

**Christina Higgins 2009. English as a Local Language:
Post-colonial Identities and Multilingual Practices.
Bristol: Multilingual Matters Ltd. 176 Pages,
ISBN: 9781847691804, £ 19.95**

Amani Lusekelo (Dar es Salaam & Cologne, 2009)

<1>

Christina Higgins credibly presents the situation of English in East Africa as scrutinized from four areas, which she investigated in the field: the newspaper journalism, annual beauty pageants for young women, the hip hop music of the youth, and advertisements. For me, as a Tanzanian, it has been a pleasure to review a book that illuminatingly documents the language situation, the cultural conceptualization and the localization of English that is taking place in the multilingual society in Tanzania. Reading through the pages I see with great pleasure that the research was conducted quite thoroughly in Dar es Salaam and in passing, as the author says, in Nairobi. Theoretically, the book focuses on how the nativization of an imported language takes place in the multilingual societies of East Africa, specifically on the way in which the English language is localized in the presence of Standard Swahili, Street Swahili (*Swanglish*) and *Sheng* in Tanzania and Kenya respectively. Higgins' theoretical orientation, her data analysis and argumentation- point out that viewing English as an international, global and foreign language is erroneous. She suggests that we need to recognize the indigenous voices that are natively constructed and used in Africa and that we should reject the western view of English as is either totally localized as in Liberia and South Africa or used through code-switching as in East Africa. The latter results in hybridity, i.e. the formation of a language which is neither western nor local in lexicon, morphology and semantics.

<2>

In gathering data, the author cooperated with the journalists of an English-medium newspaper in Dar es Salaam in Tanzania (pp. 37-64). The author says the analysis of the face-to-face data reveals that amongst journalists, code-switching between Swahili and English forms part of their oral communication in the office and outside the office hours. But the product of their office hours is a newspaper which is in plain English. The observation that journalists form the elite closure, of course, in the English-medium newspaper in Tanzania, is well founded because English in Tanzania is learned in schools and not acquired at home or in streets as Swahili is the dominating language.

<3>

The annual beauty pageants in Tanzania and Kenya form another ground where both cultural conceptualization revolving around beauty and language use and creativity demonstrated by the young women in the beauty pageants are apparent. Creativity here means, e.g., that for "Miss Bantu" competitions a section is scheduled for domestic chores, and contestants are required to show their ability to solve problems, say, for example, shortage of water. The author found that up-country competitions in Tanzania are carried out using Swahili, which is adapted to the given linguistic situation because most of the participants in rural areas have either completed only primary school or have little secondary education in addition. Such trainings can hardly turn them into competent speakers of English, and as a result Swahili, is the primary, hence dominating language. But when it comes to the national level, English is chosen as the medium of communication. At this level most of the contestants have proper secondary or college education. Also, they see English as the language of the world through

which also the Miss World competitions are pursued. The media covering beauty pageants in Tanzania have issues to learn from. First, newspaper reports indicate that beauty pageants are a form of deculturalisation (pp. 73-75) and second, the dominant use of the metaphors demonstrates the conceptualization of the East African beauty. The author sees that the use of Swahili metaphors such as *saka* 'hunt' and *nyakua* 'grab' are symbols of capitalism (pp. 76-78) and this is one of the reasons why the pageants were banned in the past in Tanzania.

<4>

Higgins covers the hip hop music of the youth in East Africa to find out how American hip hop has an impact on East African hip hop and the nativization of whatever is borrowed from America to East Africa. Findings reported are outstanding as several words have been localized and – in the term of Higgins – “re-entextualized” (pp. 102-114). In Kenya, words like *unbwogable* 'unscarable/unshakable' [< *bwogo* (Dholuo) 'to be shaken'] (p. 111) moved from hip-hop into politics and are used even in parliament. In Tanzania, three words are frequently used in Street Swahili: *sista* 'respected sister, nun', *sista du* 'hottie, beautiful town girl' [the meaning/etymology of *du* is unclear] and (*ma*)*demu* 'dame(s)'; the shape of the words and the meanings have been slightly changed to fit local needs. However, in my opinion, such nativization is quite immature as it could hardly be equated to the situation in West African English as described in Polzenhagen (2007). The usage of the terms in East Africa is limited to the youth while in West Africa the localized terms are pervasive across age and social status.

<5>

In the domain of product promotion, the author found that three categories of advertisements exist: Swahili-only adverts, English-only adverts, and code-mix Street Swahili and English adverts. All three categories are found in notice boards of shops and cell phone companies in rural and urban areas in Tanzania. Further, the book presents how words of English origin are used in East Africa with slightly modified spellings and meanings which show the shift from global English to localized English. Words like *za* > 'the', *fasta fasta* > 'fast' and *chapchap* 'quickly' are used locally and interpreted locally. However, the word *chapchap* remains problematic since the etymology is not clear. But it is noteworthy that the use of the word is apparently not restricted to East Africa. In the Francophone countries Togo and Benin, *shapshap* also means 'quick(ly)' (Amevor Amouzou-Glikpa, p.c., 28.08.2009), and in Wolof, the major language of Senegal, *rag rag* and *taf taf* have the same meaning (Jules Coly and Saliou Mbaye, p.c., 29.08.2009). To me, these words have many alike features: phonology, morphology and meaning, and this suggests that they are onomatopoeic. English as the source for *chapchap* is therefore not very likely.

<6>

Generally, I will mention three areas in which Higgins, may need some detailed re-analysing of her data or expanding of the spectrum. To begin with, for the section of beauty pageants, a good deal of local literature that covers Taarab music in Tanzania and which could have broadened the author's view on cultural conceptualization on the East African coast has not been read (cf. Khamis 2001, 2004, 2005).

<7>

In the book some sentences are given wrong translations. I mean that some of the translations of the excerpts from journalists' reports and verses of *Bongo Flava* (Tanzanian hip hop) songs are erroneous and misleading. For example, the verse *akajiona amepunch mpenzi* translates as "she felt that she was free from her parents' curfews" and not the way the author translates it as 'she punched (had sex) with her lover' (p. 104). Another example, the word *lile* that Higgins

mentions as a derogatory item would have been correct if the word was not the short form of the name *Lilian*, i.e. *Lili*. To the best of my knowledge, although the author claims that the word *gwan* is localized, it is not. The reason is that while in Tanzania other words are used in every day communications of the youth, the word *gwan* 'good, cute' is only used by hip-hop artists. The word *gwan* is documented for Sheng (cf. Shitemi 2001: 7) and hip hop artists in Tanzania may have copied it from there. In other words, the word *gwan* is not available in day to day Street-Swahili in Tanzania. Also the label *Swahinglish* that the author uses is not used in Tanzania, rather, the local label is *Swanglish*, i.e. the Street-Swahili where both Swahili and few nativized English words co-exist.

<8>

The choice of the research areas mentioned above has deprived other areas whereby the study of the nativization of English could have been more illuminating. Also, the coverage of the themes within hip hop music could transcend beyond sexuality. For example, the hip-hop music and politics, socio-economics and life hardships that have well been studied by Perullo (2005).

<9>

All in all, the entire book is a good one as it stems from the real situations of language use in local areas of East Africa. The academic grievances mentioned could be easily clarified with an expanded future study that the author can make.

References

Khamis, Said A. M. 2001

'Redefining Taarab in Relation to Local and Global Influences.' *AAP* 68, *Swahili Forum* VIII: 145-156, http://www.ifeas.uni-mainz.de/SwaFo/swafo8/8_13_khamis.pdf (01.08.2009)

Khamis, Said A. M. 2004

'Images of love in the Swahili Taarab lyric: local aspects and global influence.' *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 13,1: 30-64, <http://www.njas.helsinki.fi/pdf-files/vol13num1/khamis-taarab.pdf> (05.08.2009)

Khamis, Said A. M. 2005

'Clash of interests and conceptualization of Taarab in East Africa.' *Swahili Forum* XII: 145-156, <http://www.ifeas.uni-mainz.de/SwaFo/SF12Khamis.pdf> (09.08.2009)

Perullo, Alex 2005

'Hooligans and Heroes: Youth Identity and Hip-Hop in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.' *Africa Today* 51,4: 75-101, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb002/is_200506/ai_n15167247/ (01.05.2009)

Polzenhagen, Frank 2007

Cultural conceptualization in West Africa: A Cognitive-Linguistic approach. Frankfurt: Peter Lang

Shitemi, Naomi L. 2001

Pidginization: Sheng, the melting-pot of the Kenyan languages and anti-Babel development. In *KISWAHILI: Journal of the Institute of Kiswahili Research* 64: 1-16