

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF KISWAHILI AND MALAGASY LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION: LINGUISTIC BRIDGES IN EAST AND SOUTHERN AFRICA

Rasolonirina Florette¹, Ravaoarisoa Simonette Augustin², Ralaivao Hanginiaina Emynorane³

^{1,2}Université de Toliara, Madagascar

³Universitas Hasanuddin, Indonesia

Email : florette1826@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores the role of Kiswahili and Malagasy in education, examining how these languages serve as linguistic bridges in East and Southern Africa. Focusing on Tanzania and Madagascar, the study uses a qualitative approach to investigate the perspectives of students and lecturers at universities in both countries. By conducting in-depth interviews with key informants, the study highlights the cultural, educational, and social significance of Kiswahili in Tanzania and Malagasy in Madagascar, shedding light on their influence in higher education settings. The findings reveal the importance of these languages not only in fostering communication and academic success but also in promoting regional integration and cultural identity. The study underscores the challenges and opportunities these languages present in the context of multilingualism and educational development in East and Southern Africa. Through the voices of students and educators, the study contributes to understanding how Kiswahili and Malagasy function as tools for knowledge dissemination and intercultural exchange in the region.

Keywords: *Kiswahili, Malagasy, Multilingual Education, Linguistic Bridges*

INTRODUCTION

The role of languages in education is a fundamental aspect of shaping both academic success and cultural identity, especially in multilingual regions like East and Southern Africa (Barrett, 2024). In this context, Kiswahili and Malagasy are two prominent languages that have not only played a critical role in the daily lives of millions of people but have also become central to the academic systems of their respective regions. "Language is not just a means of communication, but a conduit for cultural expression and a gateway to knowledge" (Bamgbose, 2000). In Tanzania, Kiswahili serves as the national and official language, while in Madagascar, Malagasy plays a similar role. This study aims to explore how these two languages bridge linguistic and cultural gaps in the educational landscapes of Tanzania and Madagascar. "Language connects us to our past, shapes our identity, and plays a significant role in our academic and social experiences" (Gumperz & Hymes, 1972).

East and Southern Africa are known for their linguistic diversity, with hundreds of languages spoken across the region. As such, Kiswahili and Malagasy have emerged as key linguistic bridges within their countries and beyond (Yahya-Othman, 1990). Kiswahili has a long history of integration into various educational settings, particularly in Tanzania, where

it has been the medium of instruction in schools since the country's independence (Batibo, 1990). On the other hand, Malagasy, an Austronesian language, has deep cultural roots in Madagascar, with its own historical significance in shaping the national identity. As noted by Dlamini (2018), "Language is a powerful tool for social cohesion and national unity." Despite their prominence, both languages face challenges in their educational roles, including issues of literacy, accessibility, and resource availability. "The state of education in many parts of Africa is compounded by the linguistic challenges students face" (Brock-Utne, 2000).

The study of Kiswahili and Malagasy in education reveals not only the educational value of these languages but also the broader socio-political and cultural implications of their use in academic settings. In Tanzania, Kiswahili is seen as a unifying force among the nation's diverse ethnic groups. "Kiswahili has become the language of nation-building and a symbol of Tanzanian identity" (Mmbaga, 2007). However, there are persistent challenges in ensuring that it is effectively used in higher education, particularly in technical and scientific fields. Similarly, in Madagascar, Malagasy plays a crucial role in maintaining national identity and fostering local knowledge systems, but its use in formal education is often limited by a lack of resources and a shift toward French as the dominant medium in higher learning institutions. According to Andriamasinoro (2013), "The dominance of French in education has created a barrier for many Malagasy students in accessing higher knowledge."

The relationship between language, education, and power is an important lens through which to view the role of Kiswahili and Malagasy in their respective educational systems. "Language is inherently political because it is closely tied to power relations" (Rubagumya, 1990; Tollefson, 2006). In both Tanzania and Madagascar, the state's decisions on which languages to prioritize in education often reflect broader political ideologies and efforts to assert national unity or maintain international relationships. While Kiswahili has been embraced as a tool for fostering national cohesion in Tanzania, the influence of colonial languages like English remains strong, raising questions about the extent to which Kiswahili can fully fulfill its role as a language of instruction in higher education. "The challenge for Kiswahili is balancing its national role with the growing influence of global languages" (Mohamed, 2011).

In Madagascar, the situation is equally complex. The use of Malagasy as the medium of instruction in education is minimized due to the prevalence of using French in the whole education system. As Rakotondramanga (2006) observes, "Malagasy remains the language of culture and tradition, but French continues to dominate in the academic and professional spheres." This dual-language system creates a dichotomy for students who must navigate between local linguistic heritage and the global aspirations symbolized by French. The ongoing tension between Malagasy and French in education highlights the challenges of linguistic imperialism and the persistence of colonial legacies in African and Indian Ocean island contexts.

While both Kiswahili and Malagasy are important in their respective countries, there is limited academic research on their educational roles and challenges, particularly from a comparative perspective. This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on how these languages function as educational tools, the challenges they face, and the opportunities they provide. "Educational research has often neglected the role of indigenous languages in academic settings" (Trudell, 2009). By examining the experiences of students and lecturers who engage with Kiswahili and Malagasy at the university level, this study will provide a deeper understanding of the linguistic dynamics at play in East and Southern Africa.

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of mother tongue education for students' academic success and cognitive development. "Mother tongue education has been shown to improve learning outcomes, as students can better understand and engage with the material" (Cummins, 2000). Research by Brock-Utne (2000) on language and education in Africa supports this argument, suggesting that students who learn in their mother tongue or a language they understand perform better academically. However, these studies often overlook the role of national languages like Kiswahili and Malagasy, which are not strictly mother tongues for all students but still serve as crucial vehicles for education.

The use of Kiswahili and Malagasy in universities also raises questions about language policy and the need for greater investment in language resources and training. "Effective language policies in education must consider the linguistic realities of the community, including the status and use of national and indigenous languages" (Bamgbose, 2000). In both Tanzania and Madagascar, there is a need for more support for Kiswahili and Malagasy language teaching, including the development of textbooks, academic resources, and teacher training programs. Despite their national importance, these languages often struggle with limited resources, contributing to the challenges faced by students and lecturers alike.

Finally, the study will explore the broader implications of using Kiswahili and Malagasy in higher education, including their impact on regional integration and cultural identity. "Language is a key factor in shaping regional cooperation and fostering a sense of shared identity among people from different countries" (Brock-Utne, 2000). In East and Southern Africa, Kiswahili has the potential to serve as a unifying language across the region, while Malagasy plays a crucial role in preserving the cultural heritage of Madagascar. By investigating these languages in the context of higher education, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on language, education, and identity in Africa, offering valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and linguists working in the region.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to examine the role of Kiswahili and Malagasy in education within Tanzania and Madagascar. The focus was on understanding the linguistic, cultural, and educational significance of these languages in higher education

contexts. The study aimed to capture the perspectives of university students and lecturers who are directly involved in the teaching and learning of Kiswahili and Malagasy, as their insights were considered vital for the study.

To gather data, a purposive sampling technique was used to select 30 key informants, including 25 students and 5 lecturers from each of the two countries. In Tanzania, participants were drawn from institutions where Kiswahili is taught, while in Madagascar, participants were selected from universities offering Malagasy language programs. The sample was carefully chosen based on participants' involvement in Kiswahili and Malagasy education at the university level. The lecturers were selected based on their expertise in teaching these languages, and the students were chosen for their active engagement in learning them.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, allowing for open-ended responses that enabled the participants to express their views and experiences in depth. The interviews were carried out either in person or online, depending on the participants' availability and location. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes to an hour, and all interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. This approach ensured that participants had the freedom to discuss their perspectives while providing the researcher with rich, qualitative data.

The data was then analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved transcribing the recorded interviews, identifying recurring themes, and organizing the data into meaningful categories. Thematic analysis allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the central role of Kiswahili and Malagasy in educational settings, including how these languages contribute to knowledge dissemination and cultural identity. The findings were categorized around key themes that emerged from the interviews, providing insights into the challenges and opportunities these languages present in higher education.

Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring that they were fully aware of the study's purpose and how their data would be used. Participants were assured of their confidentiality, and it was made clear that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequence. The ethical framework ensured that the study adhered to the highest standards of research integrity while maintaining respect for the participants' rights and privacy.

RESULTS

The results of this study reveal significant insights into the role of Kiswahili and Malagasy in higher education settings in Tanzania and Madagascar, highlighting the multifaceted relationship between language, education, and cultural identity. The findings demonstrate that both Kiswahili and Malagasy are not only pivotal in fostering communication within their respective countries but also contribute to the preservation and promotion of national identities.

In Tanzania, Kiswahili is overwhelmingly seen by students and lecturers as a unifying force that transcends ethnic divisions, which is reflected in the country's educational policies. Many participants expressed that Kiswahili plays a central role in bridging communication gaps between diverse ethnic groups, as it is a lingua franca used by people from different linguistic backgrounds. However, challenges remain, particularly in the higher education sector, where there is a clear preference for English in technical and scientific fields. While Kiswahili is widely regarded as a symbol of national identity and pride, there are concerns about its limited use in advanced academic contexts, where it is often replaced by English due to global academic trends. This creates a tension between maintaining Kiswahili's role in education and meeting the demands of international scholarship. Students noted that while Kiswahili allows them to better grasp foundational knowledge, the transition to English in higher education often leads to difficulties in academic performance, especially in specialized disciplines.

In Madagascar, the use of Malagasy in education is also crucial for national identity, but it faces significant challenges due to the historical and continuing dominance of French. Malagasy is widely spoken in the country, and it holds deep cultural significance for students and educators alike. However, French increasingly becomes the primary medium of instruction, which many participants felt undermines the potential of Malagasy as a tool for academic success. Despite this, Malagasy remains an important aspect of cultural identity, with both students and educators expressing that it is essential for preserving national heritage. The results suggest that while Malagasy's role in education fosters a sense of belonging and cultural continuity, its limited use reflects broader socio-political challenges related to colonial legacy and language policy.

The perceptions of students and lecturers in both Tanzania and Madagascar reveal a complex understanding of language in education. In Tanzania, students and lecturers expressed strong support for Kiswahili as a medium of instruction, particularly in fostering inclusivity and ensuring accessibility to education for people from various linguistic backgrounds. However, the limited resources available for teaching Kiswahili at higher levels, such as textbooks and academic papers, was a concern for many participants. Similarly, in Madagascar, while there is a general sense of pride in Malagasy, lecturers expressed frustration with the lack of academic resources in the language, which hindered its effective use in higher education. For both groups, language choice was often seen as integral to both academic success and a broader sense of national identity. Yet, students from both countries highlighted the challenges they face when navigating between the national languages and the international lingua franca, especially in the context of globalized academia.

In terms of the impact of language choice on academic success and cultural identity, the results suggest that Kiswahili and Malagasy contribute significantly to students'

connection to their cultural roots, but also pose challenges in academic achievement. In Tanzania, students expressed that Kiswahili facilitates their learning process by enabling them to engage with content in a language they are fluent in, fostering a sense of cultural pride. However, the transition to English in higher education creates a barrier for many, especially in scientific disciplines where Kiswahili is less commonly used. In Madagascar, while Malagasy helps students maintain their cultural identity, the dominance of French as a medium of instruction in education creates a disconnect, making it difficult for students to fully engage with the curriculum. Both Kiswahili and Malagasy are viewed as crucial for personal and national identity, but students feel that their academic potential is often limited by the linguistic divide between local languages and the global language of education.

Overall, the results of this study emphasize the dual role of Kiswahili and Malagasy in education as both cultural symbols and practical tools for communication and learning. While they significantly contribute to national identity and cultural continuity, the challenges surrounding their use in higher education highlight the need for more robust language policies and resource allocation to support these languages in academic settings. In both Tanzania and Madagascar, there is a clear recognition that local languages must be strengthened and better integrated into higher education to ensure academic success and preserve cultural heritage.

DISCUSSION

The Linguistic Landscape of East and Southern Africa: The Role of Kiswahili and Malagasy

The linguistic landscape of East and Southern Africa is defined by a rich diversity of languages, where Kiswahili and Malagasy stand as significant linguistic pillars in their respective regions (Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir, 2020). Kiswahili has been historically used as a lingua franca in East Africa, particularly in Tanzania, Kenya, and parts of Uganda. Its role extends beyond mere communication, having become a symbol of national unity and cultural integration (Msuya, 2020). The widespread adoption of Kiswahili in Tanzania as the national language, as well as its inclusion in the East African Community (EAC), exemplifies its importance as both a unifying tool and a vehicle for education and development. In contrast, Malagasy is the official language of Madagascar, reflecting the island's unique cultural identity. Although an Austronesian language, Malagasy is deeply embedded in the social fabric of the Malagasy people, linking various ethnic groups and acting as a symbol of national heritage (Augustin & Emynorane, 2024).

In addition to its role in communication, Kiswahili's prominence in East Africa can also be seen in the growing influence it has on regional integration. As the lingua franca of the EAC, Kiswahili facilitates cross-border communication, economic exchanges, and cultural exchanges among the member states (Bogumil & Lee, 2021). Its influence stretches beyond national borders, influencing social and political landscapes throughout the region.

The use of Kiswahili in higher education has been central to shaping the intellectual discourse in Tanzania, where it serves not only as a medium of instruction but also as a bridge between local dialects and the global academic community. Similarly, Malagasy's role in Madagascar is paramount in fostering a sense of belonging and national pride (Emynorane et al., 2024). Despite the prominence of French in the country's colonial history, Malagasy remains the core language through which the people of Madagascar express their history, literature, and daily life, serving as a vehicle for local knowledge and cultural continuity.

However, the prominence of Kiswahili and Malagasy in their respective regions also faces significant challenges. While Kiswahili has been successfully integrated into educational systems in Tanzania, its role in more specialized fields like science and technology often faces competition from global languages such as English (Swilla, 2009). In Madagascar, although Malagasy is entrenched as the primary language of communication in rural areas, its use in formal education, particularly at the higher levels, is constrained by the dominance of French (Augustin & Emynorane, 2024). This dual-language system can create tension, particularly when students and educators must navigate between Malagasy and French. Moreover, there is an ongoing need for more institutional support to ensure the development of academic resources in Kiswahili and Malagasy. For both languages, their integration into the modern educational and economic systems remains a work in progress, as they continue to compete with global languages in academic and professional spheres.

Language Policies and Education Systems: Challenges and Opportunities

Language policies in East and Southern Africa have had a profound impact on education systems, often reflecting the complex historical and sociopolitical dynamics of the region (Batibo, 1990). In both Tanzania and Madagascar, language policies are central to shaping the educational experiences of students. In Tanzania, Kiswahili has been designated as the official language and used as a medium of instruction in primary and secondary schools (Muneja, 2015). This decision was made with the aim of providing greater accessibility to education across the country's diverse ethnic groups. However, despite Kiswahili's role in promoting inclusivity, the challenge remains in higher education, where English has become the primary medium of instruction. This shift creates a gap, as students who are fluent in Kiswahili may struggle with academic content in English, leading to disparities in educational outcomes (Muneja, 2015). The challenge lies in balancing the use of Kiswahili with the need to incorporate English, which is essential for access to global knowledge and participation in international academic discourse.

In Madagascar, the language policy has similarly complicated the educational landscape. Despite that Malagasy is the official language of Madagascar, French becomes the dominant language in most academic settings, a legacy of the country's colonial past (Augustin & Emynorane, 2024). This bilingual system has created barriers for students who

are not equally proficient in both Malagasy and French, affecting their academic performance and limiting opportunities for those who do not have access to French-language resources. Moreover, the lack of academic materials in Malagasy at the higher education level presents a significant challenge (Raselimo, 2020). In this context, the language policy reflects broader issues of equity and social stratification, where access to education in French may serve as a form of social exclusion for those from rural areas who may not be as fluent in the language.

Despite these challenges, there are several opportunities to improve language policies and education systems in both countries (Roy-Campbell, 2001). One such opportunity is the development of resources in Kiswahili and Malagasy to enhance the academic experience for students. In Tanzania, there has been growing recognition of the need to strengthen the use of Kiswahili in higher education, including the creation of more academic publications, textbooks, and research materials in Kiswahili (Mulokozi, 2003). Similarly, in Madagascar, there is a push to develop more educational resources in Malagasy, which would enable students to continue their academic journey in a language they are most comfortable with. Furthermore, the increasing importance of multilingualism in the globalized world presents an opportunity to incorporate a more diverse linguistic approach in the education system, fostering better linguistic and cultural integration. Both countries could benefit from an education policy that recognizes the role of local languages in supporting academic success while also promoting proficiency in global languages like English and French.

Perceptions of Students and Educators: Insights from Key Informants

The perceptions of students and educators regarding language use in education are shaped by both personal experiences and broader socio-political dynamics (Emynorane et al., 2024). In Tanzania, students generally perceive Kiswahili as a critical tool for academic success, particularly in the early stages of their education. They value its role in making learning more accessible and relatable, as it allows them to engage with content in their mother tongue (Mulokozi, 2003). However, as students advance to higher education, their perceptions shift. Many students and educators alike expressed concerns about the limited academic resources available in Kiswahili, particularly in specialized subjects such as science and technology. While Kiswahili serves as an accessible medium of instruction, students noted that their academic performance often suffers when they transition to English in advanced courses (Barrett, 2024). Educators also highlighted the challenge of teaching specialized content in Kiswahili due to the lack of terminology and academic materials, which can hinder the development of students' critical thinking and analytical skills.

In Madagascar, students and educators experience a similar dynamic, where Malagasy is seen as essential for fostering a strong sense of cultural identity and community. Students expressed pride in learning in Malagasy, particularly in primary and secondary education, where they felt connected to their cultural heritage (Augustin & Emynorane, 2024). However,

once they progress to higher education, perceptions become more complicated. French dominates at the higher levels of education, and many students, especially from rural areas, feel disadvantaged by their limited proficiency in French (Raselimo, 2020). Educators also voiced concerns about the disconnect between the language of instruction and students' linguistic capabilities. While they recognized the importance of Malagasy in preserving cultural identity, they acknowledged that the prevalence of French in higher education creates a barrier that limits students' ability to fully engage with academic content. This shift often leads to a sense of alienation and frustration among students, who struggle to adapt to the demands of academic French.

Interestingly, both Tanzanian and Malagasy students expressed a desire for greater integration of their respective local languages in higher education, but with some reservations. Tanzanian students called for increased academic resources in Kiswahili to enhance their understanding of complex subjects in their native language (Kiango, 2005). They argued that this would allow them to maintain their connection to the language while pursuing academic excellence. Similarly, Malagasy students advocated for more bilingual educational materials that would facilitate the transition between Malagasy and French, promoting better comprehension and academic performance. Educators, too, supported these calls, emphasizing that a multilingual approach where Kiswahili and Malagasy are reinforced in higher education would not only help students perform better academically but also strengthen their cultural ties. However, both students and educators acknowledged that such changes would require significant investments in resources and a shift in national language policies to truly realize the potential of these languages in higher education.

The Impact of Language Choice on Academic Success and Cultural Identity

The impact of language choice on academic success is particularly evident in regions where educational systems are shaped by both local and foreign languages. In Tanzania, the use of Kiswahili as the primary language of instruction is expected to play a significant role in facilitating academic engagement and understanding. Students will be generally able to grasp fundamental concepts more effectively when taught in Kiswahili, as it aligns with their everyday language. However, the use of English in education often creates a cognitive and linguistic gap. Students find it difficult to apply complex academic concepts in a second language, which affects their academic performance. As a result, academic success is often influenced not only by students' intellectual abilities but also by their fluency in the language of instruction (Mazrui, 1997). This creates a situation where language proficiency becomes an additional barrier to success, particularly for students who excel in Kiswahili but struggle with English (Ferguson, 2006).

Similarly, in Madagascar, the dominance of French in education presents a dual challenge for students. Although Malagasy fosters a sense of cultural identity and belonging,

students are often forced to rely on French, which many may not be proficient in, especially those from rural areas (Kiango, 2005). This linguistic divide results in academic challenges, as students may struggle to express their thoughts and comprehend complex subject matter in French. This gap in language proficiency can hinder students' ability to achieve their full academic potential, leading to lower academic performance and, in some cases, feelings of inadequacy. The challenge is particularly acute in the sciences and technical fields, where French is often the language of instruction and research.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study underscores the crucial role that Kiswahili and Malagasy play in shaping educational outcomes and cultural identity in Tanzania and Madagascar. Both languages serve as significant vehicles for communication and national identity, but their use in education presents distinct challenges. The findings of this study highlight the urgent need for language policies that support the integration of Kiswahili and Malagasy in education to bridge these gaps and enhance academic success. Strengthening these languages in academic settings would contribute to preserving cultural heritage while ensuring that students are equipped with the necessary skills to succeed in a globalized world. Both Tanzania and Madagascar would benefit from developing more educational resources in Kiswahili and Malagasy and implementing multilingual education strategies to support their students. Consequently, these countries can foster greater inclusivity, promote academic excellence, and reinforce cultural pride among their students, ensuring that language remains a tool for empowerment rather than a barrier to success.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the results, it is recommended that the government and curriculum specialists in both Tanzania and Madagascar prioritize the development and integration of Kiswahili and Malagasy into the education curricula to address the current linguistic challenges. This can be achieved by creating more academic resources, textbooks, and research materials in these languages, particularly for specialized fields like science and technology. Furthermore, both nations should invest in training educators to effectively teach in these languages at advanced levels, while also supporting multilingual education policies that balance local languages with global languages like English and French.

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