CANCELLED: ”F*ck Kiswahili, it never helped anyone”: Google Translate, linguistic peripheralism, and the economics of language empowerment in East Africa

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This paper explores East African understandings of the online service Google Translate Swahili, as emblematic of contemporary social and economic inequalities. Globally, Google Translate services have been widely welcomed as heralding language empowerment, yet since the introduction of Google Translate Swahili in 2009, the East African blogosphere has been alive with discussions to the contrary. While there is a consensus that the translations result in Kiswahili kibovu, or ‘rotten Swahili’, what is it issue instead is the question of who benefits from the service, a concern that reflects variable East African sensitivities to regional, continental, and global hierarchies in which linguistic and economic resources are intimately linked.

In this paper I analyze recent cases from East African electronic media. For example, an online discussion about Google Translate Swahili devolves into a nationalistic debate between Tanzanians and Kenyans. Tanzanians argue that the poor translation is due to Kenyans having done it and benefitted financially over them yet again, while Kenyans retort that Tanzanians worry too much about a language that ’has never helped anyone’. In another example, a Tanzanian blogger re-posts someone’s Facebook entry that presents a get-rich-quick scheme in Kiswahili kibovu. He states that the post’s author used Google Translate Swahili to subject unworldly Tanzanians to West African online fraud. Meanwhile, a Kenyan blogger blames the low quality of the service on his belief that the program writers live in Silicon Valley and did not consult – or pay – East Africans in its development.

Consideration of these examples draws on Heller’s (2010) work on language as a resource, Blommaert’s (2010) sociolinguistics of globalization, and studies of language ideologies in East Africa (e.g., Billings 2013). The analysis concludes that a scholarly understanding of language empowerment must consider local interpretations of center-periphery socioeconomic relationships that frame conceptions of linguistic opportunity.

Keywords: language empowerment, global peripheries, technology.