

Language Contact and Communicative Innovations: The African Experience

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My research focuses on the contact and interaction between Swahili and English languages and the resultant linguistic culture in Swahili-speaking east Africa, notably in Kenya and Tanzania. The coexistence between the two languages in the public space is not only a fascinating phenomenon, but also an insightful one in terms of sociolinguistic explorations.

Particularly, my interest has been in parliamentary discourse (debates and campaigns) and billboard advertisement discourse in which language use patterns are not just viewed as motivated and constrained by the linguistic culture of the speech community, but also they may constitute distinct varieties in their own right. In this regard, this exploration does not only entail language use pattern between Swahili and English, but also between varieties of the same language, especially Swahili, which has been a source of enormous communicative innovations.

While working on my book manuscript on the rise of 'elite Swahili' (Swahili as spoken by the educated/globalized elites as opposed to standard Swahili and popular Swahili) and its related dynamics in the Tanzanian parliamentary debating chamber, I am exploring patterns of language use in business signs and billboard ads in Dar es Salaam. One of my current projects explores how global business operators make use of local linguistic culture for successful business. Barclays Bank billboards in Dar es Salaam are a case in point – clearly illustrating the intersection between global



business and local linguistic culture, a testimony to the generally acknowledged claim that culture can be as important to multinational success as capital. Reflected in this representative sample of billboards is one of the common officially practiced use patterns that keep the two languages apart, that is, "Swahili or English." In other domains such as the media one finds English or Swahili medium newspapers. Similarly in education, the medium is either Swahili or English. But in other formal communicative interactions such as the parliamentary debates, the 'Swahili or English' policy does strictly separate them in actual communicative practice.

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