

J. FABIAN : LANGUAGE AND COLONIAL POWER; the appropriation of Swahili in the former Belgian Congo. 1880-1938

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Johannes Fabian established a firm scholarly reputation with his 1970 work on "Jamaa, a charismatic movement in Katanga", in which he touched upon one of the so many cultural syncretisms evolving in the Katangese colonial and post-colonial melting pot.

In his latest work, Fabian again concentrates upon Katangese society, going into the way in which "Shaba Swahili" was imposed as the vehicular language of the Congolese copper-belt.

This piece of sociolinguistic historiography is approached through a critical analysis of linguistic documentation (coursebooks, manuals, grammars, vocabularies ...) dating from the period 1880 (the earliest penetration of whites into Katanga) - 1938 (stabilization of the colonial system, expansion of the Union Minière's activities in Katanga).

Fabian's argument runs as follows : there was no "natural" reason for Swahili to be adopted as the vehicular language in Katanga, rather English (and Kitchen-Kaffir) and languages of the Luba-group stood better chances before the Belgians interfered. If finally, a variant of Swahili was adopted, this is largely due to conscious language-political manipulation by Belgian colonial authorities. Their motives for promoting Swahili (and explicitly rejecting English) were twofold :

- (a) by introducing Swahili instead of English, Katanga was "welded to the rest of Congo", and English influence from the Southern colonies was reduced. The importance of this geopolitical argument is demonstrated by other, economic and political measures taken in the same period (action against trade unions, ousting of Williams & Co as labor force recruiters for the UMHK).
- (b) Internally, the introduction of Swahili served the purpose of "control over labor forces". By establishing a certain, limited, communicative situation, the dominance-

subordination balance between whites and blacks remains stable.

How this was done can be deduced from a critical review of contemporary sources. Three phases can be distinguished :

(a) "on the road" : manuals and vocabularies are specifically set up for exploratory and military purposes. They are "open", i.e. they leave space for additional data gathering as part of the exploration. Typical for this period are the polyglotta.

(b) "settling-in" : with the establishment of colonial rule, a new type of manual evolves. It is highly practical, aimed towards a specific target-group (missionaries, administrators, officers ...) and presents only the data strictly necessary for their job.

These manuals are "closed", they present Swahili as a codified, stable whole. Typical is also the fact that, whereas the first type of manuals was mainly produced by missionary houses, the Belgian Ministry of Colonies becomes the most important sponsor in this period.

(c) "stabilisation" : "concise vocabularies" with "the most commonly used words" still prevail, but a remarkable effort towards academic codification is made. Thus, besides highly fragmentary and rudimentary descriptions of (mostly personal realisations of) Katangese Swahili, a body of philological work on "pure Swahili" evolves.

These manuals all serve the overall purpose by shaping an a-priori conceived communicative set-up. Belgian colonial administrators, trained in Brussels, learn a highly deficient form of Swahili (with inclinations towards pidginization). They don't really learn a language, rather they learn how to fulfill their duties, how to behave like a colonial administrator, with the use of some necessary Swahili words. On the other hand, close and familiar interaction with the blacks is made extremely difficult because of the academical codification. Thus a double myth is created : the one of "pidgin-Swahili", easy to learn and effective in the field, and the one of "pure Swahili", impossible to learn. Most Belgians obviously limited

themselves to the practical knowledge necessary to do as they were expected to do.

The black workers also were affected by this pre-established communicative situation. Access to French being monopolized by the official school system, and thus made unattainable for the majority of blacks, and the officially imposed means of communication being the pidginized variant of Swahili, their abilities to communicate were severely limited. Also, their chances to gain literacy autonomously (without official teachers) were cut down by the creation - by whites - of the hypothetical academic "pure" variant. Belgians controlled both the pidgin and the pure variant, both being hypothetical (and therefore easily controllable) constructs. Through this subtle use of power, a stable urban proletarian community was shaped, perfectly fitting in the Belgian colonial policy. No vanguard educated bourgeoisie could evolve autonomously, all "évolués" were products of missionary or state schools and smoothly integrated into the hierarchical framework of the UMHK-controlled industrial society.

Fabian's work is interesting and important for a number of reasons :

(a) bibliographically : it reviews many authoritative sources used in the study of Central-African Languages. In this, it points towards the non-objectivity of most works. They start from an awkward view on languages and communication. African languages are systematically called "idiomes" or "parlers", the term "language" being reserved for European languages (that is, French).

Two aspects are predominant in the approach to African languages:

(1) they are deficient, not fit for "sophisticated" communication on a high philosophical and moral level,

(2) they are highly complex and difficult to master. In fact, the Congolese language situation in general is perceived as a Tower of Babel (the myth of the 200 - later 600 - Congolese languages). Both arguments are still accepted as valid by many linguists and other

"specialists", and they have contributed to the still prevailing language situation in Zaire, in which French holds the hierarchical top (for "sophisticated" talks), and a selection of vernacular languages (Swahili, Lingala, Tshiluba and Kikongo) is used for communication "on a lower level". The limitations on communicative abilities, and the social stratification inherent to this kind of language policy, are abundantly demonstrated in Fabian's study.

- (b) Theoretically : Fabian's work is important as evidence for or against certain theories of language evolution (esp. pidginization and creolization). It demonstrates the need for integration of extralinguistic evidence into the description, the overall approach necessarily being a pragmatic one. In this study, Fabian proves the determinant role of macro-influences in the evolution of language situations :

"pidginization (evolves through) overdetermination due to the rigid, hierarchical and taxonomic nature of actual and possible speech events" (109)

- (c) Documentary : the work is an important contribution to the historical study of the spread and evolution of Swahili. It can only be hoped that Fabian's work on Katangese Swahili will be followed by likewise surveys of the evolution of Swahili in other parts of the area it covers.

The book will certainly be of great use to linguists, but also to sociologists, historiographers and anthropologists. It is easily readable, since Swahili data and specialised linguistic analyses are consciously reduced to a minimum. Therefore, we can safely recommend the book to any specialist or layman eager to refresh his ideas on the too often only partially approached matter of language in society.

Review by :
Jan BLOMMAERT
Tarwestraat 10
B-9000 Gent