reference to the assumed norm, namely, the British Standard variety. Three things can be noted about such studies:

a) that most of them have been, carried out from a nativist standpoint; that is, they incorporate an unstated assumption that whatever diversity may occur in the English usage of those for whom English is not the mother tongue, there exists in the usage of the native speaker both a unity and a hierarchical superiority (Strevens. 1982).

Strevens here uses the term ‘nativist’ to be synonymous with ‘native speaker’.

b) that their explanations which ascribe to the “interference approach” tend towards tracing the deviant usages of English to the influence of the local languages.

c) that they end up with pedagogic proposals on what can be done to eradicate these errors since the presence of these deviations is synonymous with non-learning and falling standards.

Clearly, the assumptions behind these proposals are that the English taught in Kenyan schools is the British standard and that the Kenyan teachers, even at primary school level, are capable of teaching this model effectively. This is the theoretical position that distorts many facts about the forms and functions of English in Kenya and raises the concerns indicated below.

i) One may ask how such a perspective fits in with the fact of the influence of the (non-native) teaching staff and their educational background, the intra-national uses of English, and the rapid expansion and development of education in Kenya.

ii) Another important issue closely related to this is that of language norms in Kenya. What are the actual language norms in the Kenyan community and in particular the school system where the English language is learnt by the majority of Kenyans?

iii) What is the model of language behaviour that speakers/learners approximate to when using or learning English?

As indicated earlier, there are linguists who have shown, albeit without detailed descriptions, that there exist a variety of English in Kenya that is distinct from either the British standard, the American standard or the Australian standard (Zuengler. 1982; Hancock & Angogo. 1982; Muthwii. 1994b; Schmied. 1990; Ogutu. 1993; Kachru. 1990). Zuengler, for example demonstrates this and concludes that “there are certain formal aspects of English which distinguish the Kenyan English from standard native speaker varieties of English” (Zuengler.1982:115). Such linguists, clearly hold a different persuasion from that of ‘error analysts’ concerning the relationship between non-native varieties of English and native varieties.

Following these scholars, it is our contention that the actual model(s) that speakers of English use in Kenya is/are not the British or American ones. The identity of the English that the majority of Kenyans are exposed to is that used in Kenya by Kenyans. The model they approximate to is that of the educated Kenyan users of English especially that of the teachers who are in the main non-native. There are very few native models of English available in the school system, a situation similar to that in India (Kachru. 1990)). This means that a great majority of users of English in Kenya are not
meaningfully conversant with native English. The English used in the media, especially in radio and television, acts as a model of English too. However, the ‘English-speaking’ environment that such a model provides is a mixed one whereby the native speakers in the form of the popular imported television programmes “exemplify not a single exonormative variety of English but a whole range such as American, Scottish, Irish, North of England and Australian” (Platt & Weber. 1984:169). Several of these varieties are not only significantly different from one another but compete with the local Kenyan varieties for attention in the learner/user of English. Newspapers, books and the language used by educated parents also play a role but this is significant only to a few individuals namely, those that live in urban areas.

While the variety used by educated speakers in Kenya may ultimately have some resemblance to British English (because British forms prevail over other varieties in Kenya), there are many features which are widespread and are typical of this local variety irrespective of the first-language background of its speakers. In view of this, we see the most fruitful direction of change as the adoption of this nativised variety for use in the education system in Kenya rather than the external varieties with their standards and norms?

Pragmatic Moves towards Nativized English

A move toward adopting local forms as legitimate aspects of the relevant variety of English, is and has taken place in the world of literary works, in some of the decisions of national bodies like The Kenya National Examinations Council, and in other non-native contexts such as Singapore, Nigeria, and India (cf. Kachru. 1990; Bamgbose et al. 1995; Pakir. 1992). There are several lessons one can learn from what is happening in these areas as concerns the sensitivity to local sociolinguistic contexts in the use of an exoglossic language. With regard to the world of literature in non-native contexts, “English has developed nativized literary traditions in different genres, as the novel, short story, poetry and essay” (Kachru. 1985:13). Zuengler (1982) examined several Kenyan creative writers and found that their use of English takes into account the sociolinguistic reality in Kenya. They all used features which mark off their English from the native speakers’ varieties. These include direct lexical transfer, semantic shifts, syntactic shifts and a wide use of contextual units such as riddles, proverbs, songs and so on, which embed the language to the sociocultural situations. In fact, the moves by such African writers like Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Chinua Achebe can be interpreted as deliberate attempts to transmit, preserve and communicate African cultural thought in English. In their creative approach they are “allowed” to experiment with the idea of integrating African language structures and expressions into their English use (Kachru. 1997:74).

This creative approach tends to focus on the exploitation of resources of African languages as well as of English to create new idioms and expressions (Bamgbose. 1982). Significantly, these local creative writings have been accepted as part of the national writing and in fact they have been incorporated into the mainstream literary teaching material in the education system in Kenya. We would, therefore, say that, practically, a form of nativized English is in use in the world of literature in Kenya. In the Integrated English teaching approach in Kenyan secondary schools, these works are actually meant to act as a basis for teaching other language skills and provide a model for accepted norms in creative writing. This state of affairs presents a paradox because the internal norms of correctness and appropriateness with regard to either pronunciation, grammar, or semantics within the Kenyan community have never been seriously considered or publicly recognised in the same way as has happened in local creative writing.

When we look at the practices of the Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC) we find that, though there are definite efforts to reinforce the British Standard variety, there is a realisation and
acknowledgment that students are exposed to aspects of language use that are not necessarily errors but which are not part of the British Standard English. Examiners of the national English examinations are provided with a list of ‘acceptable’ expressions which are said to be part of educated East African English. Unfortunately, this list is not given to the teachers to form part of their instructions content. But its presence shows that KNEC realises that the sociolinguistic reality of the learners calls for the acceptance of forms that are not part of the native speakers’ variety. This move, though limited in nature, is in consonance with the already established arguments that some of the deviant grammatical structures could be accepted as part of a Kenyan norm on the grounds of common language behaviour (see Zuengler. 1982; Schmied. 1990; Muthwii. 1994b; and Ogutu. 1993).

An examination of other non-native English contexts shows that attempts and moves have been made towards the use of local models for the teaching of English. Examples in mind are countries like Singapore, India, Nigeria and Sri Lanka where “local educated varieties are becoming increasingly recognised and accepted locally as standard varieties in their own right, despite some local ambivalence” (Kachru. 1985: 31; see also Kachru. 1997). We note also that a relatively stable local variety of English has evolved in Singapore and has replaced the colonial linguistic model as norm for much that is communicated in English (Richards. 1982:155; Kachru. 1994). Educators and linguists in such nations have realised the immense importance that the question of a model of English is, not only in terms of general intranational usage but also for pedagogic purposes (see examples of comments in Platt & Weber. 1984:167-169; also Kachru. 1987, 1994; McArthur. 1994; Y. Kachru. 1993). Since a lot has been written in line with this persuasion and perspective, albeit with reference to English as used in other countries, we would rather now focus on the Kenyan situation.

Weighing the Scales: Practical Aspects

The next important question is whether a move towards adopting a nativized variety in Kenya’s education system is practical in the teaching of English. In considering this important question we will look at some of the immediate problems that must be resolved.

A major problem in this direction emanates from the fact that there is no extensive description of English as used in Kenya that could be formalised and thereby used in the syllabus and textbooks. The provision of such a description poses an immediate challenge to linguists and language educators in Kenya because teachers cannot teach in a vacuum. In Platt & Weber’s (1984) words, teachers:

- do not want a model that may be suggested to them but which is nothing more than a vague outline. They .....need systematicity. They need some kind of model to which they can refer, a model which tells them what to regard as a ‘learner’s mistake’ and what to consider as a legitimate feature of the educated variety of the New English. Such a model, although it is by no means impossible, is a big undertaking...It would involve a thorough and systematic analysis of the speech and writing of a large and representative group of educated speakers.
- It would also involve large scale acceptability testing similar to what has been carried out on more established varieties (Platt & Weber. 1984: 167)

The other problem has to do with the concerns of some users of English who argue that if a non-native variety was given such a pedestal the English language would decay, be used carelessly, or that there would be a loss of intelligibility among its users across cultures (for discussion of these reactions see Kachru. 1985, 1987; Quirk. 1985; Schmied. 1990; Bamgbose. 1982).
While these concerns may be a nightmare for a purist, it is prudent for educators and planners to consider them in the light of the significant role played by the local educated variety of English in the process of language acquisition and use in a non-native context. Moreover, a closer investigation into these objections reveals that the reactions are not wholly linguistic but attitudinal and ethnocentric (cf. Kachru. 1987; Bamgbose. 1982; Kembo. 1994).

The teaching and learning of English as a second language is never complete or dynamic without a serious consideration of the intranational uses of English. Neither can this be ignored in educational policy and planning (see also Kachru. 1987: 212; Bokamba. 1994). For Kenya’s education system to be more relevant, it is prudent that recognition be given to the fact that it is almost impossible to drill a speech community out of its established language habits.

**Benefits of Adopting Local Norms**

First, as we have indicated above, there is a clear discrepancy between the actual language behaviour (a nativized variety of English) and the theoretical norm in Kenya. This presents a problem to the teachers of English because the teaching and examinations concentrate on “drilling and testing out of existence forms of speech that even the teachers will use freely when they do not have their textbooks open” (Bamgbose. 1982: 99). If a local norm is considered and made available, the teachers of English will be in a better position to act as models of this variety and thus the structures taught will be reinforced outside the classroom.

Second, we have shown that a nativized variety is already in use in our school system with regard to the works of creative writers. The recognition and adoption of a nativized variety of English would therefore, bring harmony into the teaching of the Integrated English Syllabus which purports to teach language through literature.

A third benefit relates directly to the questions raised by the Kenya National Examination Council. In their (1994) report on English Language performance they raised several questions, namely; “Can it be that our candidates, despite the work we put in, can never perform any better than this in their written work? Is it lack of training or simply the inability or incapacity of our candidates? Is it possible to have a similar cohort of candidates, year in year out, irrespective of improved teaching or change of teachers?” (KNEC, 1994: 1). Looking at these questions of desperation, one wonders whether the problem is not related to the fact that some of the structures that they test are not part of the repertoire of either the language teachers or the intranational usage of English in Kenya? The issue here is akin to the classic example given by Bamgbose (1982: 105) whereby none of the moderators of an English paper of the West African School Certificate Examination knew the correct version of the idiom *putting back the clock*. All of those present, but for a native speaker and a Nigerian who had consulted a dictionary in preparation for the meeting, gave as the correct form the nativized version *putting back the hands of the clock*.

**Conclusion**

In the preceding discussion we have attempted to show why it is not pragmatic to continue insisting on an exonormative standard for the teaching and examining of English in Kenya. Perspectives and practices like those of error analysts are uninsightful given the sociolinguistic reality of the spread of English. Their concepts only result “in observations about the users and uses of English which have doubtful empirical bases if seen in the world context of the uses of English” (Kachru. 1987: 210). Our hope is
that the argument in this paper has provided an alternative way of addressing questions of desperation such as those raised with regard to the apparent ‘non-learning capacity’ of Kenyan learners or the ‘falling standards’ of English.

References


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