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**Situating language rights:
English and Swahili in Tanzania revisited**

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Abstract

This paper argues for an ethnographic-sociolinguistic approach to the issue of linguistic rights. In much of the literature on linguistic rights a fundamentally flawed set of assumptions about language and society is being used, leading to assessments of language situations that are empirically not sustainable. An alternative set of assumptions is offered, grounded in ethnography and focused on language use as oriented towards centering institutions that attribute indexicalities – function and value – to linguistic resources. Such centers are invariably multiple but stratified, and the state occupies a crucial place in these systems, between the world system and local forces. This model is applied to the Tanzanian sociolinguistic situation, where a strong state appeared to be caught between pressures that were both transnational and local. This gave rise to a pattern of distribution of linguistic resources, including English and Swahili, that offered semiotic opportunities to speakers to construct deeply ‘local’ meanings. The languages were not in themselves agents of inequality, but the way in which they were distributed nationally and in relation to transnational hierarchies is the key to understanding inequality. Discussions of linguistic rights should start from assessments of the real potential and constraints of linguistic resources, not from idealized and statified conceptions of language and society and predefined scenarios of their interaction.

Keywords: Tanzania, Swahili, English, linguistic rights, ethnography, indexicality

1. Introduction

Language names such as English, French, Swahili or Chinese belong to the realm of folk ideologies of language and popularized or institutionalized discourses anchored therein; only every now and then are they salient as objects of sociolinguistic inquiry. When looked upon from the actual ways in which people use language in their lives, what counts are particular varieties of language: repertoires, registers, styles, genres, modes of usage (Hymes 1996; Silverstein 1998). It is our job as sociolinguists to focus on language varieties – emergent constructs reflecting ideologically regimented language use - instead of on language names, and it is our challenge to make this view acceptable and understandable to outside audiences too. Yet, too often sociolinguists have done precisely the opposite: they have developed sophisticated discourses in which language names were metonymically used for the totality of language appearances: ‘English’ was used as shorthand for every variety, linguistic, generic, stylistic, channel-related variety, as well as for all the conditions of production and reproduction of these varieties that could in one way or another qualify as English.

The effect has been, unfortunately, that the crucial *differences* within the language complex became invisible or were just blotted out, in favour of a monolithic, uniform and homogeneous conception of *the* language as an object in its own right, in fact, as *the* sociolinguistic object *par excellence*. ‘The’ language was always connected to a community of speakers – the speech community, or even more simply, the ‘speakers of language X’ – and the connections were both straightforwardly simple one-to-one, one language ‘has’ one group

of speakers or one group of speakers ‘has’ one language.¹ Crucial differences within the group of speakers were, like in language, obliterated: the group of speakers could in some way or another be qualified as ‘speakers of language X’, even if their internal differences were so massive and fundamental that any reference to commonness or sharedness would be empirically unsustainable (Hymes 1968; Rampton 1998). We thus ended up with a fundamentally flawed set of basic assumptions about language and society, completely at odds with whatever understanding we had of sociolinguistic processes. Yet, this was, this is, sociolinguistics: subdisciplines such as language planning (e.g. Fishman, Ferguson & Das Gupta, eds. 1968; Fishman, ed. 1974) as well as studies of multilingualism and code-switching (e.g. Romaine 1989; Myers-Scotton 1993) have been, and are to a large extent still plagued by such deeply idealized notions of language and society (for critiques see e.g. Williams 1992; Hymes 1996; Silverstein 1998; Blommaert 1996; Meeuwis & Blommaert 1994).² In recent years, a new branch of sociolinguistics has developed, largely inspired by studies of language planning, language policy, societal multilingualism and language shift, and focused on the issue of linguistic oppression and language rights for minority groups. This branch – the linguistic rights paradigm (henceforth LRP) - has become hugely successful (e.g. Skutnabb-Kangas 2000; Phillipson 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, eds. 1995; Kontra et al, eds. 1999; Nettle & Romaine 2000; Maffi, ed. 2000; Mühlhäusler 1996), yet it suffers from the same fundamental problems as many of its predecessors.

Rather than reiterate or summarize the critiques formulated elsewhere (Blommaert 2001a; see also Mufwene 2002a, 2002b; Stroud 2001; Silverstein 1998: 421-2) I want to recast the issue of linguistic rights in light of a different set of assumptions about language and society than those commonly used in LRP. I will use, and revisit, my own analyses of the Tanzanian sociolinguistic situation as a field of application (Blommaert 1999), discussing both conceptual issues as well as empirical ones. It should be clear to everyone from the outset that I have a deep commitment to linguistic rights and a great concern about linguistic and social inequality. This is a matter of record, and my concern is to bring to bear the best possible sociolinguistics to this issue. What follows is an attempt towards this goal, starting from an ethnographic-sociolinguistic perspective on language in society.

2. Language in society

The issue of linguistic rights is couched in the problem of inequality in (and between) societies – a problem of speakers, in which we intend to locate the role and place of their linguistic resources.³ The problem, it should be underscored, is primarily a *social* one, and we need to understand the ways in which language and inequality must be understood in relation to larger

¹ Silverstein (1998: 402) distinguishes between ‘language community’ and ‘speech community’. The former is a community characterized by allegiance to “norms of denotational language usage”; the latter is a community characterized by actual patterns of language usage. See also Hymes (1968).

² Of course, not all work falls prey to these flaws, and some recent important interventions have produced innovative, empirically grounded and hence very different approaches to the topics mentioned here. Especially in the field of codeswitching (and by extension, societal multilingualism at large) we can note several amendments to ‘multiple monolingualism’ approaches. See e.g. Auer (ed. 1998), Rampton (1995), for innovative discussions of codewitching; Heath (1983), Zentella (1997), Woolard (1989), Heller (1994, 1999), May (2001), Parlenko & Blackledge (eds. 2002) for stimulating discussions of societal multilingualism. See also Blommaert (ed. 1999).

³ This is only seemingly a self-evident remark. In much of the LRP literature, speakers hardly enter the picture and the discussion focuses on anthropomorphic images of ‘languages’ in terms such as ‘killer languages’ (i.e. languages as perpetrators) or ‘linguicide’ (i.e. languages as victims). See Mufwene (2002a, 2002b) for critical

social patterns and processes. There is some literature on this topic, and given my ethnographic-sociolinguistic viewpoint I draw inspiration from works such as Hymes (1972), Silverstein (1996, 1998), Schieffelin et al. (eds. 1998); Gal & Woolard (eds. 2001), Kroskrity (ed. 2000) and Silverstein & Urban (eds. 1996). Several theoretical assumptions can be distilled from these and related works. The framework thus constructed, I should emphasize, is a social-semiotic one, helpful in an understanding of how symbolic forms circulate in society.

2.1. Languages or resources?

Instead of ‘languages’ or even linguistically defined language varieties, we have to see the ‘matter’ of language primarily in terms of socially loaded linguistic resources, subject to patterns of distribution in society and thus becoming ingredients of repertoires for speakers. Repertoires are made up of *ways of speaking* in the sense of Hymes (1974a): forms of language *use* (not of language *substance*) and knowledge of their use in social environments, of the implicit norms for context-specific genred discourse production and reception.⁴ Ways of speaking pertain to complexes of modes of language use (spoken vs. written, visual or multimedial, productive vs. receptive activities, singing, shouting, whispering etc.), genres (formal speech, routine conversation, recitation, storytelling, joke-telling, gossiping, letter-writing, note-making, paper-writing etc.), styles or keys in which to perform (distance vs. deference, high- vs. low-performance, long, short interventions, etc.). And each time they are associated to particular *formal* aspects of language: the choice of particular codes (dialect vs. standard, handwritten vs. machine-written, ‘French’ vs. ‘Lingala’ etc.) and of particular formal structures in language (syntax, sounds, lexis...). The outcome of this is what I call a *shape* of language: a conglomerate of form and load.⁵

This brings us to the social load of the resources. Every difference in language is socially valued and marked as to degree of fit in particular contexts. Language use, therefore, is fundamentally indexical in nature, and every act of language use produces numerous indexical signals that connect the particular shape of language to not only the local ‘context’ (in the sense of contextualization: Gumperz 1982, Auer & Di Luzio, eds. 1992), but to larger *orders of indexicality* that are valid in groups/systems. The issue of authority comes in at this point, and it will be the topic of the next subsection. I want to emphasize here that the ‘function’ of language – what we usually call the production of meaning – cannot be separated from value attribution. ‘Meaning’ is a product of evaluation of language shapes along standards, norms and expectations – standards that are never purely local-contextual and hence never completely open to negotiation. Hence, what happens in language use is a continuous mapping of forms onto functions, performed by all those involved in the communicative process.

I subscribe here to a ‘poetic’ or ‘aesthetic’ perspective on language, central to performance-oriented approaches to language such as those articulate in e.g. Bauman & Briggs (1990) and focused on language as a form of action/meaningful symbolic behaviour encompassing ‘language’ in the traditional sense as well as more general (usually defined as

⁴ I thank Michael Silverstein for providing me with this gloss for ‘ways of speaking’.

⁵ Note that in this view, ‘language’ in the sense of ‘language names’ is not a central diacritic: it is one of the possible *differences* in this field, alongside many others. The difference between a spoken, colloquial, conversationally organized dialect variety of Dutch used in an intimate context, and a formal, written, highly codified official letter cast in legal jargon in the standard variety of French, is more than just a difference

‘nonlinguistic’) aspects of semiosis. An unfortunate by-product of this line of thought is the absence of the comfort of suggested clarity generated by terms such as ‘English’ or ‘Dutch’: the units we are using here have no name (Silverstein 1977: 145).

2.2. *Authority and orders of indexicality*

How to understand the inherent normativity of language use, which provides the ‘load’ mentioned above? While performing language use, speakers display orientations towards orders of indexicality - systemically reproduced indexicalities often called ‘norms’ or ‘rules’ of language, and always typically associated with particular shapes of language (e.g. the ‘standard’, the prestige variety, the ‘usual’ way of having a conversation with my friends etc.) (Silverstein 1998).⁶ By doing so they (systemically) reproduce these norms, and situate them in relation to other norms. Thus, there is always identity work involved, and the orientations towards orders of indexicality are the grassroots displays of ‘groupness’. To give an example: young people communicate through orientations to peer group norms; in that way they reproduce the peer group and situate it vis-à-vis other peer groups and society at large, thus making the group recognizable both from the inside and from the outside – the particular peer group norms have a specific place in the orders of indexicality to which members orient (Rampton 1995, 1999 provides very fine examples of this, see below).

The systemically reproduced indexicalities are often tied to specific actors, centering institutions (Silverstein 1998: 404) that are often also ‘central’ institutions imposing the ‘doxa’ in a particular group. The centering function is *attributive*: it generates indexicalities to which others have to orient in order to be ‘social’, i.e. to produce meanings that ‘belong’ somewhere. These attributions are emblematic: they revolve around the potential to articulate ‘central values’ of a group or system (the ‘good’ group member, the ‘ideal’ father/mother/child, ‘God’, ‘the country/nation’, the ‘law’, the ‘good’ student, the ‘ideal’ intellectual, the ‘real man/woman’...).⁷ And this centering almost always involves either perceptions or real processes of homogenization: orienting towards such a center involves the (real or perceived) reduction of difference and the creation of recognizably ‘normative’ meaning.

Centering institutions occur at all levels of social life, ranging from the family over small peer groups, more or less stable communities (e.g. university students, factory workers, members of a church), the state and transnational communities, all the way through to the world system. They are a central feature of what Anderson (1983) called ‘imagined communities’: though imagined, they trigger specific behaviours and generate groups. But it is worth underscoring that the social environment of almost any individual would by definition be *polycentric*, with a wide range of overlapping and criss-crossing centers to which orientations need to be made, and evidently with multiple ‘belongings’ for individuals (often understood as ‘mixed’ or ‘hybrid’ identities). To paraphrase Sapir (in Darnell 2001: 127): there are more groups of significance than members participating in them. Furthermore, such environments would be *polycentric and stratified*, in the sense that not every center has equal range, scope and depth. Small peer groups are not equal to a church community or to the state, and while some centers are what they are because of consent (e.g. peer groups), others

⁶ A lot of work in pragmatics illustrates this; see e.g. work based on the Gricean Maxims, or Politeness Theory (Eelen 2001).

⁷ Society is full of such centering institutions, and e.g. popular media culture as well as commercials offer an

generate normativity primarily through coercion (e.g. the labour environment or the state in various respects).⁸ Consequently, orders of indexicality are obviously stratified and not all ‘loads’ have equal value.

2.3. *The locus of inequality*

What, now, would be the site to look for inequality in language? Central to this, I would say, is *voice* understood as the capacity to make oneself ‘heard’ (or ‘read’) in terms of what we have sketched above (cf. Voloshinov 1973; Hymes 1996). Voice is the capacity to engage in socially ‘placeable’ communication, to produce a degree of isomorphism between projected ‘meaning’ (i.e. function-value) and granted ‘meaning’, or in other words, the capacity to produce the right *functions* in communication dialogically, by means of creative practice which develops within a set of constraints.⁹

Let us return for a moment to some of what has been said above. When using language, we map form onto function. Function, as said, is tied to social evaluation of meaningfulness, and this relates to orders of indexicality emanating from centering institutions. Function is thus clearly not an ‘essence’, but a relational, relative phenomenon which depends on the structure and scope of the repertoires of speakers (Hymes 1966; Silverstein 1998). The process of mapping presupposes and requires the existence of contextualizing (‘centering’) spaces in which particular forms can be attributed meaning. Two problems can, and do frequently occur – they are to some extent the core problems of sociolinguistics:

- i) *differential access to forms*, to linguistic/communicative resources, resulting in differential capacities to accomplish certain functions. Think of absence of access to literacy or to particular *types of* literacy; absence of access to particular language varieties, codes, jargons, styles, genres, resulting in small or truncated repertoires;
- ii) *differential access to contextual spaces*, i.e. spaces of meaning-attribution where specific forms conventionally receive specific functions, resulting in differential capacity to map forms onto functions, in other words, in differential capacity to *interpret*.

Regulating access in both domains is, in general, one of the functions of any centering institution, and notably of the state (see below). As for i), people differ in repertoires and consequently in what they can do with it. They enter communicative events with different means that structure, define and determine what they can do and accomplish in that event. Not everyone will be the ‘ideal speaker’ of Chomskyan linguistics; in effect, probably no one is. People have different *pretextualities*, different ‘baggage’ they carry around, that will enable them to communicate in certain ways and not in others (Maryns & Blommaert 2002).

As for ii), such differences may not only result in relatively harmless ‘misunderstandings’; they are genuine power differences. Not everyone has the capacity to

⁸ This obviously opens the whole question of hegemony, too often interpreted exclusively in terms of consent. In light of what has been said here, James Scott’s (1990) notion of orthopraxy is helpful. In domains where coercion is the *modus operandi*, hegemony may often be a matter of ‘hegemonic appearances’, of ‘doing as if’.

⁹ This tension between creativity and constraints is at the core of Raymond Williams’ view of creative practice (see Williams 1977: 212). Foucault’s *Archaeology of knowledge* (1989 [1969]) offers us the very suggestive and attractive concept of ‘archive’: “the general system of the formation and transformation of statements” (146), with emphasis on conditions of production and reproduction that generate systems of ‘enunciability’, with constraints and limits to what can be made understood. Foucault thus emphasizes the importance of uptake as a socio-political phenomenon: meaning and function of statements are *granted* by the parties in communicative

provide any interpretation to any stretch of communication, and this matters: spaces of interpretation are, just like all other aspects of the communicative complex, stratified and unevenly distributed, and some of these spaces are sites of tremendous power: the legal, medical or other expert spaces are cases in point. And the fact is that only some people have access to such spaces and can grant certain interpretations to words. Only a judge can transform narrative bits of real-life experience into evidence of a punishable crime.

One of the features of communication in contemporary societies is the fact that it is often the object of intricate ‘text trajectories’ – texts, discourses, images, get shipped around in a process in which they are repeatedly decontextualized and recontextualized – *entextualized* in the words of Bauman & Briggs (1990) and Silverstein & Urban (eds. 1996) (Blommaert 2001b). In such processes, all kinds of mappings are performed, often deeply different from the ones performed in the initial act of communication. Consequently, categories or other features that did not occur as salient in the initial act were added to it in later phases – for instance, talk can be ‘gendered’ ‘raced’, ‘classed’ afterwards, by someone who was not involved in the initial act of communication (not only a fact of bureaucratic or other institutional practice, but also a common feature of our own professional practices). Depending on the way in which access to contextual spaces is structured, lots of acts of communication are ‘replaced’ and given other functions – a process in which the initial functions often get removed (Mehan 1996; Briggs 1997; Blommaert 2001c).

Given the two dynamics of access, to forms and to contextual spaces, we have defined an axis of inequality. Inequality will occur whenever *pretextual gaps* occur: differences between capacity to produce function and expected or normative function. Whenever the resources people possess do not match the functions they are supposed to accomplish, they risk being attributed *other* functions than the ones projected, intended or necessary. Sometimes, this can amount to a simple and repairable misunderstanding, at other times however, it can be highly consequential. And in the meantime it may be wise to keep in mind that many misunderstandings, innocent or not, have their origin in inequality, not just in difference.

2.4. A note on the state

Given the fact that the state is an unavoidable actor in the processes we shall discuss here, and in light of the above, where do we situate the state? To some extent, the comments offered above may suggest the irrelevance of the state as just one out of so many centering institutions. Yet, the state is not irrelevant at all.¹⁰ In the field under scrutiny here, the state is important for several reasons:

- i) The state is a switchboard between various levels. In particular, it is the actor that organizes a dynamic between the world system and ‘locality’. The state often orients towards transnational centering institutions: capitalism, democracy, an international work order, transnational images of prestige and success, models of education and so forth. It often also orients to transnational models of language and language use: literacy, the relative value of ‘local’ languages versus ‘world’ languages and so forth.

¹⁰ The ‘nation’, however, may be less important analytically than often believed. The use of fixed collocations such as ‘nation-state’ suggests a ‘normal’ situation in which well-functioning states are also nations. In general, both objects need to be analytically separated, and the question whether or not a state is a ‘nation-state’ is an empirical matter: states may be nation-states every now and then, and not necessarily always in the same

The dynamic is two-way, and contrasts between ‘us’ and ‘the rest of the world’ are at the core of many state activities.

- ii) Related to i) the state organizes a particular space in which it can establish a regime of language perceived as ‘national’ and with particular forms of stratification in value attribution to linguistic varieties and forms of usage.¹¹ Thus, the state is one of the main organizers of *possible contrasts* within a particular space: it allows others to create differences between their norms and those that are valid nationally (e.g. those that are transmitted through the education system). Civil society, for instance, will typically organize itself in contrast to (or modelled on) the state. The state is, wherever it exists, a centering institution with a considerable scope and depth. And the state is very often the actor that uses ‘language’ in the sense of ‘language name’ (English/French/Chinese’ etc.) as its ‘central value’.
- iii) The state can contribute a materiality to its role as a centering institution in a way hard to match by others. The state has the capacity to provide an infrastructure for the reproduction of a particular regime of language: an education system, media, culture production – each time a *selective* mechanism which includes some forms of language and excludes others. The state, in other words, has the capacity to exert substantial control over the two dynamics of access discussed in 2.3: access to forms and access to spaces of interpretation. The state has coercive instruments usually exclusive to the state: the legal system and the law enforcement system. So the state is often a *determining* force in the sociolinguistic landscape, in contrast to other centering institutions whose effect can best be described as *dominant*.

There are thus good reasons to attribute a special position to the state as an actor in the construction and reproduction of orders of indexicality within stratified polycentric systems, enormous differences between states with regard to effectiveness, scope and range of activities notwithstanding. There will be cases where the state’s authority appears to be overruled by that of others: the real centers to which people orient can be religion, political organizations, neighbourhoods, media or other civil society actors (cf. Haeri 1997; Stroud 2002, but see Spitulnik 1998). I don’t deny that, but my point is that the actions of such non-state actors need to be understood *with reference to the state*, which remains a higher-level centering institution. There is never just one center, but a whole set of centers, and orientations to one center (the church, particular grassroots organizations) derive value from the position of that center vis-à-vis others. The precise actions of the state are an empirical matter; what we cannot do, I’m afraid, is to eliminate it from analysis or to treat it in purely idealistic terms. Even very ‘weak’ states can be very strong as frames of reference and points of contrast (and hence as meaning-attributing centers) for all sorts of non-state activities.¹²

3. Tanzania revisited

Let us now turn to a particular case: the regime of language in Tanzania (East Africa). I will divide my discussion into three subsections. In the first one, I shall summarize the main

¹¹ This view is an adaptation of Immanuel Wallerstein’s thesis that the world system is organized through interstate systems, in which sovereign states create separate but connected units. See Wallerstein (1983, 1991).

¹² For instance, the cases discussed by Jaffe (1999, Corsica) and Woolard (1989, Catalonia) both show how substate nationalisms create their own centering institutions *undermining* those of the centralized state and thus continually *referring* to the state. What happens there is a shift in rank within the stratified polycentric system:

findings of a previous study on state ideology and language in Tanzania (Blommaert 1999). The outcome will be a paradox: the state's attempt towards the generalization of Swahili at all (almost) levels of society was a huge success; its attempt towards ideological hegemony, however, was a failure. The two subsections to follow will offer explanations for this, first, by discussing the position of the state vis-à-vis developments both at higher and at lower levels, and second, by looking at some grassroots language practices that may reveal some of the dynamics that caused the paradox. Section 4 will then address the way in which this case may inform a different approach to linguistic rights and inequality.

In LRP, the argument of linguistic rights (a) almost invariably involves the promotion of indigenous languages as status languages at all levels of society, and (b) it usually identifies the state as a crucial actor in this process, both negatively (the state denies rights to people) and positively (the state is the actor that should provide and secure rights for people). Tanzania is a case in point.

3.1. The Tanzanian paradox

The case is easily summarized. The postcolonial Tanzanian (then still Tanganyikan) state was one of the first to declare an indigenous language, Swahili, the national language of the country. It also became an official language alongside the former colonial language English. Swahili was immediately introduced as the medium of instruction in primary education. The real boost for Swahili came when the state embarked on a massive campaign of nation-building in the mid-1960s. This nation-building campaign was an attempt towards establishing socialist hegemony, and Swahili was given a crucial role in this. The language was defined as the language of African-socialist ('*Ujamaa*') ideas, and the generalized spread of Swahili would be a measurable index of the spread of socialism across the population.

A few qualifications are in order here. First, the ideal situation envisaged by the architects of the campaign was monoglot (Silverstein 1996): the campaign would be a success when the population would use *one language imbued with one set of ideological loads*: those of Ujamaa. Homogeneity was the target (Blommaert & Verschueren 1998), and the spread of Swahili-and-Ujamaa would have to go hand in hand with the disappearance of other languages-and-ideologies. The first target, obviously, was English – the language of imperialism, capitalism and oppression; but the same went for the local languages, which were seen as vehicles for traditional, precolonial cultures, as well as for 'nonstandard' varieties of Swahili (e.g. codeswitching, urban varieties), that were sensed to indicate the incompleteness of the process of hegemony. The 'better' and 'purer' one's Swahili would be, the better a socialist Tanzanian patriot one would be. We have here a typical Herderian cocktail of one language/one culture/one territory as an ideal organization for society.

Second, not only was the conception of language as a vehicle for a specified (politically defined) set of Herderian ideological values, but the whole *operational* conception of language was that inherited from colonial predecessor regimes. Swahili was standardized and its main vehicle was (normative) literacy produced through formal education systems. Scholarly efforts concentrated on standardization, language 'development and modernization', purism and so forth; in short, on the construction of Swahili as an artefact of normativity focused on referential functions. There was a model for such a degree of 'full languageness': English. Throughout the history of postcolonial linguistics in Tanzania, scholars kept referring to English as the kind of level of 'development and modernization' that needed to be attained for

Swahili. And pending that ‘full languageness’ of Swahili, English would *have* to be used in higher education in order to produce a class of top-notch intellectuals needed for specialized service to the country. Thus, while Swahili was spread to all corners of the country, and was used in almost every aspect of everyday life, post-primary education remained (and still is) a domain where English was hegemonic.

Almost thirty years of concentrated efforts towards the goal set forth in the early 1960s resulted in the generalized spread of Swahili. Sociolinguistically, Swahili and its varieties have become the identifying code of public activities throughout Tanzania. But what did not happen was the ideological homogenization of the country – while Swahilization was manifestly a success, the monoglot ideal was a failure. Neither English nor local languages and ‘impure’ varieties of Swahili disappeared. And the spread of Swahili did not galvanize the hegemony of Ujamaa: the one-party system collapsed in the late 1980s and it was replaced by a multiparty, liberal capitalist state-organization which, ironically, adopted Swahili as its vehicle for nationwide communication (just as the postcolonial state had adopted Swahili as an interesting instrument for propaganda and grassroots organization from the British colonialists before them).

Summarizing, Tanzania is a case where the state granted prestige status to an indigenous language. It also granted its citizens full rights to acquire that language. And it was a state where the formal colonial language was, certainly during the 1970s, a stigmatized language that should ultimately be completely replaced by Swahili. In terms of LRP, everything seemed to be in place. So, what went wrong?

3.2. The state in space and time

Let us begin by looking at how Tanzania fitted into larger pictures. As said earlier, we have to conceive of the state as one level in a stratified polycentric system. So what the state did needs to be placed in a wider dynamic of events at other levels. Furthermore, all of this is historical process, and every ingredient of the process will show residual elements of that historical process as well. From this vantage point, several observations can be made.

i. Tanzania was a space of its own, and the nation-building attempt was a typical state activity the range of which was the territory controlled by the state. But we clearly see lots of moments where the state oriented towards higher-level, transnational centering institutions. At the most general level, the construction itself of a national space was a factor of the international world order of the day, which imposed the adoption of colonial boundaries onto the postcolonial states and which also offered models for organizing the state bureaucracy and administration. The Tanzanians oriented towards a number of transnational ideals: *panafricanism* and African liberation (which spurred the union between Tanganyika and Zanzibar and which also fortified socialism as a state ideology); the kind of *socialism* championed by the organization of Non-Aligned States (in turn something which strongly oriented towards the Cold-War framework); *development* ideals that evolved around sustainable grassroots development (an influence of Maoist China); and standard western models of formal *education* as crucial both to development and nation-building.

ii. Tanzania also oriented to transnational models of language and communication. As mentioned earlier, the state is often the level where a static, homogenous and reified notion of

language is constructed and used as something to which others need to orient. Tanzania adopted earlier, existing models of a monoglot regime of language focused around standard, purified and literacy-driven varieties of Swahili (cf. Fabian 1986; Errington 2001). It also adopted a classic nationalist model of language-and-ideology, the Herderian one. And it offered these models as normative to groups in Tanzanian society, both in everyday life, in administration, in education and in scientific work. Next to this, it also adopted existing worldwide linguistic hierarchies in which ‘fully developed languages’ such as English or French stood at the top and were the model for Swahili (defined, in the same move, as somewhat lower on the ladder of language development). In short, Tanzania adopted a regime of language which was transnational (and which also defined the colonial era in the country) and inserted Swahili into that regime.

iii. Most of what is said in (i) and (ii) represents the *durée* dimension of the Tanzanian language regime: general conditions under which the Tanzanian state operates, and which often become invisible as soon as they are ‘repatriated’, brought into the national space as part of a national project (that of nation-building). In its most simple forms: the transnational models to which the state orients are transformed into national models and offered as points to which subnational groups ought to orient. The world system disappears out of sight as soon as the state brings it into the national space.

iv. At the same time, this is not a static phenomenon. The position of the Tanzanian state vis-à-vis higher levels shifts repeatedly throughout the postcolonial period. In general – and generalizing – three periods can be defined: (1) the shift out of the colonial world order, something which takes the Tanzanian state a few years after independence; (2) the Cold War, i.e. the global world order prior to 1990; (3) the post-1990 world order, i.e. the era of contemporary globalization and capitalist hegemony. In each of these periods, changes in the relative indexicalities occur. For instance with regard to the ‘value’ of English, it is clear that it shifts from an ambivalent stance in the first period (being the language both of the former oppressor and the model for organizing the independent state) to a markedly negative stance during the Cold War period and again to a moderately positive stance in the post-1990 period. English in each period (but also Swahili and any other language or variety) receives value attributions that derive from scales valid transnationally, and the development of language evaluations testify to the sifting alignments of the Tanzanian state in the world system. Let it be noted, as well, that the three periods are not to be separated: rather than breaks between one period and another, we see how residual aspects of the value system in previous periods still occur in later ones. New orders of indexicality are built out of the rubble of earlier ones.¹³

v. But the state also responded to grassroots and civil society forces. Within the normative frame for which the state as a (strong) centering institution stood, various groups in society developed counter-hegemonic discourses and practices. In its most visible form, people were unwilling to *replace* their existing repertoires with the monoglot complex of Swahili. Nobody actually disputed the importance of national linguistic unity, but only few people accepted the idea of individual monolingualism. Most people allocated specific functions to the Swahili varieties they had adopted into their repertoires, and enthusiastically shifted to and fro

¹³ In Blommaert (1999: 148ff) I illustrate this historical stratigraphy by means of an analysis of a Tanzanian

between various ingredients in their repertoires (Mekacha 1993; Msanjila 1998).¹⁴ Furthermore, especially the emerging class of professional intellectuals, while usually strongly supporting Swahilization, launched themselves into debates about *what kind of (socialist) values* the language was supposed to disseminate. The state was forced into such debates, and the general assessments of language policies were effects of such debates between state and civil society. To be precise: the way in which the state's actions were seen as either successes or failures was an effect of a national dynamic in which the transnational dimension was hardly visible – in itself evidence of the way in which the state functions as a centering institution creating a 'national' space and thus effecting closure to aspects of the issue that transcend the national space. For local intellectuals in such debates, the only center to which they oriented was the state; for the state, it was both the world system and civil society.¹⁵

vi. The bottom line to all of this is: the state was an intermediate institution responding both to calls from above and from below, and the state to some extent got stuck between these two levels. The state was not an autonomous actor, but an embedded one, one that invited very different approaches dependent on the level from which one approached it. Add to this the heritage of models of language and language infrastructures – the monoglot, purist, standard, Herderian complex – handed down as part of the way in which Tanzania had to fit into the world order (and developed for Swahili by colonial linguistics), and we end up with a strangely contradictory general image. The state was extremely powerful, as the actor that defined the national space and some critical ingredients of it, and as the actor that had absolute control over an infrastructure that led to generalized language spread. But at the same time, it was extremely weak, because the instruments with which it could work were both deficient in scope and capacity – Tanzania was, and is, a very poor country – and hand-me-downs from transnational levels that could never answer the ambitions of the state itself nor those of local groups in civil society. To put it in its crudest (and hence overstated) form: the state had adopted sociolinguistic models and ideals that were recipes for inequality wherever they were applied, while these models were at the same time always offered as recipes for progress, modernization and development. The state adopted crucial orders of indexicality of a capitalist society, and attempted to apply them in the construction of a socialist state.

3.3. Fooling around with language

We have now described the awkward position of the state. But what did people do with language? Again, we have to keep the general model in mind: a stratified polycentric system in which people orient to a variety of (hierarchically ordered) systemically reproduced indexicalities. The state provided such a set of indexicalities, and it did so with considerable force, *aplomb* and determination. But let us not forget that

“It is entirely possible (...) that in the ordinary course of their history communities will come to differ in the degree and direction in which they develop their linguistic

¹⁴ I recall how a good friend of mine, a staunch and very prominent supporter of general Swahilization in his country, told me that he sent his children to his area of origin 'so that they would learn a language', i.e. the local ethnic language.

¹⁵ This also accounts for my own initial surprise when I heard people in Tanzania qualify the language policy of their government as a 'dismal failure'. From an outsider's (i.e. transnational) perspective, my initial perception

means (...) The same linguistic system, as usually described, may be part of different, let us say, *sociolinguistic* systems, whose nature cannot be assumed, but must be investigated.” (Hymes 1974b: 73, emphasis in original):

To the extent that we require evidence to back this up, Ben Rampton’s work on ‘crossing’ and ‘styling’ (1995, 1999, 2001) is a ready candidate. Rampton demonstrates how London adolescents of a variety of ethnolinguistic backgrounds create ways of speaking that orient to new, peer-group or popular youth culture indexicalities, and thus allow ‘crossing’ into ethnolinguistic indexical spaces not customarily theirs (e.g. white Anglo kids adopting Jamaican creole). In practice, ‘customarily’ here stands for indexicalities that are valid at higher levels and are produced by other centering institutions such as education, neighbourhood norms, or national norms of ‘standard’ and ‘substandard’ or prestige and stigma. Thus, what counts as a prestigious language variety from the point of view of the school system can be a stigmatized variety from the point of view of the pupils, and vice versa (e.g. Rasta slang can be a prestige code). Linguistic resources can indeed function in very different sociolinguistic systems, to adopt Hymes’ terms, and they can do so simultaneously.

This, I would argue, is the level at which we have to look if we want to understand what people actually do with language, what language does to them, and what language means to them, in what particular ways it matters to them. And if we want to make linguistic rights more than just a trope in political-linguistic discourse, this is where we should start. Invariably, alas, we end up with a rather complicated image. Let me give a few examples from Tanzania.¹⁶

Public English

Years ago, I started noticing the often peculiar varieties of written English used in all kinds of public displays in urban Dar es Salaam. Such varieties would come to me in the form of signs on doors and walls of shops, bars and restaurants, inscriptions on the small, privately operated buses that provide mass transportation (the infamous *daladala* – ‘dollar-dollar’), advertisements in newspapers or on billboards, road signs and so forth. The most striking aspect of these publicly displayed forms of English literacy was the density of ‘errors’ or rather unexpected turns of phrase in them. Here is a small sample:

- Fund rising dinner party* (on a banner in central Dar es Salaam)
- Disabled Kiosk* (the name of a ‘kiosk’ – a converted container that serves as a small shop – operated by a disabled man)
- Whole sallers of hardwere* (sign at a hardware shop)
- Shekilango Nescafé* (the name of a café on Shekilango road in suburban Dar es Salaam)
- new Sikinde tea (room)* (the name of a café, note the brackets)
- Sliming food* (in an advertisement for a health shop)
- Con Ford* (written on a bus)
- Approxi Mately* (written on a bus)
- Sleping Coach* (written on a long-distance bus)

¹⁶ I have made fieldwork trips to Tanzania, often visiting the same places and people, since 1985, so there is a

Clearly, these inscriptions are packed with information. They reveal a problem with the distribution of linguistic resources: standard English with its codified referential meanings on the one hand, normative literacy conventions for English on the other. Seen from the angle of monoglot normativity, the people who wrote and used these inscriptions display incomplete insertions in economies of linguistic forms. In that sense, they testify to some of the crucial problems of language policy in Tanzania: the lasting prestige functions attributed to English combined with the extremely restricted access to its prestige-bearing, standard varieties (the latter completely subject to access to post-primary education).¹⁷

But there are other aspects to this. It is clear that the producers (and consumers) of these signs orient towards the status hierarchy in which English occupies the top. This is an orientation to a transnational, global hierarchy, reinforced by the state's ambivalent and meandering stance on English. There is an orientation to English as a code associated with core values of capitalist ideas of success: entrepreneurship, mobility, luxury, female beauty. The use of English is sensed to index all of this. But at the same time, it indexes this not in terms of internationally valid norms (e.g. standard varieties of written English), but in terms of *local* diacritics. The man who commissioned the *disabled kiosk* sign probably did not imagine himself as an international businessman, but he did imagine himself as a businessman in Dar es Salaam (or even more specifically, in the Magomeni neighbourhood of Dar es Salaam). And at this point, a new space of meaning-attribution is opened. We have an act of communication which at once orients towards transnational indexicalities and to strictly local ones, and the effect is that the English used in these signs has to make sense *here*, in Magomeni – but *as English*, i.e. as a code suggesting a 'move out' of Magomeni and an insertion into transnational imaginary networks.¹⁸

This is a repatriation of sign-complexes which offers a tremendous semiotic potential for users: they can produce strictly local meanings of great density and effect. The man who wrote *Con Ford* on his bus was simultaneously advertising the brand of his vehicle, alluding to the folk-category of 'conmen' – smooth talkers and ladies' men – and boasting the standards of comfort in his bus, while also displaying his wit and capacity to perform word play in English. The same goes for the owner of the *Shekilango Nescafé*: an anchoring in the local geography goes hand in hand with a display of knowledgeability of prestigious, European brand names (Nescafé), a suggestion of a degree of sophistication and European-touch class for his business, and a flair for finding well-sounding names for things. And as for the authors of *fund rising* or *sliming food*: they target an audience who would perceive the total value of the English display rather than its normative correctness, and so offer them a space for identifying with high-class, internationalized categories of activities. It is the value of English and of literacy in *Dar es Salaam* that has to be put central.

So we are not really witnessing an invasion of an imperialist or killer-language here. What we are witnessing is a highly complex, intricate pattern of appropriation and deployment of linguistic resources whose values have been relocated from a transnational to a national set of indexicalities. It is a *Tanzanian* bourgeois (or bourgeois-aspiring) resource.

¹⁷ And this access is extremely restricted. Official statistics from the Tanzanian Ministry of Education and Culture (1996) show that less than 4,000 students finished secondary education (offering access to higher education), while more than 700,000 children enrolled in primary schools. That means that only about 0,5% of those who begin primary education eventually finish secondary levels. It was once pointed out to me that the graph of these figures (which I had presented as 'pyramidal') looked rather like a Burmese temple.

¹⁸ Silverstein (pers. comm.) calls this "a proleptic index of aspiration, a speech act of intended/attempted word

Tough talk and its norms

In the mid-1990s, I started to note the emergence of a hip-hop scene among youngsters in Dar es Salaam. One thing led to another, and I soon found myself in the company of young people willing to initiate me into their ways of life. It started with a girl telling me that her brother now spoke *Viswahili*, i.e. the plural of 'Kiswahili' – multiple Swahilis at the same time. The boy was called and he produced some phrases to me in the presence of his father, who disapprovingly said that 'this was not Swahili' and told me that the boy *anaongeza chumvi* – 'added salt', exaggerated, went too far. Rules had been broken. (Note that at this point we already have two metapragmatic qualifications for the talk of the boy: one that refers to a plurality of 'languages', another marking 'excentricity'.)

The girl and her brother brought me in contact with a group of approximately 14 young people, all living in the neighbourhood and all between 14 and 20 years old. The group consisted of six male core members and a second circle of boys and girls. In terms of ethnic background as well as social class, the group was highly heterogeneous: some of the members were poorly paid waiters or messengers, one worked as an aide to a shoe repairman, while some others were children of middle-class families and had access to prestige goods (clothes, shoes, music cassettes) and cars. Yet, there was clearly a 'group' here.

-Despite class differences, all of the members would define their outlook on life in terms of deep frustration – an awareness of being in the margins of the world expressed through mottos such as *jua kali* ('burning sun', 'hard heat', a metonym for the general condition of poverty and misery in Tanzania) or *machungu sana* ('much bitterness', i.e. frustration), and marked references to places, displaying an awareness of situatedness in a world system: *majuu*: the West (literally 'the things up there'), *Jahanam*: the third world (literally 'Hell') or *motoni*: the third world (literally 'in the fire').

-Furthermore, the core members had adopted nicknames and insisted on being called by these names in the context of the group. The names again reveal various orientations to status complexes and/or identity categories. Some were modelled on African-American acronyms: *Q*, *KJ*, another copied the name of a well known Reggae artist: *Toshi* (Peter Tosh), another was called *blazameni* – a local version of 'brother man'. Yet another was called *msafiri*, 'the traveller' (the boy had spent some time in South Africa working in the mines – an experience conferring considerable prestige), and finally, the oldest member of the group was called *jibaba* 'little father' (he had fathered a child).

-The group also identified themselves as belonging to a larger category of urban youngsters: *wahuni* – 'crooks', bandits, the Swahili equivalent of the 'Gangsta' of American hip-hop culture. It was quickly pointed out to me that this label should not frighten me, for there were several categories of *wahuni*, and *sisi hatuibi*, 'we don't steal' (in other words, 'we are not real criminals').

-The group had its own meeting places: a container converted into a bar, in front of which the shoe repairman who employed one of the members had his small shop (a small stall with one bench). Another hangout for the group was a soccer field a few hundred meters further, where they could meet *in plenum*. There was a distinct locality to the group – a *barrio* awareness.

Already we see how the group organized itself in reference to centering institutions: the world system and their own marginalized position therein was one such very salient focus of orientation; it provided a frame of reference in which English, hiphop slang, Rasta slang, and travelling could acquire particular emblematic values to be exploited in naming and qualifying practices. They shared some aspects of their groupness with other *wahuni* in Dar es Salaam – a generic *Wahuni* scene being another centering institution, the focus of which were the star rap groups of Dar es Salaam (groups with names such as *II Proud* and *Da Dee-plow-matz* and with gigantic prestige: capitalizing on the stardom of the rap groups, two weekly tabloid magazines had started to use bits of *Kihuni* in their attempt to reach the young urban readers). This level was in turn superimposed by transnational (but essentially African-American) ‘Gangsta’ culture notably focused on international rap stars such as Tupac.¹⁹ And finally the neighbourhood – their *barrio* – was a powerful focus of orientations. Other *Wahuni* groups were all identified in reference to Dar es Salaam neighbourhoods: the *Wahuni* of Manzese, of Magomeni, of Ubungo and so forth.

The group of *Wahuni* spoke *Kihuni*, the language of the bandits, and the *viswahili* earlier mentioned to me. I started recording conversations with the group, and invariably, such conversations took the shape of unilateral displays of *kihuni* in the form of single words or phrases. The group, unsurprisingly, was deeply committed to the creation and maintenance of an ‘antilinguage’ shared by the whole of the Dar es Salaam *Wahuni* scene. It consisted of baffling instances of linguistic mixing, borrowing and relexification in Swahili, English and other languages, and sound play. Consider the following examples, loosely categorized as English (relexified) borrowings; relexifications from Swahili; borrowings from other languages; sound play, *vifupi* (shortened forms) and so on:

English borrowings:

- kukipa* : to leave, to take off (< ‘to keep’)
- kutos*: to leave alone (< ‘to toss’)
- macho balbu*: eyes wide open in amazement or fear (*balbu* < ‘[light-]bulb’)
- mentali*: friend (< ‘mental’, refers to ‘mental fit’)
- Krezi*: friend (< ‘crazy’)
- kumaindi*: to want something (< ‘mind’)
- kukrash*: to disagree (< ‘to crash’)
- dewaka*: man-of-all-trades (< ‘day worker’)
- bati*: blue jeans (< ‘board’, corrugated iron roof plates)
- pusha*: drugs dealer (< ‘pusher’)

Relexifications from Swahili (‘SS’ = standard Swahili)

- unga*: cocaine (SS ‘maize flour’)
- mzigo*: marihuana (SS ‘bag’, ‘luggage’)
- chupa cha chai* (also *thermos*): small plane (SS ‘tea flask’, ‘thermos flask’)
- pipa*: big plane (SS: ‘oil drum’)
- kukong’otea*: to stalk (SS: *kukong’ota* = ‘to hit’, ‘to beat’)
- kupiga bao*: to have sex (SS: ‘to overtake a vehicle’)

¹⁹ I was in Dar es Salaam in 1996 when Tupac was shot and killed. The news spread in a matter of hours

Borrowings from other languages

- mwela*: police man (< Maasai)
- kulupango*: jail (< Luba, *ku lupango*)
- ganja*: marihuana (< Jamaican Creole, Rasta Slang)
- kaya*: marihuana (< Jamaican Creole, Rasta Slang)

Sound play etc.

- kupasha* = kupata: to receive
- zibiliduda*: a girl who plays hard to get (also *gozigozi*)
- kibosile*: a rich man ('boss')
- kishitobe*: a girl with a large backside (refers to the name of a Greek cargo vessel)
- K'oo*: Kariakoo (a neighbourhood)
- Zese*: Manzese (a neighbourhood)
- Migomigo*: Magomeni (a neighbourhood)
- Jobegi*: Johannesburg

The dynamics of *Kihuni* is not exceptional: very similar phenomena will be met elsewhere in similar kinds of groups. Neither is the domain distribution of *Kihuni* surprising. Terms cover domains such as: crime, drugs, sexual relations with girls and female sexual morphology, travel, poverty vs. wealth, the city, the group and its networks.

But more interesting is the *normativity* in which all of this is couched. *Kihuni* had its own centering institutions, its own bodies of codified norms: the rap stars and the tabloids that used *Kihuni*. The group spontaneously formalized its sessions with me, turning them into a kind of formal instruction into the language. I audio-recorded what went on, but they also insisted that I *made notes* of the words and phrases they offered me. And while I was making notes, they would watch carefully how I noted the words and phrases, and they would occasionally – rather vigorously – correct me whenever what I wrote down did not correspond to what they thought it should be. I reverted to a pattern of explicit checking what I had written, asking *hivyo?* ('like this?') and showing them my notes. Orthography mattered. For instance, a frequently used term was *toto* – a sexualized term for 'girl' derived from Swahili *mtoto*, 'child'. The plural of *toto* is *totoz*: instead of adding a Bantu plural prefix (*wa-toto*), the group used a Hiphop slang plural suffix '-z', tying the use of the term firmly to transnational Gangsta culture by exploiting the morphology and orthography of Swahili.

What this means is that, remarkably, *kihuni* is a *literate* code – or at least that written images of *kihuni* terms mattered in the process of transfer/initiation in which I was involved. The code transferred to me needed to be *correct*, and in their view of what a language should be, this meant that it was subject to standards of written form, for control over written varieties of *kihuni* offered opportunities for semiotic alignment with the local and the translocal.²⁰ This flexible, hermetic, subcultural code dismissed by parents and others as 'not Swahili', was conceived of as a 'full language' by its users – as one of the many *viswahili*, 'Swahilis', controlled by apparently quite strict norms and rules.

²⁰ Note that, obviously, what is meant by 'correct' here is a matter of local norms: what the group considered to be the way in which *totoz* needed to be written. Jaffe (ed. 2000) provides examples of the dynamics of

Just like in the case of the English inscriptions discussed earlier, the picture we get here is one of relocation and appropriation – in other words, of semiotic opportunity – rather than of deterioration of standards, language loss or English imperialism. There is not one single complex of indexicalities attached to the highly ‘impure’ blend of whatever linguistic material these kids could get hold of. The indexicalities are multiple and again, like in the cases discussed earlier, revolve around the capacity to suggest the transnational while firmly remaining within the national, even the local: it is a repertoire that allows them to ‘get out’ of Dar es Salaam *culturally*, to culturally relocate their local environments in a global semiotics of class, status, blackness, marginalization.²¹ And if we look for the value the code has for the kids themselves: it is their *language*, captured in normative perceptions and activities as soon as someone from the outside intends to acquire it.

3.4. *What went wrong?*

If we now combine the elements discussed in this section, we can begin to answer what went so dramatically wrong in Tanzania – in the eyes of its own language planners. The key to understanding this is the fact that Tanzania was not an autonomous space, that it was encapsulated in divergent processes both at a higher and at a lower level. The state was not an autonomous actor, and it could not operate in total freedom: it had to operate under conditions that were both historically and synchronically constraining. At the same time, it was the actor upon which everything converged: it was *the* centering institution in the process. The failure of its own definition of hegemony lies in the fact that the state was so weak *because* it was so strong. The crucial centering institution did what it had to do: be the crucial centering institution; but it had to do that under constraints that precluded success.

The effect was the creation of a space in which a hugely unequal pattern of distribution of linguistic resources occurred and started to operate. Vernacular Swahili was generally spread, with some degree of literacy in Swahili for a rather large group of the population. In a different stream, English continued to be a prestigious resource because of its embeddedness in a class-organizing system of reproduction: higher education, which for a long time was the only ticket to the elites. This order of indexicalities, in which English, standard and literate language varieties stood on top, and vernacular Swahili and local ethnic languages were way down, was a national order, but it was obviously permeated by transnational orders. And the various levels at which such indexicalities operated – the transnational, the national, the regional, the strictly local – could all be oriented to by speakers. By using one way of speaking versus another, they could ‘place’ themselves in relation to images culled from the various levels, the combination of which was a strongly local semiotics of identity, probably only fully understandable – fully ‘social’ – to people from that place.

This surely is a feature of inequality: the capacity to ‘move out’ by means of specific semiotic resources is definitely one of the elements of what we understand by ‘empowering’, while resources with a ‘placing’ effect – keeping speakers ‘in place’ – would be a feature of disempowerment. If the use of a particular form of English fails to turn you into an international businessman, but rather makes you more than ever the small-time shopkeeper from Magomeni, then the mapping of form over function needs to be looked into carefully.

²¹ As for class, one of the striking features encountered among these mixed-class youngsters was the refusal and dismissal of middle-class trajectories. When asked what they wanted to become in life, even the middle-class members would answer *dewaka*: the man-of-all-trades or fiddler who tries to get money (a *dili*, ‘deal’) wherever

But the point is that such mappings occur locally, that the ‘sociolinguistic system’ referred to by Hymes cannot in any way be equated to some supposedly internationally valid system in which English is always empowering or disempowering, and similar simplicities are applied to indigenous languages. What is disempowering in the case of Tanzania is the whole historical process of being caught in a marginal position in the world system. This whole process governs the value of the linguistic resources: it governs what people can do with them and what they do to people. In the case of Tanzania, inequality resides in the fact that the functions of linguistic resources controlled by speakers are primarily local, and this goes for local languages, Swahili and English alike. As soon as they get moved out of the local environment and get circulated translocally, they lose function at a rapid pace. The strong-weak state has left its mark.

4. Discussion

Let me now try to move this discussion back to the issue of linguistic rights. I shall first summarize my case. I have tried to show that if we adopt an ethnographic viewpoint on the issue of language in society, we need to focus on how linguistic resources are actually employed, and under what conditions, in real societies. In order to arrive there, we can use a framework in which language use is seen as oriented towards multiple but stratified centering institutions that construct and offer opportunities to reproduce indexicalities. Such indexicalities determine the ‘social’ in language use, and they are the basis of interpretive work. The way in which they are organized is the locus of inequality.

In order to understand real processes of inequality, the different processes need to be situated. In contemporary scholarship, no analysis of national phenomena can afford to overlook the global level which defines or constraints a lot of what can be done nationally. This is where we need a fresh look at the state as an actor in this field: even if the state appears to be weak, its position vis-à-vis global forces remains crucial, as does its position vis-à-vis grassroots and civil society processes. We must look, however, not exclusively at the state’s concrete *performative actions* such as legislation, enforcement of regimes of language in education and bureaucracy and so forth, but also at its role as a centering institution, a point of reference, contrast and comparison which often defines the value and relevance of actions undertaken by other actors.

Looking at sociolinguistic phenomena from this angle might help us understand the real role and function of language practices for people – their value-attributions and their understandings of such practices. For if we believe we can do something about inequality, we need to know its locus, its real *modus operandi*, its structure and objects. And this, I would argue, requires an ethnographic outlook informed by history and general sociolinguistic insights. Applying this, as in the case of Tanzania, may yield disturbingly complex results. In the Tanzanian case, I cannot be led to believe that English is the cause of oppression or minorization. On the contrary: the varieties of English spread across society offer opportunities for localizing transnational indexicalities to speakers, the effects of which are highly meaningful locally. The problem is: they are *only* meaningful locally, they do not count as ‘English’ as soon as translocal norms are imposed on them. In that sense, the Great English Monster sketched in LRP literature is not there. Neither can I be led to believe that Swahili has been the key to progress and liberation for the Tanzanians. It isn’t that simple. Swahili was, during its heyday, as effective an ‘imperial’ language as English, Russian or Mandarin Chinese.

It was imposed as a monoglot standard with its own prestige varieties, and it was offered together with strong encouragements to stop using other languages (Blommaert 2001a). If minority languages have disappeared in Tanzania since the 1960s, Swahili is most likely to be one of its killers, to adopt for a moment the LRP line of thinking.

The point is, however, that single ‘languages’ attached to single collections of attributes, values and effects will never do as a framework for thinking about these issues. Ethnographically we will always see complex blending, mixing and reallocation processes, in which, as said at the outset, the differences between ‘languages’ are altogether just one factor. Inequality has to do with *modes of language use*, not with languages, and if we intend to do something about it, we need to develop an awareness that it is not necessarily the language you speak, but *how* you speak it, *when* you can speak it, and *to whom* that does it. It is a matter of *voice*, not of language. And as I also said at the outset: this is a social problem, only partially a linguistic one.

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