

Rights Abuse - English the Official Language

Extract from “Policy Report on Agriculture – A Cultural Anthropological Perspective”
(Section 3; English the Official Language; Pages 8-11). The full report is online
http://www.cparuganda.com/images/PolicyReportonAgricultureinUganda_CPAR_OSIEA1.pdf

By Norah Owaraga¹

“I am now speaking English. I refer to the British language as a captured weapon we are now employing.” His Excellency President Yoweri Kagutta Museveni speaking at the function at the residence of the British High Commissioner in Kampala for the 2017 Official Birthday celebrations of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and also the 65th anniversary of her reign.

English, the official language of the Republic of Uganda, is not indigenous to the territory. It is not an ‘African-Ugandan’² language. It is the language of those who colonised the territory; a clear testament of sustaining neo-colonialism.

English as the official language de facto means that all Uganda’s important policy is written in English. It is rare, if at all, for policy documents to be translated into ‘African-Ugandan’ languages. The first National Development Policy (2010) and the second National Development Policy (2015), for example, are not translated into ‘African-Ugandan’ languages; and are available online only in English.

These two policies are among the key ones in which the National Resistance Movement Organisation (NRMO)³ Administration articulates its vision and aspirations for the Republic. Such policies contain the structure which shapes all other policy, as it is defined by the NRMO Administration.

Policy documents not being translated into ‘African-Ugandan’ languages would ideally not be a problem; the formal education system of the Republic, after all, is conducted in English. Nevertheless, according to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2016), a significant proportion, nearly 30 percent, of the population aged 10 years and more are unable to **“read with understanding and write a simple sentence meaningfully in any language”**, let alone in English.

Illiteracy levels among women, according to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics, are higher at a rate of 32.4 percent, as compared to among men at the rate of 22.6 percent. The varying abilities to read and write, may explain why there is male dominance in policy development and implementation arena.

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² ‘African-Ugandans’ are believed to have been all immigrants who migrated into the territory from other parts of the African continent. African-Ugandans are the ancestors of the peoples recognised as citizens, by birth, by the Constitution (1995) of the Republic - 65 different cultural groupings; making the Republic the most ethnically diverse nation-state in the world (Blake 2013).

³ The NRMO political party is headed by President Museveni and has been the ruling party of the Republic since 1986.

Ability to read and write does not necessarily translate into one's abilities of conceptual understanding as was beautifully captured by Okot p'Bitek in the *"Song of Lawino"*. The main protagonist, Lawino, the "Traditionalist-Ugandan"⁴, is not able to read and write, but is highly intelligent in her mockery of global-western culture; in comparison to the reasoning abilities of her husband, Ocol, the "Westernised-Recaptive"⁵.

It is Lawino who has the presence of mind to caution Ocol that: *"the pumpkin in the old homestead must not be uprooted."* Heron (2011), a literary analyst, explains this Acholi proverb to mean:

"Pumpkins are a luxury food. They grow wild throughout Acholiland. To uproot pumpkins, even when you are moving to a new homestead is simple wanton destruction. In this proverb, then, Lawino is not asking Ocol to cling to everything in his past, but rather not to destroy things for the sake of destroying them."

Slavishly accepting, as a given, global-western coined concepts and enforcing their implementation without question has caused significant uprooting of proverbial pumpkins in the old 'African-Ugandan' homestead.

Wanton destruction of 'African-Ugandan' culture by 'Westernised-Recaptives' is perpetuated due to insufficient understanding of English - the proportion of the population of the Republic unable to understand English is significant if measured in their ability to understand and to correctly interpret conceptual underpinnings behind words in English.

Those competent to internalise and to deduce the conceptual underpinnings behind words such as: "progress", "development", "modern", or "modernisation", for example, are few. Insufficient understanding of English is a reason why civil servants and politicians in the Republic get away with blatantly making pronouncements and including in policy documents statements of questionable logic.

Take for instance the vision statements of the national development plans – second plan (2015) for 2015/16 – 2019/20 and first plan (2010) for 2010/11 – 2014/15 - which the National Planning Authority reportedly authored after wide consultation with stakeholders. The identical vision statements read:

"A transformed Ugandan society from a peasant to a modern and prosperous country within 30 years"

The Authority's use of the word *"peasant"* raises questions. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2016), peasant in British English means:

"A person who owns or rents a small piece of land and grows crops, keeps animals, etc. on it, especially one who has a low income, very little education, and a low social position. This is usually used of someone who lived in the past or of someone in a poor country."

⁴ 'Traditionalist-Ugandan' is a descendant of 'African-Ugandans who 'resists' global-westernisation.

⁵ A 'westernised-recaptive' is an African-Ugandan who has acquired some formal global-western education, which, in his or her view, makes him or her the civilised and superior one amongst his or her people. A mentality similar to that of 'rescued' and 'freed' slaves that Davidson (1992) in his book *"The Black Man's Burden"* describes as *"recaptives"*, hence the categorisation: 'Westernised-Recaptives'

- How is it that the majority of whom the Authority characterises as peasants with low incomes and very little education are the major actors in the agriculture sector of the Republic; a sector that the Authority (2015) considers the backbone of the economy?
- If the Authority accepts the characterisation “peasant country” why is it necessary to transform, instead of planning within a peasant economy or more accurately within the logic of an economy for smallholder farmers?
- How has owning or renting small pieces of land on which they are growing crops and keeping animals been of negative effect to the extent that their way of life must be transformed – changed to another one, a ‘modern’ one?
- What is the root cause of them being of low income, of very little education, and of low social status?
- If the label “peasant country” is accepted, why is it so in the first place?
- In choosing the word “peasant” did the Authority ask and answer questions such as these and determine that “peasant” was the best word to use?

If the Authority made an informed decision in its choice of the word “peasant”, then the Authority is composed of ‘Westernised-Recaptives’ who think of themselves and of their fellow ‘African-Ugandans’ in a seriously derogatory manner. Alternatively, those within the Authority may have an insufficient command of English – they are able to speak, read and write it, but have insufficient intelligent capacity to deduce conceptual underpinnings behind English words.

It is important to note that the Authority was established by an Act of Parliament (2013) for the purpose of:

“Building the national capacity for visionary and long term planning. The Authority would establish a framework that enables the short and medium term national priorities to be derived from and guided by agreed strategic objectives, long term development goals and perspective vision aspirations.”

The immediate quote prior is extracted verbatim from the Authority’s website. It is difficult to understand what these two sentences mean exactly, especially the second one - what are “*perspective vision aspirations*”?

The proceedings of the 2016 Joint Agriculture Sector Annual Review (JASAR)⁶, expectedly, were in English. During the Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) presentation at the JASAR, in fact, the disconnections between workshops in which policy is determined in English for the Republic and the realities of smallholder farmers living in the rural areas were alluded to by Kirabo (2016), who was delegated by her colleagues to deliver the CSO’s presentation, when she said:

⁶ The JASAR is an annual workshop that brings together representatives of the NRMO Administration, their ‘development partners’ – multi-lateral and bi-lateral donors of exogenous origin, members of parliament, farmer organisations, CSOs, and the private sector, review the agriculture sector performance for the Republic’s past financial year and the sector plans and budgets for the next financial.

“In terms of production practices, Mr. Chair, we wish to draw your attention to this kind of woman (image of smallholder farmer) and others that are on the farm while we are here speaking English.”

Kirabo nicely demonstrates and confirms the position of English within policy in the Republic - while the elite speak English in air conditioned rooms in five star hotels, smallholder farmers are on the farm producing the food that feeds the nation and that generates a significant proportion of the nation’s gross domestic product (GDP).

There is a tendency in the Republic to equate one’s ability to read, write and speak English to intelligence. The power of English, as analysed by the Teso⁷ focus group (2016), is that many poor rural smallholder farmers believe that it is a must for them to ensure their children are able to read, write and speak English; and so they sacrifice a lot in order to ensure this. The Teso focus group surmised that:

“People sell food in order to get money for school fees. Moreover, there are these schools that have come – the private schools – you do not have an alternative source of income but from farming. So, you end up selling food in order to pay school fees for your child, what else can you do? Even UPE (government sponsored Universal Primary Education) schools require money, even though it is not the same as in private schools. People want amusugun (English) from the private schools. In UPE schools a child reaches Primary Seven when they don’t know how to even write their own name. That is what has caused people to sacrifice to sell food to raise money to pay the costs of private schools so that their child may get at least acoa adio (a little education or wisdom or knowledge or skills).”

The Teso focus group clearly equates ability to read and write English to being educated, wise, intelligent, knowledgeable or skilled. They sacrifice and sell food in order to afford high school fees in private schools so that their children will get ***amusugun*** and ***acoa adio***. The Teso focus group have internalised a factoid that ability to read and write English equals wisdom. A factoid, as it is defined by Oxford Living Dictionaries (2016), is:

“An item of unreliable information that is reported and repeated so often that it becomes accepted as fact.”

The ‘English-equals-wisdom’ misconception is heightened in the Republic during campaigns for political office; swearing in ceremonies for politicians; vetting and approving of presidential nominees; and during political debates in parliament; all spaces in which policy is determined and applied.

Persons otherwise highly competent, but unable to read, write and speak English, are disqualified on grounds that their insufficient mastery of English renders them incompetent to hold office. Case in point is Haji Nasser Ntege Sebaggala, a highly competent leader, if judged on the basis of his business acumen (Wikipedia 2016). On grounds of his insufficient mastery of English, the Parliament of the Republic denied Haji Sebaggala the chance to be part of the NRMO Administration as a Minister. It should be noted that before Parliament denied him the space to serve as Minister he had previously been elected by popular vote as the Mayor of the capital, Kampala.

⁷ Teso is a region in North-Eastern Uganda that is claimed and populated mostly by the Iteso people of Uganda who are believed the 5th largest ethnic group (African-Uganda nation) in Uganda. Their language is Ateso.

Misconceived superiority prevails and allows elitist ‘Westernised-Recaptives’ to get away with actions such as those of the National Planning Authority and that allows for the discrimination against a significant proportion of the population. Negative attitudes towards those with no or insufficient English language skills are widespread and it is accepted as the norm, as exemplified by Twinamatsiko’s (2015) analysis titled: *“Sebaggala broken English is his best political card”*, published in the media, in which he reported that:

“Makerere University students drowned his voice (that of Haji Sebaggala) in boos and jeers as he struggled to share his political vision at the Freedom Square. The students couldn’t bear the prospect of a mayor who couldn’t construct a decent English sentence.”

Haji Sebaggala went on to win the mayoral race, but the students’ conduct points to institutionalised discrimination and human rights abuse - the few who are able to read, write and speak English drown the voices of those not able to do so.

A significant portion of the population is denied direct access to spaces in which policy debates occur and in which policies that bring significant impact on their lives are determined. Logically, policies that result do not truly reflect the views of the majority, but rather those of a few – the ‘Westernised-Recaptives’.

Their inability to read, write and speak English is used against them and the silence of their voices within national policies is conspicuously loud. Sedentary smallholder farmers and pastoralists who live in the rural area cannot possibly buy into the visions of the national development plans and of the land policies of the Republic - they cannot subscribe to being “modern” through the loss of their homesteads.

That English is used as the official language is an example of the ways in which exogenous knowledge is prioritised and privileged over and above endogenous knowledge. The incidence between the university students and Haji Sebaggala, furthermore, is a good example of Falola’s (2003) conclusion, in his book *“The Power of African Culture”*, that:

“If (African) traditional cultures privilege the wisdom of elders, modern cultures favour the skills of a Western-educated elite ... Western education is a marker of success, while ethnicity (‘Traditionalist-Ugandan’) is the boundary of operation to exclude others from power and resources of the nation.”

Ordinarily when Haji Sebaggala articulates his views in the ‘African-Ugandan’ language of his ancestors, Luganda, his wisdom is unmistakable; wisdom that has the potential to significantly enhance policy.

University students, nevertheless, had the audacity to disrespect an elder and to dismiss his wisdom, for he couldn’t articulate his views in English. This is the norm in the prevailing ‘modernisation rhetoric’ - that which is considered taboo – disrespecting and dismissing views of elders - within ‘African-Ugandan’ culture is the norm in being “modern.”

In the context of Uganda, English is far from being a weapon that Ugandans have captured and are employing for the good of the majority; but rather it is a weapon through neo-colonialism sustains.