

5 The Role of Religion in Written Language Maintenance and Shift in Uganda

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Introduction

The primary focus of this chapter is the ambivalent role of religion in language maintenance and shift in Uganda. This chapter draws its theoretical framework from the work of Pauwels (2005) on language maintenance and shift. Indeed, Pauwels' contribution is central to this area and provides a very good definition of language maintenance and shifts in the context of language contact. Furthermore, she considers factors and forces promoting both language maintenance and shift, relevant to the case of Uganda and the Christian religion. Basically, according to Pauwels (2005), both phenomena of language maintenance (LM) and language shift (LS) come about in the context of language contact. An outcome of this process is that one language may give way to the other as the dominant language.

The contact of significance in this Ugandan language landscape was between European Christian missionaries and native Africans in Uganda. The missionaries introduced two aspects of language use: literacy, which contributed to language maintenance, and formal school education, which promoted the use of English in favor of local languages.

The Christian missionaries created two powerful social institutions in Uganda: school and church. These two social institutions produced the conflicting forces of both LM and LS in the Ugandan language landscape, as I shall show in this chapter. Language use in this chapter will be considered largely in terms of the written text (literacy) and to some extent spoken language as well.

Religion, language, literacy and education have always been associated in Africa to the same degree as in other parts of the world. The three noted 'Religions of The Book' are Islam, Christianity and Judaism (Kapitzke,

1999). Accordingly, religion, especially the Christian religion, through the activities of its missionaries, has done a lot in spreading alphabetic literacy in Africa (Venezky, 1999) and has triggered both LM, through the development of orthographies and printing in local languages, and LS, through the introduction of school education based on the use of English as the language of instruction and power in Uganda. Before going into a detailed discussion, it is important to look at the language context in Uganda. I will draw on the literature and also refer briefly to my field notes.

The Language Context in Uganda

In Uganda there are many ethnic groups, associated with 45 unrelated languages. Two of these languages are reported as extinct (Gordon, 2005). The 43 remaining are organized under five major linguistic groupings: Bantu, Nilotic, Madi-Moru, Nilo-Hamites and Highland Nilotic (Myuganda, 1996). There are other forms of classification which distinguish Luo as a distinct group (Nsibambi, 2000). The Bantu group of languages is spoken in most of western, central, southern and eastern parts of Uganda. The Madi-Moru languages are spoken in the West Nile region of Uganda. The remaining languages are spoken mostly in northern Uganda. There is no clear information on the number of languages that are written and those that are not. However, based on my personal experience, if there are still some languages that are not yet written, then they are less than five (Openjuru, 2004).

According to the constitution of Uganda, English is the official language (Government of Uganda, 1995). As the official language, English is used in governance, the judiciary, and the legislature. The country's political elites and the educated and upper-class people prefer to use English in most aspects of their lives, including in their homes and with family members who can also all speak a local language. In fact, English is seen by most Ugandans as a 'language of the social achievers ... *and* ... symbol of success' (Magoba, 2001: 54). This makes English the dominant language in Uganda. It is a language of power, and it pervades every aspect of people's everyday lives in both rural and urban areas of the country (Kasozi, 2000). Regardless of whether one is able to speak, read or write in it, English is unavoidable in ordinary life in Uganda. Being able to read and write in English can enable access to jobs and/or provide access to a much easier life than that of a person who is not able to use it (Kwesiga, 1994; Nsibambi, 2000).

English is also the language of instruction after the first three years of school. Local languages can only be used during the first three years of education, and this is the case in schools that are located in rural areas only. For schools located in urban areas, which have a mixed linguistic population, English is used from the first year of schooling (Nsibambi, 2000). The speaking of English has been enforced in a variety of ways including

through peer embarrassment¹ of the pupils caught speaking their local languages (Magoba, 2001). As a language of instruction in schools, the manner in which it has been enforced and the stigmatization of local language use in schools, English has become the preferred language of literacy (reading and writing) for most people in Uganda. It is not surprising, therefore, that to be considered literate in Uganda, one should be able to read and write in English. Nsibambi points this out when he says, ‘When we speak of high level of literacy skills in Uganda, we naturally think of English as the language in question since it is the medium of instruction at all levels but the lowest level of schooling’ (2000: 3).

Maintenance and Shift in Uganda: Religion and Literacy

Considering the above Ugandan language context, I would like to explore what is described as LM and LS in Uganda. I will start with LM before moving on to LS, as explained by Pauwels (2005).

The missionaries and language maintenance in Uganda

The term language maintenance is used to describe a situation in which a speaker, a group of speakers, or a speech community continue to use their language in some or all spheres of life despite competition with the dominant or majority language to become the main/sole language in these spheres (Pauwels, 2005: 719).

In this chapter, language maintenance is being discussed in terms of the introduction of alphabetic literacy, first by traders but ultimately by missionaries, who were important in the development of orthographies for different local languages in Uganda. This is an activity which is promoting the maintenance of some languages despite the phenomenon of a growing usage of the English language in the context of multilingual Uganda.

The first group who brought texts/written information to Uganda, in the form of the Quran from around 1844, were the Arab traders. Although the Muslim Arab traders from the East African coast were the first to introduce written information in Uganda, they did not make any effort to teach reading and writing in the Arabic script outside of the practice of the Islamic faith (Ssekamwa, 2000). That leaves the Christian missionaries as the biggest players in the promotion of written forms of local languages in Africa.

The missionaries, according to Venezky (1999), did a lot to promote literacy to facilitate spreading their religious gospel. In doing that the missionaries inadvertently contributed to local LM in three ways. Firstly, as stated above, they did so through the development of local language orthographies that helped to document and promote African languages and language study. Secondly, local varieties were supported through

creating a church discourse associated with a church-associated cultural identity. This involved practices based on the use of local languages that are passed on from generation to generation. Thirdly, the printing and publishing of books in the local languages contributed to continuity. In all the above cases, writing became a tool for the maintenance and promotion of the local indigenous languages, especially for those whose orthographies were developed earlier rather than later.

Literacy (use of written language) in the Roman script was introduced in Uganda by Christian missionaries in the late 19th century. The missionaries of the Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) were the first, arriving in Uganda from England in 1877. They were later followed by the Catholic White Fathers' Society from France, who arrived in 1879. These two Christian missionary groups came to 'civilize' African natives using religion and education.

Thus, literacy was introduced in Uganda as an integral part of Christian religious practice, making Christianity the first social and institutional framework within which literacy found meaningful use in everyday life. Accordingly, wherever the missionaries went, their first task was to learn the local languages and develop orthographies for each particular language. The next step was to translate and print bibles, prayer books, hymn books and other religious texts into that language. By embracing the Christian faith, the local people embraced a literate culture involving the use of a written language (Byakutaga & Musinguzi, 2000; Onono-Onweng *et al.*, 2004; Ssekamwa, 2000). Becoming a Christian often became closely associated with becoming literate, which was seen as an enhancement or an exotic mode of local language usage or application.

The missionaries emphasized the use of local languages in their literacy work. In doing that, they gave local languages status and acceptability in church practices/discourse thus elevating those languages to a new level of existence and use in a written form. I note that over time print texts and more recently print media are ways in which LM can be achieved (Dyer, 2008; Fishman, 1991 as cited in Rohani *et al.*, 2005).

The Anglicans emphasized reading of the Bible by individuals themselves. Therefore, before the establishment of schools, reading was taught as a precondition for becoming an Anglican Christian. The Catholics on the other hand emphasized rote learning of prayers and religious doctrines printed in other Catholic literature and did not require learning how to read and write as a precondition. Nevertheless, they also conducted some literacy classes (see Byakutaga & Musinguzi, 2000; Parry, 2000a), translating and publishing/printing more religious books in local languages than the Anglicans did. This is because the Catholics were the first to establish printing presses for the production of simplified religious texts (reading materials) for their followers. Being able to read, write and print words is, in my view, an extended use of local languages providing it with a chance for taking a life of its own as a text form.

Since the Catholic catechism emphasizes recitation, the material that is recited and read from books is made available to the catechumens orally (Byakutaga & Musunguzi, 2000). This practice introduced two alternative formats of language use. Firstly, it was demonstrated that written words can be accessed through other people (literacy mediators according to the social practice theory of literacy – see Parry, 2000a); secondly, it was evident that book content can be memorized and recited orally. These language practices, in addition to routine use of the same texts, as we shall discuss later in this chapter, encouraged Catholics to learn most of their prayers by heart and recite them during their Sunday church services without further reference to the prayer books. Church prayers could therefore be transmitted to the next generation of Christians with ease based on the available recital. This, however, does not mean the recited text ceases to have authority as a written text.

These differences in emphasis on individual literacy have contributed to differences in literacy levels between Catholics and Anglicans, as Okech (2004: 184) notes: ‘The Protestant approach promoted better acquisition of literacy among their followers than the Catholic one.’ Therefore, while the two Christian denominations did similar work in promoting local language in the written form, they produced different outcomes due to their historical and doctrinal differences. They did not cooperate on common issues but instead rivaled each other (Ssekamwa, 2000). For example, they sometimes even developed two different orthographies for the same language, which led to variation in the spelling and pronunciation of some words in the same language. For example, in the Acholi dialect of the Luo language, the word for the concept of one supreme God (which was introduced by the missionaries) is spelt and pronounced as *Rubanga* for Catholics and *Lubanga* for Anglicans; and a Christian is *Lacristo* for Catholics and *Lacristayo* for Anglicans. These different spelling and pronunciation systems later became marks of identity and differentiation between Catholics and Anglicans (see Kalema, 2001; Onono-Onweng *et al.*, 2004; Ssekamwa, 2000). This of course cannot disqualify their contribution to the maintenance of these languages.

School education and language shift in Uganda

Pauwels (2005) explains that ‘language shift implies the change (gradual or not) by a speaker, a group of speakers, and/or a speech community from the dominant use of one language in almost all spheres of life to the dominant use of another language in almost all spheres of life’ (2005: 719). This understanding emphasizes the contradictory role of the Christian missionaries in LS and LM in Uganda. This is because the missionaries were responsible for the introduction of formal school education in Uganda in 1895. This further promoted the use of written language – however, unlike in the church, the teaching of literacy in schools was no

longer in the local language but in English. This shifting of literacy teaching to schools resulted in the dominance of school literacy and English as the language of literacy outside of church practices (see Ssekamwa, 2000). As noted above, English was, and has continued to be, the language of instruction in Uganda after the first three years of initial education (from Primary Four (P.4) to university) (Government of Uganda, 1992; Nsibambi, 2000). The introduction of school education came with the reduction of local language use in writing and speaking, especially for those who had learned how to read and write from the formal school system.

Even within the church, activities not directly related to prayers and Sunday church services were now conducted in English. The use of English even became more acceptable as a language of communication in a multi-lingual context, as evidenced by this field note below:

Generally, this meeting is like any other meeting with an agenda, a chairperson, and a secretary who is recording the proceedings. The meeting is being conducted in Luo with English and Kiswahili use by the non-Luo speakers at the meeting. Participants orally use any of the three languages, while two other people translate their contribution into the other two remaining languages. Luo is the main language of the meeting because it is spoken by most people in the meeting. English is mainly used by educated non-Luo speakers, and Kiswahili, by uneducated non-Luo speakers. All documents, except the attendance list, are being written in English. (Field notes in Bweyale Church of Uganda Parish: Sunday 12 June 2005)

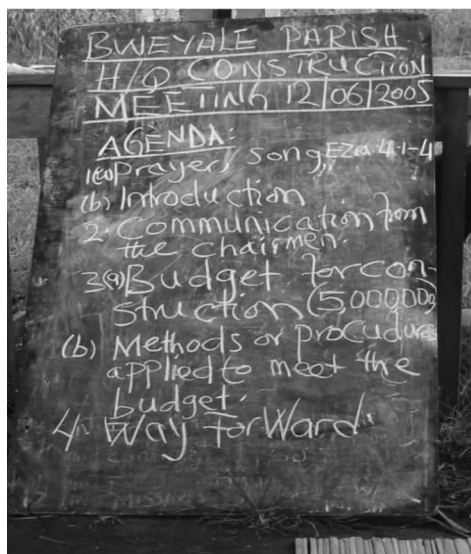


Figure 5.1 An example of the English agenda displayed on a chalkboard placed before the members



Figure 5.2 Record books on a worn-out Bible

Records of such village meetings are kept in files and exercise books like the one shown in Figure 5.2.

School exercise books are used as personal and official record books. The book on the top of the pile in Figure 5.2 is a 'Recording Book' kept by the secretary of a village religious group. The language used in this book is an innovative creation of the writer mixing two foreign languages: English and Kiswahili. It reads 'The Books ya Division' (the non-English word in this construction is the Kiswahili word 'ya' which seems to be substituting the English word 'of'). The next line of writing is the name of the officer and his title, 'securtary'. In Standard English, this could be 'The Secretary's Record Book of the Division'. This shows that in spite of often-limited ability to write in English, this rural community in Uganda still insists on conducting official and public writing in English. In contrast, the second notebook in the photograph, which was a Bible study notebook and contained personal notes taken during the same meeting, was written in Luo. These personal notes are used to guide individual participation in meetings by referring to them regarding decisions made in previous meetings. The official minutes in the secretary's record book are not given to the members due to the problem of reproduction.

The fact that English is the primary mode of written communication in meetings, despite the reality that Luo is the predominant oral language, illustrates the shift being made to English and the way in which it is associated with record-keeping, education and status (see Sentumbwe, 2001, 2002). This is particularly interesting given that some church services are conducted in Luo and the Bible and Catholic Missal are written in Luo. This confirms Papen's findings in Namibia, where she found that although



Figure 5.3 A worn-out English and Luo language Bible with two pages of underlined texts

much of the reading and writing done in the Bible study groups to which Emma (pseudonym for one of the key respondents in the research) belonged were in the local language, English was still important in the religious identity of the learners (Papen, 2005). There is therefore a mild language shift in terms of all written communication being perceived to be presented in English and not the local language.

This shift is slowly overtaking the local language religious text, as most school-educated individuals start preferring to read English bibles, claiming that local language bibles are difficult to read. This attitude is eroding the efforts of the missionaries in achieving local LM through translation and local language book printing and publishing. In many of the homes visited during fieldwork, the Bible is the most frequently used book, as Figure 5.3 shows.

The worn Bible with underlined texts in Figure 5.3 reveals that it is frequently used. The fact that sections of the text are underlined is evidence that the book is not only read regularly but also read attentively for a purpose. This differs from Kulick and Stroud's finding in Papua New Guinea where they found that printed matter in Gapun was only looked at, and that, 'Nobody ever actually reads the bible' (Kulick & Stroud, 1993: 36). In most homes which I visited, with the exception of children's schoolbooks, the Bible was the most prominent book in the house and was one of only a few books visible. In addition to the Bible, other religious texts are commonly available in rural community life in both English and the local languages, because different religious organizations like the Jehovah's Witnesses distribute religious leaflets and books free of charge or sell them very cheaply. These religious texts are the reading materials most available for rural people to read, even for leisure. Note the following example:

Sitting inside a hut built in front of a restaurant to serve as a cool shade for its customers, a man who is well known to me is busy reading a book. As I enter the hut to join him, he stops his reading to recognise my presence,

and I decide to ask him what he is reading and take a seat next to him, thus being able to see the book he was reading. He abandons his reading and gives me the book to see what kind of book he was reading. The book is a Jehovah's Witness's book, 'The Greatest Man who ever lived'. (Field notes in Bweyale Church of Uganda Parish: Sunday 12 June 2005)

Therefore, apart from schoolbooks, religious texts are among the most dominant and common texts in rural communities in Uganda. It is clear that these texts are central to the identity of many rural Ugandans and written language usage. This reflects and confirms the findings in other developing countries such as Papua New Guinea where a study reported that 'of the eighty-four specimens, all but two were connected with Christianity' – that is, 98% of texts in households were religious texts (Kulick & Stroud, 1993: 36). This suggests that the incorporation of religious texts as part of local LM programs could utilize the widely available religious reading materials where appropriate. This could be done along the lines suggested by Purcell-Gates *et al.* (2000: i); in this case, religious practices and printed materials could be used as the authentic 'activities and texts employed in literacy [sic] learning'. In doing this, emphasis should be put on promoting local languages so that the effort of the missionaries in that direction is moved forward.

Conclusion

We have seen that Christianity is a major impetus for reading in the local language in rural community life in a variety of contexts: formal church services, church meetings, choir practice, Bible study groups and family and individual Bible reading and prayers. These Christian practices illuminate the complex ways in which most African local languages can be maintained or diminished through choice of language (English or local) in a multilingual context and through the role of literacy mediators in joint religious literacy events. Furthermore, as a practical matter, Christian religious literacy materials are easily available. However, for indigenous languages to survive, the growth of English – which is causing a language shift – will need to be countered by going back to supporting local language publishing which was also being promoted by the Christian missionaries. Future research could also consider the role of technology and broadcast media in LM and LS as they develop in the Ugandan context.

Note

- (1) Pupils caught speaking their local languages (vernacular) are made to wear a bone around their necks until they catch the next person committing the same offence and transfer the bone to them. While wearing the bone they will be subjected to ridicule by teachers and fellow pupils.

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