

ABSTRACT

Swahili-English Codeswitching in Development Communication in Tanzania – an Obstacle for Participatory Development?

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This paper discusses examples of Swahili-English codeswitching by Tanzanian development workers in two agricultural programmes in Musoma and Zanzibar. Evidence from formal meetings in these development networks shows that codeswitching is used both to facilitate as well as to obstruct grass-root level participation.

On the positive side, the very nature of the codeswitching patterns – intrasentential codeswitching with Swahili as a matrix language and occasional, mostly single-lexeme switches to English - means that interaction is still widely accessible to Swahili speakers. Extending the terminological base of Swahili by codeswitching also means that the role of English in formal contexts can be kept very limited. Swahili-English codeswitching is usually translated to Standard Swahili with little effort, while providing English-Swahili translations is more time-consuming. This is important as development workers usually avoid the use of English in interaction with the target group. In case a Swahili equivalent is not readily available, some development workers engage in an active search for the adequate term, thus developing their own and the community's linguistic resources.

On the negative side, Swahili-English codeswitching may exclude and alienate target group members. The asymmetric bilingualism that the present education system creates is reinforced by linguistic practices in development networks. In some cases, development workers fail to acquire full Swahili competence in relevant technical domains and instead rely on English to fill the gaps. Codeswitching to English when discussing technical matters or when foreign development workers are involved leaves development workers ill prepared for communicating these very matters at grass-root level in rural contexts. In case lexical gaps force a development worker to codeswitch to English in village meetings, those who do not speak English are excluded, and a detrimental implicit message is communicated to the target group: that English, a language they themselves do not speak, is indispensable for development or progress.

To sum up, it is lexical gaps in Swahili rather than codeswitching that constitute the major problem for participatory communication. The recommendation for development organizations is thus to support Swahili competence of their staff in technical domains relevant to their work.