# Uglish: the Unavoidable Dialect. A Passage from British English to Ugandan English from a Sociolinguistic and Historical Perspective

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Pearl of Africa
Heart of this suckling continent
Star of this ravaged haven
Switzerland of mountainous glory!

Ocean of inexhaustible resources,
Cradle of the rushing Nile
Where rain and shine
Are locked in a passionate embrace.
Oh, seat of the crowned crested crane
How you suffuse me with beauty![1]

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The language of Shakespeare enjoyed different statuses, during the four centuries of use on African land, their nature depending on the country and the time when English was used. Be it official language, lingua franca, language of the elite, foreign or even mother tongue, English managed to survive in a multilingual society.

Uganda[2], once described by Winston Churchill as the Pearl of Africa, is, just like the other Sub-Saharan African countries, a multi-ethnic[3], multicultural and multilingual space. According to a study conducted by the *World Linguistic Society*, it is the best speaking English country in Africa, followed by Zambia, South Africa and Kenya. Uganda is situated in East Africa on a territory that shelters free-standing volcanic mountains, semi-arid plains, the Great African Lakes and the Nile

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[1] Nalugwa Kiguli 1998: 2.

[2] The country derives its name from one of its regions, *Buganda* (home to native speakers of Luganda, located in the Central region of the country), where the British established their base first before moving to other parts that constitute present-day Uganda. At Ugandan English, challenges to, and food for, current theories, Meierkord, Isingoma et alii 2016: 1; for further information related to Uganda's history, see Briggs, Roberts 2013: 5–26.

[3] See the article Saudah Namyalo, Bebwa Isingoma and Christiane Meierkord, "Towards assessing the space of English in Uganda' s linguistic ecology", in Meierkord, Isingoma et alii 2016: 20–21. The distinct societies that constitute the Ugandan nation are usually classified according to linguistic similarities.



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basin[4], being surrounded by South Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

From 1894 until 1962, the kingdom of Buganda is a British protectorate and English, introduced to Uganda in the second half of the 19th century due to Christian missionaries, pioneers of formal education, serves as official language[5], used in administration, later on, being "associated with higher education, social status and prestige".

According to Christiane Meierkord who, in the article *A social history of English(es) in Uganda* (Meierkord, Isingoma et alii 2016: 51–75), mentions a first contact between British explorers and the Baganda tribe in 1875 – followed two years later by Christian Anglican missionaries – the first formal school was established by the missionaries of the Catholic White Fathers. The area had contact with English language also before the protectorate, due as already mentioned to missionaries, but also, to some British explorers: John H. Speke, in 1858, Sir David Livingstone, or Sir Henry Morton Stanley's expedition to Lake Victoria from 1874, when he visited King Mutesa I of Buganda. Sons of aristocrats and even Bantu princes were among the first to study the English language and British culture.

During the next two decades after the independence, the country's situation was critical. Tyranny and oppression; corruption, black-marketing and economic collapse; tribalism, violation of human rights and civil war – these were the epithets by means of which Uganda became known (Leggett 2001: 2). Things started to change for better only after 1986, when a new government was installed[6]. As far as it concerns the language, "education in local languages in Uganda was faced with such a myriad of problems, both practical and attitudinal, that it gradually broadened the path for the ascendancy of the English language" (Fishman, Conrad et alii 1996: 280).

*The Constitution of the Republic o Uganda* from 1995 and *The Constitution (Amendment) Act* from 2005 recognize 65 indigenous groups, among which, the Baganda is the largest and Luganda, the language spoken by this group, is the only indigenous language extensively used. Kabananukye and Kwagala (cf. Kabananuyka, Kwagala 2007) assume that each of these speaks a distinct language. Ladefoged (cf. Ladefoged, Glick et alii 1972) mentions 63 varieties of languages, choice probably based on affiliation to almost all the local ethnic groups. As Saudah Namyalo, Bebwa Isingoma and Christiane Meierkord point out in *Towards assessing the space of English in Uganda' s linguistic ecology*[7], there are contradictory dates about the number of

[4] In the Southern part of the country we can find Lake Victoria, half of it being situated on Uganda's territory. The estimated population according to the 2014 census surpasses 34 million. Although its surface equals that of the United Kingdom, Uganda is considered a small country among other African states.

[5] During the colonial era, the British educated only those they wanted to serve their interests, mainly to assert their authority outside the capital Kampala; or the Buganda kingdo, through what came to be known as Indirect Rule. […] The subimperialism and Ganda cultural chauvinism were resented by the people being administered. Wherever they went, Baganda insisted on the exclusive use of their language, Luganda. […] As a result, the language of the Baganda – Luganda – would later heavily influence the dialect and lexicon of the English spoken by Ugandans, or what is now informally known as Uglish, cf. Sabiti 2014: 7.

[6] For further information related to Uganda's history, see Briggs, Roberts 2013: 5–26, Karugire 1980 and Oliver, Fage 1988.

[7] Saudah Namyalo, Bebwa Isingoma and Christiane Meierkord, "Towards assessing the space of English in Uganda' s linguistic ecology", in Meierkord, Isingoma et alii 2016: 20–21.



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languages spoken in Uganda (varying from 35 to 65). In *Uglish: Dictionary of Ugandan English* (cf. Sabiti 2014), Bernard Sabiti talks about at least 43 languages which are spoken by the 65 ethnic groups. *The Ethnologue* mentions 41 living languages[8] just as *Ethnology*[9], some of them, especially those used by the same ethnic group, sharing common features. Thirty-five languages are approved in 2009 as languages of learning and teaching in primary education.

The Bantu languages are spoken in the South as well as in the West of the country, while the Nilotic languages are spoken in the North[10]. These two languages families are used on most of the space, both regionally and in terms of their speaker numbers. Central Sudanic languages occupy limited space towards the North-West and the three Kuliak languages small islands along the north-eastern border with Kenya[11].

In this context, it is worth pointing out two common aspects around which the notion of multilingualism is built in Sub-Saharan Africa: the difference between language and dialect, and the confusion between language and ethnic group. In *The Language Situation in Zambia*, Mubanga E. Kashoki and Michael Mann (Kashoki, Mann 2017: 22), bring into discussion the difference between these two. For example, a person speaking Tonga, Lenje and Ila, which are not labeled as being mutually unintelligible and are considered as members of the same language, is considered by linguists as speaker of only one language, while a Zambian using Bemba, Tonga and Lenje is believed to speak two languages.

Regardless how many languages Ugandans use, there is an obvious multilingualism, manifested either in the form of several languages used in the country or certain regions, or in that of a community's members' knowledge and use of more than one language. Most of Ugandans are bilinguals and, despite the lack of a "comprehensive data" related to L2 in Uganda, Kiswahili and Luganda are widely used as L2, followed by other indigenous languages such as Runyankore, Lango, Lusoga or Dhopadhola, also known as area languages[12].

Nowadays, Uganda has two official languages: English[13], and since July 2005, Swahili (Kiswahili) is also a constitutional but not a *de facto*, operational,

[8] Of these, 39 are indigenous and 2 are non-indigenous. Furthermore, 5 are institutional, 26 are developing, 6 are vigorous, 2 are in trouble, and 2 are dying, at https://www.ethnologue.com/country/ZM/languages (22.12.2017).

[9] https://www.ethnologue.com/country/ZM/languages (22.12.2017).

[10] For more about Uganda's local languages, also see Essay 2007: 12–19.

[11] Cf. Meierkord, Isingoma et alii 2016: 24–25. Lake Kyoga in central Uganda serves as a rough boundary between the Bantu-speaking south and the Nilotic and Central Sudanic language speakers in the north. Despite the popular image of north-versus-south in political affairs, however, this boundary runs roughly from northwest to southeast near the course of the Nile River, and many Ugandans live among people who speak other languages. Some sources describe regional variation in terms of physical characteristics, clothing, bodily adornments, and mannerisms, but others also claim that these differences are disappearing, at http://countrystudies.us/uganda/21.htm (22.12.2017).

[12] According to Bolton, Kachru 2006: 217 approximately 20% of Ugandans have Luganda as a mother tongue, 35 % use one of the four dialects of Runyakitara, and up to 30% speak one of the Lwo Languages. There are arguably 40 recognised Ugandan languages, some being used by only a few thousand speakers. Within this incredible diversity, not uncommon in many African countries, the colonial language is retained for official, administrative, legal and udicial purposes.

[13] "6. Official language. (1) The official language of Uganda is English. (2) Subject to clause (1) of this article, any other language may be used as a medium of instruction in schools or other educational



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official language. Within the numerous ethnic groups, shaped and divided by linguistic, economic, social and geographical differences, the pros and cons of English language's use, like in the case of other African countries, remain a reality.

English is the only language used in parliament, in the judiciary, in administration, legislature, as well as language of the elite, or lingua franca for those speaking different mother tongues. Although Uganda doesn't have a national language, Luganda strives for this status. For the educated inhabitants, English is seen as a national language and also shares with other local language the status of second language, especially among the elites. All in all, English in Uganda fulfills mainly the official, the international/regional, the educational and the school subject and literacy functions (Meierkord, Isingoma et alii 2016: 43).

Different from many other conceptualizations of English as lingua franca, it assumes that with every interaction there is a new scenario of speakers bringing different types of varieties, and thus, accents and pronunciation features into the interaction[14]. However, Luganda is also considered a lingua franca.

Just like in 1962 Robert Hall introduces the notion of a "life cycle of pidgin languages", Moag[15] talks, thirty years later, about a five stages life cycle of the new varieties of English, particularly Fiji English, that includes: transportation (English is brought for colonial administration, trade or evangelisation), indigenisation (the language's adaptation to the new, adopting environment which includes the transfer of local languages' features into English), expansion in use and function (refers to passing from a use of English by the elite with limited purposes, to a use by a larger population for multiple functions), institutionalization (a generalized use of English which becomes official language), restriction in use and function (the use of another language). Schmied (cf. Schmied 1991: 97) adapts this model to the African continent and drafts stages as: contact, institutionalization, expansion, succeeded by a "decision" stage: recognition followed by adoption, or repression leading to deinstitutionalization (the return to its status of foreign language, English losing its role in state institutions). On the other hand, Schneider identifies a Dynamic Model when it comes to new varieties of English, according to which "it is possible to identify a single, underlying, fundamentally uniform evolutionary process which can be observed, with modifications and adjustments to local circumstances" and which includes five stages: foundation, exonormative stabilization, nativization, endonormative stabilization and differentiation[16].

Kiswahili, on the other hand, is preferred in education, and is largely used by the military[17]. There is a certain stigma attached to the use of it in Uganda,

institutions or for legislative, administrative or judicial purposes as may be prescribed by law", according to *** *Constitution of the Republic of Uganda*, 1995, p. 29.

[14] See the article of Christiane Meierkord, "Diphthongs in Ugandan English. Evidence for and against variety status and interactions across Englishes", in Meierkord, Isingoma et alii 2016: 122.

[15] R.F. Moag, *The Life Cycle of Non-Native Englishes: a case study*, in Kachru 1992: 233–252.

[16] Cf. Filppula, Klemola et alii 2017: 47. See also Schneider 2003: 233–281, as well as Schneider, 2007.

[17] In the early days of the existence of the Uganda Protectorate, Kiswahili was widely used for administrative and educational needs. Before 1900, both missionaries and the colonial administrations used it and in 1900–1912, it was the official local language in Uganda. During the regime of Idi Amin, Kiswahili was again declared Uganda's national language by presidential decree, which was, however, never implemented (Meierkord, Isingoma et alii 2016: 30).



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particularly among the educated. This is perhaps rooted partially, in the perception that, it is a peasant language, but most of all because it gathered negative associations during the Amin and Obote crash, when it was language of the military. In rural areas where English is not understood, Swahili generally will be (Briggs, Roberts 2013: 497).

Some indigenous languages are used in primary education, as well as in Ordinary and Advanced level. "In 2006/2007, a local language policy was introduced in Uganda allowing primary schools to choose a local language familiar to all students to use as a language of learning and teaching from Primary 1 (P1) to P3. Then, in P4, the students' transition, and P5 to P7 there is an English only policy. This policy has widely been used with exception of rural primary schools which are filled with multilingual students, and these schools wish to be associated with the high-class status and prestige that has always been attached to the English language ever since the colonial period when it became the language of government and aristocrats"[18] (Essey 2007: 8).

In urban centers, church services are usually conducted in English and the language that is more used in that area. According to Hariet Nannyono, in a study on pupils aged 10–20, most of them in the age range of 12–14 years "out of 3916 pupils […] 64.2 percent spoke vernacular at home, a very small proportion 3.9 percent, speak English only at home, while 31.9 percent speak both English and vernacular" (Nannyonjo 2007: 20).

In such a multilingual country, the numerous groups speaking one or another language imprint English a particular local flavor, the result being a far from homogeneous Ugandan English[19].

Ugandan English, also known as *Uglish*[20], is not a native variety that has its own phonology, morphology and syntax. It is the dialect of English spoken in Uganda, mostly used as a second language, commonly acquired in schools, where it is a medium of instruction from Primary 5 onward. In the past, it was labeled together with other East African varieties of English as East African English (Schmied 2004: 918–930 and Wolf 2010: 197–211) based on the assumption that the varieties of English from this part of the continent are under the influence of Kiswahili, but, according to more recent researchers[21], the main influence comes from Luganda.

It seems that we cannot only talk about a version of English language in Uganda, but also about versions of this version, as people from the North, East and West of the country have developed their own version of Uglish. As stated in *Uglish: Understanding the Variety of English Spoken in Uganda*, every tribal group interprets Standard English and thus produces a unique verity of English. Ugandans use a creative imagination to invent new words from the indigenous languages, to replace those in Standard English. Many Ugandans are unable to speak English without transferring features from their mother tongues or code switching. Additionally, there exists a tendency for Ugandans to assume that many Uglish

[18] As a result, the knowledge of English is equated with being "educated", i.e., someone is educated to the degree to which s/he is able to converse and write in English, cf. Bolton, Kachru 2006: 217.

[19] For more details about this aspect, see Nassenstein 2016: 396–420.

[20] Sometimes referred as "East African English".

[21] See Isingoma 2014: 51–56.



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features are the correct alternatives to Standard English (Essey 2007: 20). Older inhabitants try to speak more Standard English. Uglish or broken English is more often used by men rather than women.

Yoweri Museveni started to rule the country in 1986 and it is during this period that Uglish develops. An increase in enrollment takes place but the standard of education falls as, "the pupil-teacher ratio stands at 1:47 and even the few teachers are demoralized by little pay […] A policy of automatic promotion has resulted into students who scrap through the system uneducated […] Ugandans use their local understanding and impressions of the so called Queen's language to speak English" (Sabiti 2014: 11).

Ugandan English diverged from other varieties of English from East Africa, the influence of Luganda's phonology being predominant. Among its features, are illuminating:

- the process of deriving words from those already existing in Standard English: *dirty – to dirten*;
- the use of local words as English words: *Mbu his sister is going to school next year*;
- the addition, omission or substitution of articles*: President is visiting our factory* instead of *The president is visiting our factory*;
- the use of singular form for plural and the use of plural form instead of singular: *trousers vs. trouser; shorts vs. short; information vs. informations; name vs. names;*
- long term used brand names utilized as nouns: *butter-Blue Band, toothpaste-Colgate, electricity-Umeme;*
- reduction of syllables and spelling influenced by the pronunciation of Uglish: *discipline – displin, visitor – vista, coat – court, iceberg – icebag, parking – packing*;
- no use, change or adding of prepositions: *I am used to – I am used*;
- the alternation between languages in the same conversation (code switching): *Anti for us, Okiraba, the problem is nti okudevelopinga will take us long because of politicians eating all the money*;
- the variate pronunciation of /l/ and /r/: *play-pray, problems-probrems*.

On the one hand, the colonial past and its remains, reflected in the use of English, transformed into official language, turns into a sort of prison for African speakers. The feelings of frustration and alienation are inevitable because: When did an imposed language manage to better express your forefathers' values and your cultural identity than your own mother tongue? English remains, mostly for the old generation, the language of international trade but perhaps, never the language of the African soul, as Susan Nalugwa Kiguli points out in the poem *The Resilient Tree*: "I am the slave of a foreign tongue/ I speak about myself and my own/ In a language of distant lands./ I am a treasonous traveller/ A dumb child among my own folk/ This tongue betrays me…" (Nalugwa Kiguli 1998: 102).

On the other hand, it seems that Ugandans (particularly the young urban generation, as the older generetion perceives the legacy of the white colonizer within the English language) have learned to accept English because "it is the official language" and it opens the path for "better jobs and good standing in society", remaining a "medium of inter-ethnic and inter-linguistic communication"



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(Nassenstein 2016: 399). In education, a vital aspect for a society's development and prosperity, a pupil that is able to communicate in English is a proof that the learning is done properly[22].

Lastly, is it English solely the voice of the British colonizer or the voice of a post-colonial Uganda, a new voice, a voice adjusted to local realities, values and needs? Adopted and personalized. The existence of Uglish, answers this question. In a Sub-Saharan Africa marked by famine, war, poverty and disease, which struggles to show the world that the *tabula rasa* appellation is an unjust one; English is a necessity for a better future. Born either out of the un/ under educated locals' incapacity of using Standard English or, out of a certain need and pride of creating a dialect that is not foreign and imposed, but bears within the African being, Uglish is a part of the African identity.

In sum, this work introduces the reader into the multilingual and multicultural realm of Uganda, emphasizing the unifying characteristic of English, as well as, the conflicts and contradictory aspects that the imposed use of this European language generated along the years. The emergence of all the multiple roles of English was greatly influenced by the local communities, the same comunities that are at the foundation of a new dialect's genesis, namely Uglish, the study following the path of this metamorphosis from Standard English to Ugandan English.

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*** *Constitution of the Republic of Uganda*, 1995.

## Abstract

This article considers the complex linguistic landscape of Uganda, as well as familiarizing the readers with the multiple statuses of English, with its progress, adjustment and role nowadays, in this part of the African continent and more than half a century away from its independence. Just like in the other African countries, English must survive in a multilingual, multiethnic and multicultural environment. Uganda, the best speaking English country in Africa, not only reached the acceptance of this imposed language, but also changed it, developing a local variety of English, known as Uglish, on which we will also focus in the end of our study. In a state, where the pieces of information on the precise number of languages in use, are contradictory (but they are at least 35), it is inevitable for English not to exhibit phonetic, lexical, morphological or syntactic specific features, as a result of English's cohabitation with this blend of local languages, especially when it comes to English used in areas inhabited by speakers belonging to lower social classes, with insuficient or no access to education.

The idea of how contemporary Uganda relates to this foreign language has also been mooted in this article. The country stays faithful to the pattern of other Sub-Saharan territories, as there are two groups: those considering English a legacy of the white man, a threat to African identity and values, and those who see in it, an open gate towards a better future.



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