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National and subnational features in Kenyan English

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The following analysis is a feasibility study for a research project on 'English in East Africa: an independent African means of communication?', which is the contribution of English Linguistics to the Special Research Programme (SFB) on 'Identity in Africa' carried out at the University of Bayreuth.[1] I will therefore briefly explain the background to this study in relation to the notion of identity, before explaining the methodology and problems of the analysis and the results of this micro-sociolinguistic study on the co-variation of pronunciation, social and contextual variables.

English and Kenyan identities

The basic assumption of this research project is that attempts to define specific African national identities must rest on various distinct concepts of cultural identity as well as on various overlapping regional identities. In this overall framework language is seen as a means of expressing, together with a message, a personal and/or a group identity, which is chosen by the speaker and interpreted by the hearer. In modern ethno-psychology personal identity is often seen as the sum of heterogeneous identities. Thus if a market woman in a market in Nyeri responds in English to a white man's question in Swahili, she expresses part of her identity, just as when she talks in Kikuyu to her market neighbours. Similarly, a Luo hotel manager may talk in basilectal English to his Kikuyu cleaners and in acrolectal English to his foreign guests. Here, language, and a particular variety of language, is seen as a marker, used (within a certain repertoire even deliberately) by the speaker to suggest a distinct identity to the hearer and/or interpreted by the hearer as signalling a particular speaker identity. English is unique in East Africa as it may signal international, national and subnational identities.[2]

In this analysis I investigate which features in the pronunciation of

Kenyan English (KenE) may be interpreted as sociolinguistic signals of national (all-Kenyan) or subnational (ethnic) identities. Such signals, or markers, are defined as variants that are constantly used (and clearly perceived) by one group of speakers rather than another. As nation-building is generally considered of prime importance in Africa, ethnic background was examined as the basic nonlinguistic variable, the dimensions of sex and linguistic context and style later. Although some notions about linguistic markers are commonly held impressionistically by educated and linguistically conscious people in Kenya, they have not been subjected to rigorous analysis before (Zuengler 1982, for instance, does not mention pronunciation in 'Kenyan English'). The basic hypothesis of this study was that the pronunciation of vowels (levelling of quantitative distinctions between vowels, monophthongising diphthongs and avoiding central vowels) systematically differentiates KenE from 'Standard English', that is, southern British standard English (including RP), whereas the pronunciation of consonants ('r/l problems' for the Bantu, 'alveolar fricative problems' for the Luo – see Kanyoro, this volume) expresses differentiations within KenE.

Research methodology and problems

The research methodology of this analysis was guided by the basic principle of recording not only which features occur, as in traditional dialectology, but also how consistently they are used. From previous studies (for example, Hancock and Angogo 1982 and Schmied 1985) the basic patterns of 'Africanisation' were well-known, especially for the more obvious vowel system (see figure 28.1), but it was not clear what the relative importance of these features was. Thus the methodology used in our analysis had to be quantitative; that is, structured data had to be elicited, which could later on be coded and analysed statistically.[3] Generally, the research methodology was inspired by Johnston (1983) and Jibril (1986), who investigated similar processes that occur when a pronunciation standard independent of RP develops.

The selection of informants for the three comparable studies was different. Whereas Johnston used a random sample of (29) mother-tongue speakers, Jibril and I selected second-language speakers (45 and 44, respectively). Like Jibril, I selected English language 'promoters', but I chose a more homogeneous socioeducational group, namely trainee teachers, who were mainly between 20 and 25 years old and had studied English for 13 to 15 years at school and college (which places them somewhat lower on the socioeconomic scale than Jibril's informants). There were 18 male and 25 female informants in the sample.

Due to the low number of informants (and to avoid data interpretation when there were less than 5 members in a cell) only language groups were
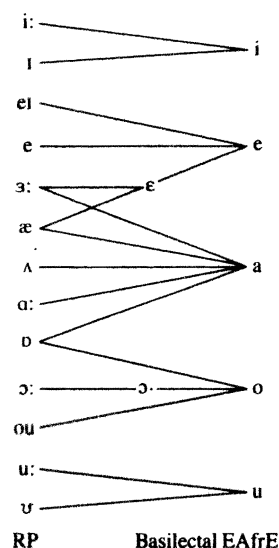
Figure 28.1   The vowel systems of RP and EAfrE compared.

analysed (this excluded the Teso and Taita informants). The informants' mother tongues (and birthplaces) fall into four groups: 19 Central Bantu, that is, mainly Kikuyu, but also Meru, Embu and Kamba, 9 Western Bantu, that is Luhya, Maragoli and Gusi, 6 Kalenjin (Southern Nilotes), that is Kipsigis, Nandi, Sabaot and Pokot, and 8 Luo (Western Nilotes). The distribution of this sample over the four language groups roughly reflects the ethnic distribution over the whole of Kenya, with the exception of the Coastal Bantu and the Cushitic sections.

The language data was not selected from free or structured conversation, as by Johnston and Jibril, but only from a reading list, which consisted of a continuous text (a slightly adapted version of Henry Sweet's 'Arthur the rat', which has often been used in English dialect studies) and a list of isolated words and word pairs specifically put together to elicit typically East African pronunciation features. Although this reading list may have caused a more formal interview situation, even though most of the recordings were made by Kenyans, it was the only way to ensure absolute qualitative and quantitative comparability.

Altogether about 110 sound units in different places in the text were selected as pronunciation variables, but only variables with more than 3 clearly identifiable variants from the standard norm were included in the statistical analysis. These remaining 72 variables were also marked according to three types of context variation, as text variables (names coded plus

a prefix T), pair variables (plus a prefix P) and isolated word variables (plus a prefix I). This made it easy to recognise the context of individual features as well as to calculate aggregated context variables.

The coding system was developed to record qualitative and quantitative deviations from the English norm (RP), which theoretically is still regarded as *the* standard norm among Kenyans (see Abdulaziz, this volume). The general scale from acrolectal to basilectal variation can be represented by a cline from 0 to 3, with 1 and 2 representing mixtures or transitional forms between the extremes. For some features additional values were necessary: for long vowels and diphthongs 4 represents quantitative, 5 qualitative and 6 quantitative + qualitative differences from the basic variant 3; for short vowels and consonants 4 to 6 represent qualitative differences from 3 (for some quantitative procedures the values 4 to 6 had to be collapsed into 3). Thus the pronunciation of [ɜ:], as in *heard* or *further*, was recorded as 0 = [ɜ:], 3 = [a:], 4 = [a], 5 = [e:] and 6 = [e]. The values 7, 8 and 9 were reserved for hypercorrect, deviant and missing items, respectively.

Some coding problems were connected with listening comprehension, since only listeners with some experience in East African pronunciation proved to be reliable for coding (these were two German and two English mother-tongue speakers). Another (technical) problem is connected to the cline from 1 to 3. Although some 'East Africanisms', for example, [a:] or [e:] for [ɜ:], are much more salient, with larger distances between the extremes, than others, for example, [o:] for [ou], all pronunciation variables were coded according to the same scale. Thus similar numerical values for Africanisation may conceal quite different perceptual impressions of 'Africanness'.

Results

General features of KenE pronunciation

A wide range of pronunciation variables was examined in order to gain as complete a picture of (segmental) pronunciation features as possible. Figure 28.2 summarises 21 features of KenE: long vowels, short vowels, diphthongs and consonants.

Figure 28.2 can be compared with Jibril's Figure 2 (1986: 57), reprinted as Figure 28.3 below, bearing in mind that Jibril records 'typical' representations of YorubaE and IgboE, whereas this figure shows aggregated means. An important difference between West and East African English is the pronunciation of the RP *but* sound, [ʌ]. In general it becomes manifest that some vowels (including diphthongs) clearly and consistently mark KenE, whereas the consonants, in general, show less difference from the maintained RP model.
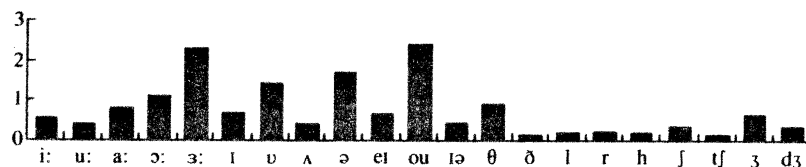
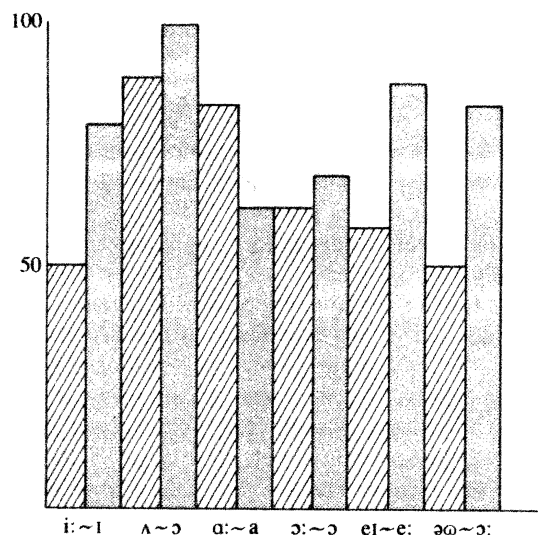Figure 28.2 'Africanisation' of 21 RP phonemes in KenE.

Figure 28.3 Some typical Igbo/Yoruba realisations of some RP vowels (from Jibril 1986). ▨ = speaker 10, Igbo; ▧ = speaker 21, Yoruba.

This general rule, however, conceals an important difference between four types of variables. Some are salient and used consistently, such as [a:] for [ɜ:], some are less salient and still used consistently, such as [o:] for [ou] or [dj] for [dʒ] and some are salient but used inconsistently, such as [r] for [l] (the fourth group, which is neither very salient nor consistently used, is of course not examined here).

These three groups of features pose different problems as far as intelligibility and acceptability are concerned. Less salient and less consistent features are easily understood and accepted. They include most of the rising diphthongs (mainly /eɪ/ and /ou/ and, though less so, /aɪ/ and /ɔɪ/, which tend towards double monophthongisation), with a reduced glide or even levelling to monophthongs (/e/ and /o/ respectively), as well as the centring diphthongs (mainly /ɪə/, /ɛə/ and /ɔə/), which tend to become double monophthongs, with a final [a] element. Salient and consistent features of pronunciation pose a problem of intelligibility when they merge
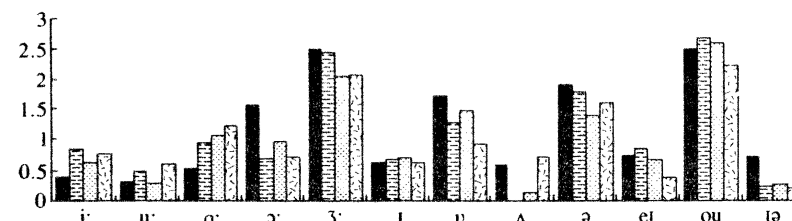
Figure 28.4 'Africanisation' of vowels by four Kenyan language groups.
■ = Central Bantu; ▦ = Western Bantu; ☐ = Kalenjin; ▨ = Luo.
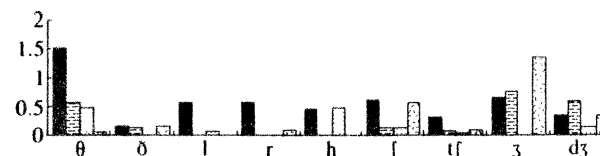

Figure 28.5 'Africanisation' of consonants by four Kenyan language groups.
■ = Central Bantu; ▦ = Western Bantu; ☐ = Kalenjin; ▨ = Luo.

with other phonemes. This is certainly the case with the frequent levelling of differences between long and short vowels in KenE, but this seems to be much less of a problem for East Africans themselves than for foreigners unaccustomed to this language behaviour (for problems of mergers see Milroy and Harris 1980). The most salient and consistent case is [ɜ:]. In this case most East Africans would shrug off the obvious discrepancy between the theoretical (RP) norm [ɜ:] and the actual language behaviour [a:] or occasionally [e:]. 'I don't want to strain myself so much to say [fɜːst] (first) only to sound British' or 'This would seem snobbish to my colleagues' would be typical reactions. Obviously the vernacular forms have covert prestige. They seem to function as a symbol of group identity, which is used to signal national solidarity even by those who have, through study and travel, clear links with standard English speakers, but who do not necessarily want to be associated with them in the national context. These salient and consistent features are clearly markers of the developing national variety of KenE (or EastAfrE). Salient and inconsistent features include most of the fricatives and were further analysed to find out whether they showed a more consistent pattern on the subnational level.[4]

Subnational features of KenE pronunciation

Figures 28.4 and 28.5 show the pronunciation of vowels and consonants broken down into the four language groups analysed. Due to sample

restrictions single results can only be interpreted tentatively, but again a difference between the vowels and the consonants can be seen.

In a rigorous statistical analysis with ONEWAY (using the fairly conservative Scheffé method) the following features showed significant differences at the 0.05 level between our four language groups:

- the pronunciation of RP voiceless *th* [θ] as voiced [ð] by the Central Bantu differs from that of all the other groups,
- the pronunciation of RP [l] as an [r]-like sound by the Central Bantu differs from that of the Western Bantu and of the Luo,
- the pronunciation of [iː] by the Central Bantu again differs from the Luo and the Western Bantu, as they tend not to keep the length distinction,
- generally diphthongs as pronounced by the Central and the Western Bantu differ from those of the Kalenjin and Luo; whereas the former tend to monophthongise diphthongs the latter are somewhat 'better' at maintaining the second element.

This means, on the whole, that our hypothesis that the four language groups are distinguished by consonants was confirmed, but it raises new questions as far as the diphthongs are concerned. The occasionally expressed opinion that 'the Luo maintain the vowel distinctions better than the Kikuyu' was not confirmed.

Other features that were not analysed quantitatively but that certainly occur (inconsistently) in rapid or basilectal speech are insertions of nasals before alveolar plosives, as in *sala(n)d* or *foo(n)d*, and the related hypercorrect omissions in *hand*, pronounced as *had* or even *ad* (then it may become a homophone with *and*), by the Kikuyu and Meru; or unreduced unstressed final vowels, particularly by the Luo. Some features even identify only specific mother-tongue speakers and not the whole language group, for example, dropping initial [h] is fairly consistently heard from the Kamba, but only inconsistently from the Kikuyu.

Towards these subnational pronunciation features Africans express a less 'generous' attitude. The pronunciation of RP [l] as [r], for instance, is clearly stigmatised, even by those who use it themselves ('You know, we Kikuyu have this *r/l* problem'). Thus, although this feature is quite common and serves as a social marker for certain groups, it is not an acceptable one. Here no covert prestige is attached to vernacular forms. This may be explained by the fact that in the multilingual context in Kenya, English does not function as a means of communication to express intra-ethnic solidarity, as here ethnic languages, the mother tongues, are used.

Contextual and other influences

An analysis of all 'deviations' in the three context styles – text, word pairs and isolated words – shows that 'Africanness' is more clearly marked in
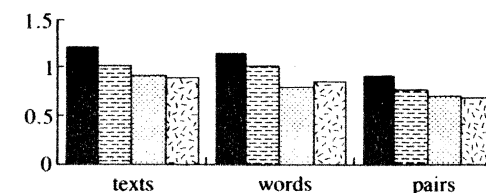
Figure 28.6 'Africanisation' of variables in reading texts, isolated words and word pairs by four Kenyan language groups. ■ = Central Bantu; ▤ = Western Bantu; ▥ = Kalenjin; ▨ = Luo.
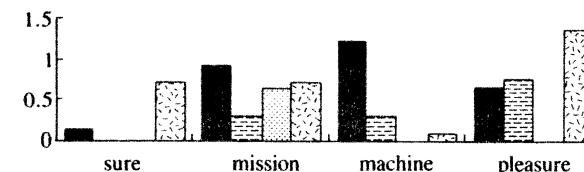

Figure 28.7 The pronunciation of the alveolar fricatives in *sure, mission, machine* and *pleasure*. ■ = Central Bantu; ▤ = Western Bantu; ▥ = Kalenjin; ▨ = Luo.

the text than in the word list, but that the differences between the context styles are not significant (see figure 28.6 for the four language groups). This may mean either that all three interview styles are rather formal or that English in general is a rather formal language. In view of this the general level of 'deviation' seems rather high.

The narrow context, in the sense of variable position within the word, plays a much more decisive role for some variables. Figure 28.7 shows the pronunciation of some variables containing alveolar fricatives. This example shows that the pronunciation of [ʃ] as [s] is partly, that is, in word-initial position, a marker for the Luo, partly a more general phenomenon, that is, in central positions. 'Common' modifications of [ʃ], for example, a slightly voiced pronunciation, are often accepted, yet modifications 'in the Luo way' are stigmatised.

Other subnational features related to the word context, for instance the tendency towards the lenition of voiceless plosives in final word position by the Luhya ([send] for *sent*), and other fortis-lenis differences, are related to phonotactic rules of the first language. In many cases, particularly with Coastal Bantu, intrusive vowels are prominent. For Bantu generally, these include final *-i* added to words ending in alveolar or palatal consonants and final *-u* added to those ending in labial consonants; furthermore intrusive *-i-* occurs in consonant clusters, as in *against them* [agenisti ðem].

The high rate for the voiced instead of voiceless pronunciation in

Arthur, even by the non-Bantu, may also be due to the immediate context, that is, the vocalic environment where this pronunciation is more normal. Here inter- and intralinguistic influences converge. Similarly the affricate instead of the fricative in *machine* may reflect hypercorrection or a more 'normal' pronunciation. The tendency seems to be not to make exceptions to the general pronunciation rules for specific words. This tendency is related to another important factor influencing the pronunciation of KenE, that is, the spelling.

Since in many ESL countries the written form of English is (through education and documents) considered more important and prestigious than the spoken version and since few native speakers are available as models, the spelling is often taken as a guideline for pronunciation. This can be seen in the (basilectal) pronunication of 'silent letters', as in *half* and *calf*, and in hypercorrect pronunciations, for example, of the full vowel in *said* and the reduced vowels in *let us/let's say* (here 'spelling pronunciation' occurs even when the vowel is not spelled). Some special words included in the questionnaire, such as *juice* and *Southern*, are pronounced as they are written even by highly educated East Africans. Other reflections of spelling pronunciation are the variants chosen to avoid the central vowels. The unstressed [ə] in *horror* and *pilot* is likely to be pronounced as [o], although the more likely KenE pronounciation of [ə], as in *angrily* and *figure*, is [a]. The same applies to long [ɜ:] in *word* occasionally, which can become a homophone with *ward*.

Differences between the sexes

An analysis of male–female differences in pronunciation reveals, as in most comparable studies, that women are more 'conservative', closer to the overt norm. A comparison of Figure 28.8 and Figure 28.9 shows that the differences between vowels are less striking than between consonants. As women tend to avoid salient features more than men, differences between the sexes are most striking where men use more vernacular forms. This is certainly the case when variants are stigmatised, such as the subnational forms of *th, r/l, h* and *sh*, but it is also so for variants that seem to have covert prestige, such as the Kenyan pronunciation of the national features [ɜ:] and possibly [iə]. The only variants that are used more often by women than by men are the less salient features [i:], [u:], [ɔ:], [ɪ], [ʒ] and [dʒ].

This difference between the sexes is also visible in the comparison of the stylistic contexts (see Figure 28.10). The 'Africanisation' is, in all three styles, more noticeable with the men than with the women, and the differences between the three styles are more extreme for the men than for the women.
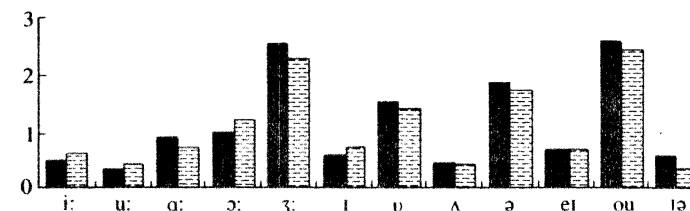
Figure 28.8 'Africanisation' of English vowels by male and female Kenyans. ■ = male; ▦ = female.

Figure 28.9 'Africanisation' of English consonants by male and female Kenyans. ■ = male; ▦ = female.
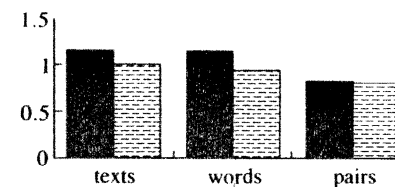

Figure 28.10 'Africanisation' of variables in reading texts, isolated words and word pairs by male and female Kenyans. ■ = male; ▦ = female.

Reasons for national and subnational features

For an explanation of national and subnational features in KenE it is important to consider two aspects, their origin and their persistence.

The influence of the mother tongue certainly plays a decisive role. Since the mother tongues often belong to different language families they explain many subnational features, for example, the Kikuyu have only one sound for *r* and *l*, only voiced *th* and nasalised plosives in their mother tongue; the Luo have no alveolar fricatives [ʃ,ʒ], only affricates [tʃ,dʒ]. There are, however, also areal features of KenE, for example the lack of certain consonants, that are surprising because they do occur in the respective mother tongues, at least as peripheral phonemes. In Kisii, where Luo and Gusi groups overlap, some Luo occasionally have 'r/l problems', whereas many Gusi replace [ʃ] by [s] (even in African languages, e.g. [samba] for *shamba*). On the national level it is interesting in this context that the

pronunciation of [ɜ:] in Kenya strongly tends towards [a:] and in Tanzania towards [e:]. The second possibility would be parallel exposure to the non-standard English of colonial administrators, settlers and missionaries. Here the sheer quantity of native speakers does not seem sufficient (as there were, for instance, fewer settlers than in South Africa and fewer missionaries than in Malawi, both possibly with some influence on the English spoken there; see Hancock and Angogo 1982). A third factor is teaching methods, which often do not reflect specific learning problems sufficiently and the efficiency of which must be seen in the context of local development problems (see Schmied 1986). Finally I want to mention a fourth factor, namely general language learning strategies in relation to the structure of English. Gimson (1980: 306) writes of RP, which he considers as the appropriate model (even if only to measure deviances from it):

> the full systems (20 V and 24 C) must be regarded as complex compared with the systems of many other languages. In particular, the opposition of the close vowels /i:/–/i/, /u:/–/u/, the existence of a long central vowel /ɜ:/ and the delicately differentiated front vowel set of /i:/–/i/–/e/–/æ/+/ʌ/, together with the significant or conditioned variations of vowel length, will pose problems to many foreign learners.

Thus he almost predicts the lack of vowel distinctions in 'New Englishes'. The acquisition of these and other sounds may be particularly difficult, because they are less universal.

The maintenance of markers is clearly determined by the attitudes towards them. The long and arduous attempts of traditional school-teachers[5] to eradicate some of the (national) features of KenE may have been in vain, because they are not considered as 'bad enough' mistakes in relation to the overt prestige norm, having acquired some covert prestige of Kenyan solidarity, which signals an African identity independent of European prescriptivism (see the attitudes towards [a:] instead of [ɜ:] above).

There are, however, many more questions concerning the variation of KenE, particularly socioeconomic and age variation. If national features are gradually accepted, then younger informants should use them more often than older informants; similarly informants higher on the socioeconomic scale should switch regularly between covert and overt prestige variants in certain circumstances, in order to deliberately express certain identities. Another question concerns syntactic variables. Is it really the case that 'syntax is the marker of cohesion in society', whereas 'pronunciation reflects the permanent social group with which the speaker indentifies' (Hudson 1980: 48)? This analysis has shown that some pronunciation features in KenE do identify groups at an intra- and an international level. Whether syntax really unites them will have to be shown in future studies.

NOTES

2. Much in the same way as Swahili may signal different identities, as it covers a wide intralingual spectrum from coastal to up-country varieties.
3. I used SPSS/PC+, a 'Statistical Package for the Social Sciences for Personal Computers', which is available and used world-wide, so that the methodology and results may be comparable to other studies. It allows a wide range of statistical procedures and at present up to 200 variables per active file, which is satisfactory for normal sociolinguistic purposes. In connection with MS-CHART it also produces simple graphs used for summary and illustrative purposes in this study.
4. Besides these phonetic features, prosodic features are striking. These include relative syllable length and prominence, voicing, devoicing before plosives and (post-)aspiration; the supraphonemic tendency in general is towards a syllable-timed, not a stress-timed pronunciation. This accounts for the general tendency to give too much weight to the unstressed syllables and weak forms of English, and helps to avoid consonant clusters, as in *difficult*.
5. An important factor in the persistence of subnational features is school background. In secondary schools with a nation-wide intake or with teachers from different ethnic groups these features will be stigmatised and levelled down after some years. This is normally not the case where students and teachers come from the same ethnic group. Children from the (few) English-medium missionary schools will develop only a few national features and hardly any subnational ones.

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