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# The Fate of English

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DONALD STUART

*Is it wanted or not wanted?*

IS IT POSSIBLE to make a guess at how much English will be spoken at the end of this century in the great curve of Africa from Nairobi to Cape Town?

The question and the answer are both of course political. If you are an inhabitant of this part of Africa the question watches you from every point—the hospital ward, the school classroom, the charge office of the police station, the visitor's gallery of the legislative chamber. The answer is shaping itself while you make use of the newspaper or the radio to measure the temperature of the United States or of Russia.

However, it is the habit of politicians today to have their experts—even if they usually appear to act without them. At the present time, under double pressure of American anti-communism and the British fear that the whole of her old colonial world may be lost to Europe, there is some stiff thinking being done by administrators and linguists alike on the language policies of Africa. At Makerere College in Uganda last year there was a Commonwealth conference on the teaching of English as a second language, at which in addition to delegates from commonwealth countries as remote as Sarawak and New Zealand there were present five observers from the United States, as well as a French representative of UNESCO.

One of the papers circulated before this Conference was by J. R. Firth who stood until he died in 1960 at the growing point in the British philosophy of language, which he had reached from making a wide study of languages, chiefly of Asia. He argued that since the future of so great a part of the world rested upon communication through English there was now no time for shoring up a single, reserved variety of it—the spoken English of southern England known as “received”. He argued that English was being “nationalised, localised and democratised abroad”, and wherever it could be seen to have seeded itself the new growth should be encouraged to root, blossom and spread in its own way.

Firth said nothing particular in praise of higher studies in English, of the study of English Literature which has been one of the main suspension points of each new colonial university, and has so seeped through the schools of the commonwealth that we may read of children in junior classes in Ceylon having difficulty in

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knowing which words in Tennyson's “Lady of Shalott” to spell with a capital letter. He was thinking, on the contrary, of how deep into each people English was being spoken. He believed that in the same way as in England since the last war regional speech has claimed its rights in the schools and among the educated, so over the commonwealth diverse forms of speech and even of writing would in the end force our recognition. Our immediate and urgent concern should be to set about giving each form, as it were, its title by describing it. At bottom this is also the view of Michael West, who is the author of a well-known rudimentary vocabulary of about 1,200 words, a rival to Basic English, who holds that upon this there could be built, in present-day India, special limited vocabularies for medicine, agriculture and engineering. The view is that the only people in India needing to know English are in the professional and technical classes. Some older Indians will sorrow over the passing of that firm and subtle grasp which produced scholars and poets, like Nehru himself, who were able to interpret the whole world to India and the whole of India to the world. These people will go. English is only the third language in India now, with Hindi as the second. In Ceylon English is no longer the medium of instruction, even in the two universities.

How do we stand in Africa? Leaving out the English-speaking populations of Kenya, the Rhodesias and South Africa, it is only in West Africa, in the province of Buganda in Uganda, and in some of the towns of South Africa that English comes near to being the daily language of the African or other non-English people. Varieties in West Africa range from the Creolese of Sierra Leone where interpreters are needed for it in the courts, to what is often called “pidgin”, which in the coastal cities of Nigeria supports many newspapers and small presses. This language is the basis of such writings as Amos Tutuola's novels. The speech of West Africa is said by Peter Strevens, who spent some years studying it, to be of two kinds, the first being that of the few highly educated who have studied and lived in England—and it is indistinguishable from “received” pronunciation; while the second is that spoken by educated West Africans:

The most interesting fact about Educated African pronunciation of English is the way in which it differs from the general African pronunciation. It contains a larger number of vowels, diphthongs and consonants, it contains a stress-system, and it contains a system of intonation. It corresponds exactly to Educated Canadian and Australian . . . in that it is clearly identified with an area of the world, Africa, but is completely intelligible to speakers of other educated dialects. Finally, it is intelligible to speakers of the local dialects of English in Africa.

Strevens, however, adds a further item to description, which is of the first importance: he calls such a pronunciation “independent”, since it belongs recognisably to the area in which it is spoken, while in other parts of Africa where the tradition of English has been short or the numbers of the educated small, there is nothing for educated speakers to do but follow some independent model, either “Received”, or American, or West African.

East Africa is in quite a different position. It is a stage or two earlier in the same course of change. But in addition to this, and much more important, it has

Swahili, an old language taken up by the British and used in the administration throughout Tanganyika and Kenya. This Bantu language grew up on the coast in two forms, that of Mombasa and that of Zanzibar, the latter being the one which has crept far into the Congo where it goes by the name of Kingwana. John Allen, the Chairman of the East African Swahili Committee, says that it is still spreading, and actively: it has reached Kismayu in the North, and in the South as far as Ibo, well down the Portuguese coast; to Stanleyville in the upper Congo and "deep into Rhodesia and Nyasaland."

Any person, therefore, who wishes to follow African politics other than purely local politics requires an adequate knowledge of Swahili. Even if he knows English or French but wishes to discuss public affairs with others who do not, he must use Swahili.

In the professions ignorance of Swahili is a serious handicap. I have repeatedly had to interpret between doctor and patient, advocate and client, etc., or to explain to the people what a team of scientists is doing. No professional man can know all the vernaculars with which he is likely to come in contact and sufficient Swahili is vital to any such person who is either liable to transfer from one vernacular area to another, or in the course of his work likely to meet persons from other areas who cannot speak English (or French).

It is even useful to those who do already have English:

It should be observed that when two highly educated Africans of different tribes meet, they converse in English—so long as the subject is fairly academic. When the subject touches the emotions it is more than likely that they will slip into Swahili.

In Uganda—even in the vernacular stronghold of Buganda itself, where the police now use it—Swahili is gaining ground. It has had varied fortunes in Kenya where it has long been used in the administration and as the medium in primary schools, but was for long resented by, amongst others, the Kikuyu. Today, however, the drive towards independence is leading Africans in Kenya to desire it in the same measure as in Tanganyika. An educated Kenyan will say that this, not English, is the future language of his country.

In Tanganyika English is still the language of the legislature, but the current can be felt in the recent decision of the Town Council of Dar es Salaam to use Swahili. Swahili literature is old, and it includes much poetry. If it is accepted that it still cannot fill a university course, it is argued that in order to maintain quality and establish correctness it should be taught in all standards at school. One student of Makerere College, reading for an Honours degree in English, when visiting Leopoldville on a student mission a year or two ago, was surprised that he could converse with most of the delegates in Swahili. He claimed that there was no subject they were unable to talk about, though when pressed he conceded that this was true only along the more or less loose lines of conversation. Swahili is going

to be passionately advocated, and scholars, including international linguists, are going to be invited to make it grow rapidly both outwards and upwards by grafting and by injecting and by prescribing for it diets and tonics. Words may very well be taken in from English: but they may equally be borrowed from Indian languages, Arabic, or Russian. What makes Swahili very different from the Hausa of Northern Nigeria is that it is a currency ready to hand which can be used to pay for the building of a national myth.

Will English after this be wanted; and can it serve a purpose?

In East Africa at the present moment English is the painstaking accomplishment of the very few who have been through the secondary or the high school. It is true that in Uganda one can usually find someone in a country place to talk to about the crops or the roads: he will probably turn out to be a headman or a shop-keeper or a blacksmith. In Buganda one may very well find oneself while pausing at a petrol pump chatting to a man who is able to read a newspaper in English and listen to the BBC. His English may be no poorer for this purpose, and just as easy to follow, as what could be heard in a small English village. I was once given a long account by a young tax-collector in Bugisu at the foot of Mount Elgon of how he was expected to squeeze local taxes from unwilling smallholders who, as I could see all about me, might well be rich, but who, he said, lied to him and claimed to be penniless. What, I asked, did he do about that. "I slap them," he said. This was in 1959 shortly before the serious tax riots in the next district of Bukedi. I believe English used in a casual conversation in this way would be rare outside Uganda.

The English overheard between schoolboys or students in Kampala is deliberate and grammatical, although it is recognisably African in its failure to distinguish stressed from unstressed syllables, as well as in its confined range of vowels and its total want of diphthongs. This kind of English one used to hear in a Magistrate's Court or between country schoolmasters in the Ciskei. It is to be heard in an office or in a hotel lounge in Nairobi. It is not free enough to be "independent" according to Strevens's definition. W. G. Bowman, a teacher with fifteen years' experience in Uganda and the coastal strip of Kenya remarked in 1960 that ungrammatical conversations would be welcome if you could find them, if only because they would prove English to be a common language. They are not found. Throughout Kenya and Tanganyika English lives in the top of a long jar, clinging like a vapour to the stopper.

As the East African countries set out upon their independence there will be less desire for English. Even those who have sought single-mindedly for English

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culture and "received" speech will become less thorough, less convinced. It is not unknown in Africa for men and women through altered circumstances to lose the power of expression in a language they once used for all their thinking. The point of greatest coolness seems to be in the twenty to fifty years after independence has been won—as it was in the United States at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

English is going to become, as in India, though with still flimsier resources, the third language in East Africa. If this prospect can be perceived clearly, and acknowledged generally, much soul-searching and needless theorising may be saved. In the villages for many years to come, it may be the vernacular for daily matters; in the shop, the co-operative shed, the law court, dispensary and railway station it will be Swahili; Swahili ever creeping upwards as it finds new terms and grammatical structures. Finally English, which has been introduced and taught vigorously in the secondary school, may be accepted for what it rightly must continue to be, the technical and international language. It will be needed in communicating with West African countries as much as with America and India. One grows afraid that if English is not thought of in an unpretentious way as the useful solvent, it may be rejected. We are covering the future with mist if we English-speakers for our own sakes long for English in these parts of Africa.

It seems as if the want of a common African language in the Rhodesias may make English more acceptable there; but much must depend on whether the mood of co-operation can be kept between black and white. If the African grows exasperated he may seek Swahili, even in Rhodesia—and this might not be an unhappy solution. He may even return to the vernacular, which would be the end of his political development.

Only in South Africa, up till now, has the vernacular been officially offered as the peaceable way. Before the Nationalist Government came to power well-intentioned scientists and educators, even from outside the continent, were encouraging Africans to return to their tribal languages. Afrikaner nationalists saw in this an opportunity to weaken the hold of the English missionary and of the overseas press. The policy has the great attraction to many Africans of conserving tribal ways; but this is done at the expense of the kind of broader loyalty which Swahili may hope to encourage further north. It is true that any one of the four main African languages of South Africa has been longer in writing and used for a greater variety of purposes than most East African vernaculars. But who will dare to promote any one of them as the lingua franca? It is unlikely that either the African himself or the Afrikaner has a strong wish to see Afrikaans universally used. Is English, possessing in South Africa the same advantages as a third, and international, language as it possesses elsewhere, welcome enough to the African peoples to serve them as a second language as well? This will be worked out by those who live in South Africa during the coming decades. Africans will certainly turn more and more to the north while they are searching for their solution. ●

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## Bechuanaland and South Africa

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E. R. WATTS

RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE Bechuanaland Protectorate has recently been assumed by the British Colonial Office and in the future the territory is to be developed as a self-contained political and economic unit. It is therefore timely to consider how this decision will affect relations between Bechuanaland and South Africa. Bechuanaland has, since its establishment as a British Protectorate in 1895, been closely linked with South Africa. Indeed until quite recently the territory has been subjected to threats of incorporation and only since the departure of South Africa from the Commonwealth has this ceased to be a real possibility. The capital, Mafeking, is still inside the Republic but the administration is being moved in stages to Gaborone. Another important link is the Mafeking to Bulawayo railway which was built around the boundaries of the Transvaal shortly before the Boer War. This railway is still the only direct rail connection between South Africa and the north and it is of great economic importance to both the Republic and the Federation.

Unlike the other High Commission Territories of Swaziland and Basutoland, Bechuanaland has strong links with other countries. To the north it is bordered by the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. Federal currency is accepted in the territory and there are important trading links particularly with the Francistown and Chobe areas. To the west Bechuanaland is bordered by South West Africa and the Ghanzi District obtains all its supplies through Windhoek and Gobabis. Assuming that South West Africa is freed before the inevitable collapse of the Republic then an association between the two territories is likely. Such an association would make Bechuanaland into a viable economic unit which she is certainly not at present. She would then have direct access to the sea and would no longer be dependent on South African goodwill. The South West African Peoples Party are known to be in favour of such a link.

Basutoland is bound by its geographical position to stay within the orbit of the Republic while Swaziland is sandwiched between the Republic and Portuguese East Africa and is bound to stay on good terms with both. Of the three territories Bechuanaland has the greatest chance of pursuing a relatively independent future. Economic independence cannot be achieved until the Customs Agreement of 1910 has been revoked. By this agreement Bechuanaland has been annually receiving .027622 per cent of the customs collected by the South African Government. Since the Nationalist Government has been pursuing a policy of drastically

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