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Sabrina Billings, *Language, Globalization and the Making of a Tanzanian Beauty Queen*, Bristol, Multilingual Matters, 2013, pp. 222

Throughout the postcolonial world, the position of English, its relation with local *linguae francae*, its discursive ramifications and its steep social repercussions constitute a complex area, for which we need new, interdisciplinary critical tools that benefit from disciplines as diverse as applied linguistics, anthropology and postcolonial studies. As matter of fact, it is no longer possible to apply old-fashioned, schematic approaches to a reality which intersects and condenses a variety of discourses, whose cultural productions are habitually affected by processes of globalization. Sabrina Billings' well-documented and innovative book *Language, Globalization and the Making of a Tanzanian Beauty Queen* (2013) focuses on the context of Tanzania and analyses a very specific domain, the world of beauty queen pageants, to explore the multiple realisations of language(s) – with the pregnant tension opposing English and Swahili, the two official languages of the country – along with its implications, imaginings and transformations. Theoretically sound and convincingly articulated, the book adopts, adapts and revises a range of possible approaches from many disciplines such as sociolinguistics, anthropology, gender studies, social studies, pragmatics, which are applied to various kinds of data, spanning from fieldwork in different research periods in the area to published sources and online materials. The author also provides some insightful considerations about the values, meanings and contradictions that seem to characterise the complicated milieu of Tanzanian beauty queen contests, which in reality are useful for understanding other dimensions too, such as the educational environment and the effectiveness of its didactic policies, the present-day role of the woman and the question of gender, or the function of English as a linguistic capital, typically working at the expense of vernacular languages.

The author elaborates a rich theoretical framework following important scholars in various fields (e.g. Hymes, Appadurai, Pennycook, Silverstein amongst others), and in particular she draws from Blommaert's *The Sociolinguistics of Globalization* (2010) significant notions such as scales, indexicality, truncated multilingualism and mobility that can be useful in the investigation of a context in which many forces are at work. Although contestants are given the possibility of choosing either English or Swahili during their self-presentations and speeches onstage, unsurprisingly covert prestige, indexical projection and symbolic value turn the former into a sort of

linguistic capital, which is also seen as a device to obtain well-paid jobs, to move up the social ladder or even to leave Tanzania and access global markets and opportunities. Therefore, Billings interprets the sphere of language as a resource whose pragmatic power does generate effects and contribute to the shaping of lives for people those young women who struggle to master proper linguistic skills in a multicultural setting against the backdrop of globalization. In Billings' words, "contestants manipulate linguistic (and other) tools to perform specific personae and achieve particular goals on stage as part of the evaluative process" (p. 20) and in so doing they handle a variety of strategies which the author studies along ethnomethodological lines, for example by considering body and fashion discourses and the typical features that index beauty, elegance, health and other values. The colour of the skin for instance is expected to be clear, "without blemishes or signs of chemically lightening" (p. 95) and this tendency can be found in other postcolonial contexts too, for example in India where the adjective 'weatish' is used in matrimonial advertisements. The choice for clothes and attires too must be considered very carefully as they may carry particular meanings, and here Billings considers the question of how ethnic dresses (for example the Masai costume) can lead contestants to be either praised or ridiculed, and in this case they are labelled *washamba* ('country pumpkins', p. 114). Therefore, building up personality and appearance – a form of stratified, polyvalent cultural *habitus* – is a complex operation orchestrating many different components linked to both local culture and global cosmopolitanism.

The presence of English of course is tied to a colonial past, but its current role is also determined by its world position of power and predominance, and in fact English is common in everyday life in Tanzania, although often it emerges in non-standard versions, in informal contexts and structures, such as hip-hop lyrics, advertising, magazines and other genres. Billings also employs the notion of multivocality (cited from Higgins' *English as a Local Language Postcolonial Identities and Multilingual Practices*, 2009, and originally coined by Mikhail Bakhtin) to approach the local realisations of a global type of performance (the beauty contest) since "as commodities, ideas, people and language move through space and time, their significance and substance get reworked into new categories of meaning" (p. 11). In this light, what emerges concerns the manifold interplay and frictions of sociocultural phenomena, which often have to face the weight of disparity and unavailability of welfare, as it frequently occurs in postcolonial countries.

However, the conflict engaging English and Swahili has another consequence, namely it further marginalises and downgrades vernacular languages, which govern communication in rural areas. In urban contexts, English is seen as the language of modernity, success and fulfilment whilst Swahili tends to represent identity and roots, but local languages are not encouraged, and on the contrary are confined to specific geographical areas, such as the countryside. Ethnic languages pertain to certain

domains only, such as family relations, and considering the fragmentariness of the sociolinguistic landscape of the country it is true that they may even generate problems of unintelligibility. Billings affirms that “in urban Tanzania, ethnic languages do not hold a visible place, and at pageants – a form of urban entertainment orienting towards cosmopolitan (English-linked) identities and nationalist (Swahili-linked) agendas – it is perhaps expected that markers of ethnicity, and especially ethnic languages, should not play a prominent role” (p. 156). Therefore, they do not participate in the cultural and social processes that take place in and, to a certain extent, reshape contemporary Tanzania.

Billings’ empirical research was conducted in Tanzania in various periods between 2001 and 2007, and her fieldwork included attending beauty pageants, interviewing contestants, and gathering other types of materials and data. Observing and exploring the multilayered world of pageants, which embed language competence, identity manifestations, social and gender positions, but also the articulation of dreams, expectations and behaviours, Billings notices two peculiar intertwined elements in the mechanisms of the performance. The first is represented by the idea of confidence, which contestants deem as a fundamental value that they have to show when they are onstage in order to appeal to audiences and judges. The author explains the scope of confidence through a metasemiotic lens since it is a quality that structures linguistic and non-linguistic acts in an expressive ensemble. The vital importance of using a ‘pure’ register, i.e. a formal language (typically English) devoid of code-mixing, borrowing and interference from other languages, constitutes the second element, although actually the sense of *ufasaha* (‘purity of language’) or speaking in a *fasaha* (‘stylistically pure’) manner is not so widespread since code-switching is commonly practiced. Indeed, very frequently in order to prepare presentations and speeches contestants merely rely on memorisation techniques – normally implemented by education systems in many postcolonial contexts, in which learning by rote and drilling are methodological practices to inculcate formal, unattainable and probably inadequate language models – rather than developing effective fluency skills, which in many cases lead to poor performance and clumsy results. In stressing the perpetuation of certain schemes implemented and upheld by the school system and the general social perceptions, Billings argues that “we see the linguistic and ideological model of *fasaha* English emerging in school and reappearing on the pageant stage” (p. 145). In this, the ideological dimension of English language education and language use appears with its inner contradictions and unsolved questions.

However, the author does not just wish to denounce the concatenation of causes operating in this milieu that determine social conditions of discrimination, unfairness and rigidity, but she also points out the dynamicity of those subjects (in this case, young women) who invent new strategies for

identity expression and strive to come to terms with their surrounding dire reality in their *kutafuta maisha* ('looking for life' p. 180) plans. In this intermingled landscape, located on the edge between the postcolonial periphery and the globalising trends, mobility is the key term as it configures flows, transformations and modalities of different nature, and thus according to Billings "not only must we steer clear of a view of language as static, predetermined clusters of grammar, phonology and words, but we must also avoid ones that take their indexicalities as static and predetermined" (p. 12). Ultimately, the book charts new cultural terrains and expands our understanding of Tanzania as a specific postcolonial scenario rich in layers of meanings, histories and discourses.