

# Immigrant Identity: Code Switching among Kenyans in Upstate New York

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## 1. Introduction

There are a substantial number of Kenyans in the US scattered across the many cities of the country although there are thought to be particular concentrations in Minnesota, Texas, New Jersey and Delaware. Many of these have come to the US as students, for business, as permanent residents and as employees of multinational companies (Kahura 2003). Entering the US is a big experience for many and part of their adaptation strategy to a new way of life in the US has been a tendency to stay close to other Kenyans hence the concentration in particular states and also the use of community networks like social gatherings, informal Kenyan clubs and fraternities, umbrella groups like the Kenyan Community Abroad (KCA) and internet websites set up by Kenyans for topical discussions among themselves. These forums seem to serve as a reification of common interests, heritage and identity.

While it would appear, outwardly at least, that membership in these informal Kenyan groups and networks, indexes a Kenyan identity, my interest in this inquiry focuses on the role of language in this identification project. There are over forty languages in Kenya with Swahili and English being co-official. As such, most of these first generation Kenyans in the US are trilingual in Swahili, English and some other Kenyan language. In addition, they come with a tradition of code switching that has been shown to be second nature to them in their home country (Myers-Scotton 1993, Ogechi 2001). Indeed, according to Mazrui (1995), code switching finds its most overt structure in *Sheng*, an urban vernacular in Kenya that Mazrui and others consider to be based on code switching. Outside of the home country, far away in America, is there code switching and how does it manifest itself? What role does it play in the new context of Kenyans living as a minority in a dominant US cultural setting?

**Definitions:** Following Myers-Scotton (1993), code switching is defined here as the mixing of different codes by speakers in the same conversation. The switch may take place at any level of language differentiation (languages, dialects, styles/registers) and can involve units from the morpheme to the sentence. Consequently, code mixing and code switching are identical for our purposes.

Kenyan American: the term is purely descriptive – it refers to Kenyans in America, any Kenyan, born in Kenya but domiciled in the US, whatever their purpose or length of stay. A distinction is made between first and second generation Kenyan Americans whereby first generation refers to those born in Kenya and second generation refers to those born and raised in the US<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. Data

Data were collected from a mixed group of individuals identifying as Kenyans in and around Albany, New York, an area commonly referred to as the capital region in upstate New York, although an online survey that was conducted for a specific part of the study included individuals from out of the area. Consultants were identified by personal contacts made through friends and acquaintances since no specific sample frame existed that would be used. Because of the exploratory nature of this

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<sup>1</sup> The Swahili term “Mwamerika/Waamerika” meaning “American” is commonly used in conversations by people in Kenya to describe Kenyan Americans when used in relevant contexts.

study, only first generation Kenyans were interviewed. Most respondents were trilingual in English, Swahili and one other Kenyan language. Participant-observer sessions were digitally recorded and then transcribed.

A combination of approaches including conversational analysis (CA), sociolinguistics (Gumperz and Hymes) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) will be used to transcribe and interpret the data collected and arrive at tentative conclusions on code switching among this group in particular and Kenyan Americans generally.

(Note: non-English material is in italics as a stylistic device only. Names have been changed to preserve anonymity)

1) <English ~ Ekegusii switches> ~ friends looking at pictures. Setting: home

- a. Moraa *Gaki eeh, eye ero tinkoorokia ONDE!*  
(Oh please, I can't show this one to anybody!)
- b. Maria *Ntango, ntango eyio torore*  
(let, let us see that one)
- c. Moraa I think *baba Sally, chibicha chinde ntobwenerete gochibeka chi-frame*, at least for memory. *Gaki okwo tai okongusana kwobosoku gaki?*  
(I think that father-of-Sally, we need to frame some of these pictures. Isn't that tagging naughty?)
- d. Moraa ↓*nche tintageti* (mimicking an adolescent on a date)  
'I, I don't like this...'
- e. Okari *Ogotora ebinagu kabisa!*  
'Totally shy'
- f. Maria *Inche tokombwata igo...*  
'I, I don't like being touched like that...'
- g. Moraa *Inki okombori?*  
'What do you want from me'

2) <Ekegusii ~ English switches> ~ talking about computers. Setting: home

- a. R The commands *okoa e-computer* they don't make it have a problem  
(the commands you put into a computer don't give it a problem)
- b. Monda No
- c. R *e-problem e-gocha* when you install things  
'the problem comes when you install things'
- d. Monda Because even when you put *e-command etari* acceptable  
'because when you put a command that is not acceptable'

3) <English ~ Swahili switches> ~ cost of living. Setting: in a restaurant

- a. Kiti Wait, you can do away with cable
- b. R That's right
- c. Kiti Ok? You don't really have to have cable. You know what I am saying
- d. R =hmm
- e. Kiti =if it gets down to that point
- f. R If...
- g. Okori [*mbinu za kuweka akiba...*]  
'Strategies of saving money...'
- h. Kiti Yes, you can cut a few things here and there. Of course these are things we – they are not you know like "must have things"

- i. R That is, that's right *mzee* and you know...  
'elder'

4) <English only> ~ Conversational Interview situation. Setting: home

- a. R Have you ever felt that you are being either discriminated against in the sense that huh – have you ever felt that people look at you differently because you spoke with an accent?
- b. Ciku I don't think, in a way, depending. I have had my education which if I was in Kenya I wouldn't have, so America gave me something...I know there is an area, job wise, that you don't get into 'cause you have an accent but that also depends with whoever is interviewing you or whoever you are going to encounter. If they are ignorant, if they have never left their domain, so it is harder for them to understand. Because they do not know what you can offer. And they are many. Once you get into a field, into a job set, they know. Once they know what you can do, then they appreciate you, they want to keep you longer. We are hard working, we are patient, we are very cooperative given a chance. But an accent is one thing that opposes you from getting what you really want unless it is a dirty job

5) (English ~ Swahili switches) setting: over the phone

- a. R Do you feel funny *ukitumia* Swahili among *watu ambao ni wa huku* – like *kwa* store, *shule*?  
'do you ever feel funny when you speak Swahili among local people?'
- b. Sara No, I just talk. The more they don't understand me the better. *Lakini najua* my boyfriend, *tukiwa kwa* plane, *naanza kupata misomo nitumie English*  
'No, I just talk. But when I am with my boyfriend in the plane, he starts lecturing me that I should not code switch and that I should stick to English'
- c. R Your boyfriend, *anakijua Kiswahili vizuri*?  
'Does your boyfriend speak Swahili well?'
- d. Sara Yeah, *anajua*. He even stayed at the coast for some time. I don't know, *akiamka* on the wrong side, *naanza kusikia* "can you speak in English and stop mixing?" Like in the plane, I can speak to him in Swahili but he will never answer in Swahili. *Hata* one word. Something about not drawing attention to himself. But me, I don't care, I don't want to be controlled, I just speak Swahili. I show them I have *yang'u*...  
'He does. He even stayed at the Coast<sup>2</sup> for some time. I don't know, if he wakes up on the wrong side of the bed, he starts saying things like "can you speak English and stop mixing?" Like in the plane, I can speak to him in Swahili but he won't answer me in Swahili at all. Something about not drawing attention to himself. But me, I don't care, I don't want to be controlled, I just speak Swahili. I show them I have my own (language)'

6) (English paper questionnaire)

- Q5. R What do you think of Kenyans in the US who speak with an American accent?

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2 "Coast" here refers to the Kenya/Indian Ocean coastline that is the cradle of Swahili.

Stano I hate anybody speaking to me with a twang<sup>3</sup>. I also get more annoyed if somebody speaks Swahili or Ekegusii with a twang to me. In fact, I keep quiet. Why? Why does a person need to speak like a foreigner to me? That means the person despises our culture

### 3. Analysis

In the first session (1), the setting is at a home in the evening after dinner, with children playing in the background. Two couples, trilingual in Ekegusii, Swahili and English, are seated in the living room of Moraa, looking at some family photos. They are going over memories and good times together in the past (note the play-acting in lines **d-g**, where they are re-enacting a dating scene from their younger days). The environment here can be said to be relaxed, private and intimate. Note that the shared first language for all those involved here, Ekegusii, takes over as the ‘*matrix code*’<sup>4</sup>, i.e. the dominant language in this conversation. Blom & Gumperz (1972) have characterized the choice of code in multilinguals as dictated by consideration of the physical setting, social occasion and the social event that is being performed. In this first scene, the setting (and the activity that the couples are involved in) seems to be constraining the choice of language being used. We may say by implication that the language reserved for such occasions, is the mother tongue, i.e. the first language shared by these discussants. (Also see Goffman, 1974 on Frames)

In the second session, (2), the setting is also in a home and the occasion is a family visit: it is also a private and intimate setting. The conversation starts out in Ekegusii, the first language of all the four adults in the conversation. Two men are talking about fixing a computer that has been acting-up. These two are in a larger gathering of four people, three of which speak three common languages (Ekegusii, Swahili and English) while one of them, an elderly lady, speaks only one of the languages, Ekegusii. The conversation prior to the excerpt has been in Ekegusii but when the issue of computers comes in, the switch is made to English. The discourses that surround the workings and knowledge of computers tend to be some technical jargon that we may term *computerese*. English provides the bulk of the *computerese* in this context. The spicing of this talk with Ekegusii appears to be a strategy of accommodation for the old lady in the group who does not speak nor understand *computerese*.

In the restaurant setting for the third session (3), the three men are trilingual but between all of them, share two languages, English and Swahili (two speak Ekegusii while the third speaks Kimeru). This is an out-of-home, public setting and although all the participants form an intimate group, the restaurant setting among strangers dictates the mode of interaction between them. There is minimal code switching taking place and the conversation is largely in English, with a few Swahili snippets even though the men are engaged in a discussion about how hard it is to make ends meet in the US (*is this nostalgia for the old country?*). Here too, we see a correlation between the use of English with technology and when used in the public arena. We begin to suspect that languages in a repertoire have defined roles and English is the language for the public arena, whereas Swahili and the other Kenyan languages are the in-group, informal languages.

In session 4, the interview with Ciku marks a complete switch to English by both the discussants even though the setting is at home among friends, after Thanksgiving dinner.

We offer two explanations to account for this behavior. One explanation is if it is true that English represents the distant and the formal, then it is the best choice for this event, a conversational interview on a fairly academic topic. As Gumperz (1972) has stated, social events have a special language (code), associated with their delivery, and interviews may well fall in that category. The reality of this division of roles for multilinguals may be evident from the way in which the switch to English is made here notwithstanding the fact that the setting is an in-group, intimate one in a home - after Thanksgiving dinner. However, since this is a *social event* that is recognized as such, it defies the setting and as a formal event, invites English to mediate as the text established for that purpose.

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3 ‘Twang’ is a Kenyan word that describes foreign, mostly American, accents of English.

4 For a discussion of matrix and embedded codes, see Myers-Scotton, (1993).

Secondly, it is conceivable that the English spoken in this case may not be Standard American English (AmE) or any of its dialects, but a variety of English, which has been appropriated and reconfigured as Kenyan English (KE)<sup>5</sup> and which for the group may not be a completely foreign entity, but part of their heritage. Kenya had a long colonial relationship with English (the British variety) and as the case with regional dialects, the variety of English in Kenya is in turn now distinct from British English and for that matter, other regional dialects like ‘standard’ American English (AmE). The most striking differences between Kenyan English (KE) and AmE are those to do with the diphthongization of tense vowels in AmE, the pronunciation of post-vocalic [r] and the flapping of [d] and [t] inter-vocalically after a stressed syllable (although other salient differences at all levels of the grammar do exist. See Skandera, 2000 for a discussion).<sup>6</sup>

The existence of Kenyan English implies that for most of the consultants in this study, it has become part and parcel of their way of life, their habitus. As explained by Bourdieu, habitus refers to socially acquired, embodied systems of dispositions and/or predispositions, which constrain an individual’s outward behavior. The re-analysis of English as a part of the heritage of the group under study therefore explains the ease with which group members used English as part of their repertoire even in in-group situations. Blommaert (1999:184) commenting on the Tanzanian intellectuals’ use of English at the height of the *Ujamaa* project of Swahilization states: “the history of a language...is also a history of its metapragmatic appropriation by power brokers, institutions and social actors...” I would add that these power brokers shape, adapt, and create discourses about language and reconfigure it to serve their purposes. They come to own the languages as it were. For instance, Ciku’s sentence in 4 (b): ‘I don’t think, in a way, depending’ is a case in point; it would be ungrammatical /unacceptable in standard AmE.

The target group exhibited evidence that they were aware of the existence of KE as a separate code and made a distinction between KE and other ‘Englishes’ and/or dialects. Observations were that in guarded moments, especially in out-group contexts, where ‘outsiders’ are more likely to overhear and perhaps react to a non-AmE accent, group members tended to use the *idealized*<sup>7</sup> form of AmE. This was observed in stores and outside the home, wherever Kenyans were in contact with the general population. (The setting, as a determiner of the choice of code was manifest and underscores Gumperz’s insight that code switching is largely governed by considerations of setting, social situation i.e. audience and the social event being performed). Conversely, the use of this idealized AmE is (supposed to be) dispensed with inside the group in favor of the KE pronunciation. In answer to a questionnaire question, a group member, Stano, summarizes why:

- 6) I hate anybody speaking to me with a twang. I also get more annoyed if somebody speaks Swahili or Ekegusii with a twang to me. In fact, I keep quiet. Why? Why does a person need to speak like a foreigner to me? That means the person despises our culture.

Implicit in Stano’s assertion is a discourse which states that to be Kenyan in a foreign place, one must show it by the language that one uses, especially to fellow Kenyans. It is clear that for him one way of maintaining a Kenyan identity in the US is not only in speaking a Kenyan language, but also in the accent that one employs. Accent was the most noticeable site of difference between group members and others and most respondents identified it as such. Discussions about *accent* generated emotional responses and those who spoke on the issue of accent had negative things to say about it,

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5 For a discussion of this variety and other world Englishes, see Skandera (2000).

6 AmE (most accents) is largely r-full (pronounces the retroflex liquid [r] after vowels as in words like ‘hard’, ‘heart’ and ‘car’. Thus, the transcription of those words in phonetic symbols would be: hard [hard] heart [hart] car [k<sup>h</sup>ar], whereas in KE English, post-vocalic [r] is silent and therefore the words above would be rendered as: [ha:d], [ha:t] and [k<sup>h</sup>a:] respectively. Secondly, AmE flaps the alveolar stops [t] and [d] in unstressed positions intervocalically: writer [rayDər] rider [rayDər] water [waDər]. KE however, does not: writer [rayta] rider [rayda] water [wɔta].

7 Usage of AME accents among this population is largely an approximation since for most English is not a first language and has been learnt too late in life to be a perfect match. For this and other attitudinal reasons that we will get into later, AmE remains just an approximation, an ideal that is rarely achieved.

identifying a non-native AmE accent as the reason they were treated as foreigners, were discriminated against and/or had negative attention brought to bear on them. Of speaking with a Kenyan accent Ciku said that it denies skilled Kenyans the chance to get commensurate jobs (4, line b):

7) ...I know there is an area, job wise, that you don't get into 'cause you have an accent...

For others, the treatment that they have received by speaking with an accent makes them resolve not to try to learn to speak in an AmE accent. One member of the group said that native speakers of AmE are not 'patient with him'<sup>8</sup> so he doesn't care now what they think of his accent and that is why he speaks Ekegusii and Swahili most of the time. Others have chosen to mask their linguistic and therefore Kenyan, identity and would rather blend in with the dominant culture. Sara says of her boyfriend (5, line d):

8) Like in the plane, I can speak to him in Swahili but he won't answer me in Swahili at all. Something about not drawing attention to himself. But me, I don't care, I don't want to be controlled, I just speak Swahili. I show them I have my own (language).

Accent simply defined, is an alternative/dialectal pronunciation of a word. It is therefore the first and obvious pointer to the speaker's background and experience with a particular language, a culture. Consequently, together with color, accent is a quick demographic identifier and a quick way to get labeled and stereotyped. Because of the negative experience that Sara's boyfriend may have had, he chooses not to code switch between Swahili and English in particular contexts, for to do so would mark him as a foreigner and as a result, invite all that such an identity may attract. For people like him, even though code switching may be a natural and spontaneous activity for multilinguals, it is also a conscious action of the speaker, motivated by a desire to present a certain posture or identity of oneself. In that regard, code switching is a reaction to the larger society, to the dominant culture that has ideologies that privilege certain accents while stigmatizing others.

Code switching must of necessity be studied as both a local phenomenon that is contextually conditioned, and also as an issue that reaches beyond the local context to the larger cultural and socio-political arena, where discourses hold conversations with other discourses, influencing them and getting shaped in return. A local reading of the code switching excerpts above shows that code switching is a common practice among the group under study and that the choice of a code is sensitive to the physical setting, social event and occasion of the context (as per Gumperz and Hymes 1972). A reading of that kind allows a correlation between code and role so that we may say that a code *X* indexes a particular context *Y* and vice versa. Note however, that a simple correspondence between code and function, in the sense that a certain code regularly indexes a particular identity, did not hold true<sup>9</sup>. Thus, whereas we have seen a correlation between English and the out-group/non-intimate contexts, English is still used at home in situations between intimate friends when the topical context demands its use (excerpt 4). Evidently therefore the idea that identity is stable and hegemonic (i.e. *essentialist*), is fallacious. In reality, identity is a negotiation based on context, local and external, that impacts on the speaker/hearer and as a performance, is "highly deliberate and strategic" (Bucholtz and Trechter, 2001). This is why two Kenyans, Sara and her unnamed boyfriend, who are close friends and may be thought to share a common outlook on things like group identity, strategically manipulate their language use to signify different identities in excerpt 5. For Sara's friend, there may be other ways of showing Kenyan identity<sup>10</sup>.

In addition, codes can be ranked in terms of intimacy and distance (or formal and informal codes), so that in our case, Swahili and other Kenyan indigenous languages (like Ekegusii), form one group of

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8 Excerpt not included.

9 See also Blommaert, (1999) for a discussion of why this simple correlation is problematic.

10 Although code switching indexes conformity with the prevailing discourse of being and performing Kenyaness; nonetheless, individuals have flexibility in ways they choose to perform this discourse and that flexibility (in the form of variance) may involve use of other symbols of common identity like dress, food, type of friends etc. Alternatively, non-privileged linguistic identities may be shunned totally.

intimacy (in-group) and English, the other (out-group). Evidence that languages in the repertoire have been divided into functional groups came from the discovery that trilinguals in this group only code switch between two languages at any given time, never between the three (or more) that they do speak. Nowhere in the recorded data was there evidence of code switching between more than three languages in a conversation even when speakers shared more than two languages. There was anecdotal evidence from couples in the sample frame to show that they never code switch with their spouses between a shared first language and Swahili unless the shared language turned out to be English. This would seem to reinforce the claim that the shared languages are ranked in a hierarchy of distant/intimate, formal/casual, so that since Swahili and Ekegusii for example, fall into one conceptual and functional group – the intimate group, code switching is penalized between the two, while it is preferred between either of them and English.

On a different level, code switching can be understood as a response to a non-local, wider socio-political and economic context. In that regard, this study considers code switching as a language practice that is governed by other, larger, discourses abroad in American society that impact Kenyan immigrants as a minority in a dominant cultural setting. Statements like those in (6), (7) & (8) above, show that speakers have been made sharply aware of their separate identity and what it means to be different/foreign. They are aware of the status attached to their linguistic otherness. It is here that we benefit from a reading of the resulting language behavior (e.g. code switching) using the lenses of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA as variously espoused by Gee (1999), Fairclough (1993), Rogers (2003) and others, seeks to explain ‘the relation between language form and function and explains why and how certain patterns are privileged over others’. In this regard, CDA highlights the power relationships in society with a view to exposing the ‘inequities embedded in them’ (Rogers, 2003: 5). The discourse of Kenyanness is a response to these larger discourses. Phenomena like Globalization, Post modernism and rhetoric like ‘English only’<sup>11</sup> and the ‘if-you-are-not-with-us-you-are-against-us’ discourses are cases in point. Minorities view globalization as a danger to cultural diversity (i.e. as a form of “cultural imperialism” where only western ideals and values are propagated through the technological, economic and military power of the West), while the questioning of old truths and long established ways in post-modernity leads to “provisionality, fragmentation and instability” (Slombrouck 2003). Kenyan Americans find themselves in this unstable environment compounded by new settings and new ways of doing things and their use of Kenyan languages is a desire for some anchorage, something familiar in the chaos. Language easily fulfills this role because historically, language holds the pride of place in projects of identity.<sup>12</sup>

Fueling the feelings of immigrant insecurity and identity crisis in the Diaspora is the fact that American society remains sharply polarized in terms of race, color, social class and as we have seen, language. New immigrants tend to congregate in traditionally established ethnic neighborhoods. The maintenance of these neighborhoods (e.g. Little Italy, Chinatown, as well as Cuban, Brazilian, and Afro-Caribbean concentrations in particular cities) is a demonstration of the myth of integration for minorities into mainstream America. Social stratification, especially the dichotomy between white and black, remains real and for Africans, integrating may even be more difficult given the ‘loud’ linguistic difference that they exhibit<sup>13</sup>. Discourses that seek English-only use in the work place and in schools constantly remind them of their different and non-preferred linguistic identity. Rising

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11 See news item on the same at (<http://aolsvc.news.aol.com/news/article.adp?id=2003121111909990001>) of 9-5-05.

<sup>12</sup>It is significant that language is a core value of the process of identification. State-based projects of national identity have frequently put language at the center of their endeavors: Yiddish and Hebrew in Israel, French in Quebec, Swahili in Kenya and Tanzania. English, especially in the US, is an integral symbol of the nation, its importance taken so naturally that its status as a national language is not even written in the law books. The movement towards English only in many school districts in the US and the requirement to speak English at the work place all point to a national project where the English language is taken as a central feature of that enterprise. Indeed, it is not only the use of English per se that is important, but also the mastery of particular varieties as we have seen above.

<sup>13</sup> The stigma of being black in America is especially problematic for Africans who come from dominant cultures in the home countries only to be considered the minority in the US.

nationalist discourses, especially in the face of terrorist threats to the US have created state-generated rhetoric with terms like “our way of life”, “either with us or against us” etc. Discourses like these equate American society narrowly with a unitary way of life/culture that denies its diversity. Minorities’ search for identity and exclusivity is vindicated further by such rhetoric that negates plurality and by incidents of racial profiling, linguistic intolerance in English-only schools and English-only sentiments in the work place.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

In this paper code switching has been discussed as a language practice that contributes to the identity of Kenyan Americans. Code switching as the target group’s performance of ‘being Kenyan’ is a discourse that revolves around forging and maintaining a unique immigrant identity through the use of Swahili (and other Kenyan languages). Code switching, the resultant interplay of English and these various Kenyan languages is as much a statement about the group’s common linguistic legacy as it is a marker of membership in Kenyanness and a reaction to other discourses in the larger society that are hostile to difference and variety represented by immigrants.

In the course of the study, several interesting issues have arisen which require further scrutiny. Trilingual code switching turned out to be very rare and more data is needed to make formal generalizations about how multilinguals code switch. Anecdotal evidence showed that code switching was active at the level of two codes in any one setting, even when conversationalists shared more than two codes. Although this was not crucial to our study, it is nevertheless an area that should be investigated. If indeed it turns out that there are restrictions to more than three-language switching, are those constraints psychological, linguistic or behavioral?

Most respondents in this study were first-generation immigrants, i.e. foreign-born, whose first languages were not English. It would be interesting to see what the language practices of the second generation of Kenyan Americans would be like. Lastly, demographic studies have shown that immigrants tend to congregate in traditionally ethnic neighborhoods. Is this the case for this group? There are indications that some concentrations of Kenyan Americans exist in particular states and cities and if this is true, are their practices identical across the board or does the geographical area and number have an impact on their linguistic behavior? These issues need further study.

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