The Colonial Project: Language and Colonization in East Africa  
By Tara Reyelts

My Senior Integrative Project is related to a quotation from author Lois Tyson:

“That so many peoples formerly colonized by Britain speak English, write in English, use English in their schools and universities, and conduct government business in English, in addition to the local languages they may use at home, is an indication of the residual effect of colonial domination on their cultures.”

This project will investigate the effects of the English language in Britain’s colonization of East Africa. I will compare these effects in Kenya and Tanzania, focusing on the 20th century colonial and postcolonial periods. Britain colonized both countries, although Tanzania was first under German rule until the end of World War I. English is one of two official languages in both Kenya and Tanzania (the other official language of each is Kiswahili). My research will consist of two main categories: 1) literature and scholarship review and archival analysis; 2) life histories, testimonies given by people who have lived in Kenya and Tanzania.

For the first category, I will read literature written by authors from Kenya and Tanzania written during and after the colonial period. I will also investigate primary source material, such as periodicals and other journalistic accounts of political and social issues in 20th century colonial and postcolonial Kenya and Tanzania. I will research how and when English was implemented into government, educational, commercial, and even private home spheres in these countries. I aim to discern why English is a dominant language in this region of Africa and how English (or any language) can be used as a weapon wielded in the name of colonization and domination. For this reason, I will start my research by exploring Frantz Fanon’s theories about language, colonization, and racism.

For the second category, I will interview the immediate and extended family members of my best friend who is Kenyan. I will also interview Professor Joseph Mbele and his family members that live in Northfield. These interviews will follow the format of the life history method in which the interviewed person tells his or her life story or important stages in his or her life. It involves less back and forth questioning and answering than a typical interview style, and that allows the interviewee the freedom and agency of storytelling. I may prompt, however, with questions regarding the uses of Swahili and English in everyday life when that person lived in East Africa.

This project builds on and integrates my work in my African Culture & Colonialism major. For example, it combines the life history method, which I studied and/or practiced in most of the required History courses I completed, such as HIST 189A, Topic: Women in African Colonial History. Also, the literature review part of this project requires critical analysis skills that I have used on African literature in ENGL 206 Topic: African literature, ENGL 211: Hemingway in East Africa, and will use in ENGL 399 Seminar: West African Literature in the spring. Furthermore, in the required course, FREN 232B: Intermediate French II, we learned about the issues that stemmed from French colonization and forced cultural assimilation (including linguistic assimilation) in West Africa. I can compare what I know about French colonization in West Africa to what I will study about British colonization in East Africa.

I would like to present my findings to St. Olaf English majors specifically, but I also want my presentation open to the rest of St. Olaf and the public. I think it is important for people to
understand the power of language, especially written language. In this way my project will contribute a new perspective to African historical, literary, and other cultural studies. It will also bring awareness to St. Olaf students about the impact that the English language has on another part of the world that most students do not often consider. I will use my comparative study of Kenya and Tanzania to introduce the rest of the work that I have done for my independent major. Since language is such a large part of culture and since I am also an English major, this senior integrative project fits well with my interests and much of what I have studied in the past three years at St. Olaf.