

Language Perceptions and Identity among Kenyan Speakers

Leonard Muaka

Winston Salem State University, North Carolina

1. Introduction

In this paper, I draw on data collected from a research project carried out in four different regions of Kenya between 2006 and 2007, to provide and discuss results that examine the language perceptions that Kenyan youths in selected rural and urban areas exhibit. I also examine how such perceptions are reflected in their daily language practices and how they help in constructing their language identities. This paper utilizes both quantitative and qualitative sociolinguistic methods of data collection that include the use of questionnaires, informal interviews and participant observations to capture and characterize language practices of the target population. Using these strategies I examine the discrepancy between speakers' stated perceptions and their actual language performances and how this mismatch helps explain the meaning of the different identities speakers perform, enact or project. In the discussion, I underscore the importance of underlying metalinguistic phenomena responsible for the ambivalence evident among the youths that were studied. This is made possible through an eclectic sociolinguistic approach that examines different language ideologies at play. This approach and the questions raised in this paper ultimately contribute to a better understanding of the larger question of the state of language maintenance and shift in Kenya and the ever dynamic identities of youth language, which could be replicated in other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa.

1.1. General background information to the study

Africa is one of the regions in the world with extensive linguistic diversity. Of the world's estimated 6,000 plus languages, Africa has more than 2,000 languages which represents about a third of the world's languages. However, as many scholars such as Djité (2008), Nettle and Romaine (2001) observe, not much empirical research has been done and this creates more gaps in ascertaining some needed facts about the linguistic situation in Africa. For example, an attempt to even ascertain the number of languages spoken in Kenya remains a speculative one with some figures stating 40, 42 and still others claiming as many as 61 languages (e.g. *Ethnologue*). Similar speculative and contradictory statistics are spread all over the rest of the continent. Given such contradicting reports, it is not surprising that when it comes to the question of language maintenance and shift or endangerment, contradictory reports abound.

1.2. Objectives

In this paper, I engage in this dialogue by examining language perceptions and actual language practices of speakers in four different regions in Kenya. I examine two rural areas and two urban regions carefully selected to reflect both rural and urban linguistic behaviors in Kenya and shed light on the current language situation. Specifically and based on empirical data collected primarily among Kenyan youths in 2006 and 2007, the paper aims to contribute to the debate on the role and place of African languages in the Kenyan public domains by examining the relationship between youth

speakers' perceptions regarding their linguistic repertoires and their actual language practices. What it seeks to ascertain is the extent to which these young people's language identities are not only continually constructed to reflect the contestation that exists between local and dominant ideologies, but also whether their perceptions of their languages are potential indicators of the future vitality of Kenyan languages.

2. Language in Kenya

Before discussing language issues in Kenya, it is useful to make a general observation about the country's linguistic diversity. Kenya is pervasively multilingual both at the societal and individual levels. An average person speaks at least three languages. This stems in part from the different ethno-linguistic groups that are found in the country and their daily need to communicate with different people in different contexts. As stated above, it is estimated that there are between 41 and 61 languages spoken in Kenya. There is also an urban slang variety commonly spoken by urban youths called Sheng, with a grammar that is very close to Kiswahili.

Objectively speaking, the actual range of languages spoken in Kenya remains to be determined with any degree of accuracy due to the lack of in-depth and systematic studies. Current estimates may be too unrealistic in that there may not be that many languages. One reason why these linguistic figures are so varied could in part be attributed to a lack of proper methodology for data collection and validation in the few studies that have been conducted thus far, and also due to the fact that the estimated demographics have been arrived at by researchers from outside who have inadequate knowledge of the region's linguistic complexities (e.g., the existence of several dialects of certain languages, some which appear to be less mutually intelligible at first blush).

This situation has led to a failure, for example, in identifying the different names used for the same language. Similarly, some of the varieties that have been claimed to be independent languages are actually dialects of the same language. As in other multilingual societies, a clear demarcation between a dialect and a language has not been easy to establish because of cultural and political considerations. It may not be very surprising that some speakers of a given dialect would claim that theirs should not be viewed as a dialect but instead as an independent language. With all the difficulties and redundancies inherent in the documentation of the current number of languages, it is fair to estimate the number of Kenyan indigenous languages to be about 40.

2.1. *Language policies and their impact on language practices*

For the most part language policies in Kenya are more pronounced in institutions such as education, legislature, mass media and the judiciary where specific languages have been earmarked for specific roles. Since the study's focus was on mostly young participants, it is imperative to comment briefly on the Kenyan education language policy.

2.1.1. *Language in education and other domains*

In Kenya, language policy in the education system recognizes English as the main medium of instruction in the urban areas at all levels of education. In the rural areas where linguistic homogeneity exists, the policy identifies indigenous languages as the initial languages of instruction until the third grade, *with English taught as a subject*. In the fourth grade, English takes over as the medium of instruction. Kiswahili is also used in the initial stages in multi-ethnic settings up to the third grade. After this level Kiswahili remains in the curriculum only as a subject. On the other hand, after the third grade the use of local languages is not allowed in schools. Since English is given a privileged role in the entire education system, admission into a public university in Kenya is highly depended on students' passing of their English language exam. Ultimately, English is the language that is encouraged in public domains, because of its instrumental role at every stage in an individual's career life. The Kenyan education system can therefore be said to implement what is commonly known as subtractive bilingualism.

Similarly, in the legal system, English dominates even though Kiswahili is occasionally used in the lower law courts. Although according to Chapter II, Section 34 (c) of The Kenyan Constitution that has been in use until 2010¹, Kiswahili- the national language and the co-official language, can also be used in parliament; still all the reports of parliamentary proceedings, constitutional bills drafted and passed are required to be in English. In her paper about the use of English in Kenya, Michieka (2005) notes that English dominates in different domains including the media and education, very critical forums where language plays a major role.

2.1.2. *Language in the media*

Another public domain where language is critical is the media. Prior to 1992 the media was largely controlled by the government. Following the liberalization of the press after the 1992 multiparty elections, the country now has a vibrant and a diverse mass media sector in the region. As an information disseminating tool, the media has great influence on its citizens. The government controls the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) which recognizes Kiswahili and English as the official languages of operation. KBC has three major levels of news broadcasting (television and radio). The National Service broadcasts from Nairobi and its programs are strictly in Kiswahili, the national language. The General Service also broadcasts from Nairobi and its programs are all in English. The national television ran also by KBC broadcasts in English and Kiswahili, but with the majority of the programs in English. The government has also established regional radio stations which are ran in at least 17 major regional languages on a four-hour basis per day. The programs in these regional stations are organized as follows: Central Station broadcasts in Kikuyu, Kikamba, Kimaasai, Kimeru and Kiambu. The Eastern Station broadcasts in Somali, Boran, Rendile, Burji and Turkana. The Western Station broadcasts in Dholuo, Kisii, Kalenjin, Kuria, Teso and Luhya (see Kiarie 2004).

After the advent of multiparty in 1992, airwaves were liberalized, a development that has seen a proliferation of different forms of mass media including print and FM radio programming in local languages throughout the day. Some of these FM stations include Mirembe FM in Luhya, Musyi FM in Kamba, Ramogi FM in Dholuo, and Kameme FM in Kikuyu. Besides these ethnic language stations, there are also stations that broadcast in Kiswahili and in both English and Kiswahili with announcers who are hired not because they are trained in journalism, but rather due to their popularity among the general public. In urban areas, such personalities often use Sheng in their talk shows. Private FM stations in ethnic languages that continue to emerge, for the first time, seem to offer local languages a public that had never been envisaged by ordinary Kenyans.

In print media, English publications dominate the market. In fact there is only one privately run local daily newspaper in Kiswahili called *Taifa Leo*. There are no publications in local languages except occasional street pamphlets that are not professionally produced. This clearly reinforces the dominance of English not only in literacy, but in most of the public media avenues. The Kenyan government does not support local languages as avenues of disseminating public information for fear of promoting ethnic division.

As one can observe, the impetus to have local languages in the public media comes from private enterprises, a move that has sometimes received criticism from the government as a site for hate speech. It is therefore fair to conclude that while the private media liberally allow the use of indigenous languages and Sheng in their programming, language policies in the media run by the government such as the KBC are largely aimed at promoting English and Kiswahili.

Although English is given preferential treatment and reinforced in these public domains, it remains very difficult to ascertain the percentage of the people who speak it effectively in Kenya. Mazrui and Mazrui (1998) point out that English is yet to develop a large number of native speakers in Kenya. What has been established in other African countries is that the percentage of those Africans

¹ Kenya has a new constitution that came into effect in 2010.

who can speak the former colonial languages proficiently, including English, French, Portuguese and Spanish is about 20% (Djité, 2008). This means that such speakers can *effectively* use these languages in different language contexts.

2.1.3. *The vernaculars vs. the official languages*

As already stated in section (2.1), Kenya is a multilingual society with perhaps over 40 vibrant indigenous languages, especially in rural areas where they are used by speakers for their daily needs. Kenya's two official languages, namely English and Kiswahili, are used in formal domains such as education, legal system, business, etc. In contrast, Kenya's local languages are marginalized and viewed as impediments to people's success in education by teachers who serve as government agents. These erroneous views by the school system lead to the stigmatization and devalorization of Kenya's local languages in favor of English, as is the case in many other African states (see Bamgbose and Bokamba in this volume). However, these erroneous views are not cognizant of the role indigenous languages play as the people's initial identity markers and as major tools for small-scale businesses in rural areas that allow ordinary people to carry out transactions in the informal sector. These languages also serve important roles in religious and community development projects. At the local level, local languages facilitate administrative work which is carried out by local leaders such as the village headman, the sub chief and chief. It is important to note that without Kenya's indigenous languages, official policies would not be implemented. Unfortunately, these important roles are taken for granted and Kenya's local languages continue to be marginalized in public domains. This asymmetrical relationship created by unequal playing field conditions affects how speakers whom I studied in 2006 and 2007 construct their language identities.

2.1.4. *Sheng as an urban vernacular for the youths*

Sheng is a hybrid variety spoken mostly in urban areas by youths. This variety is now extending beyond Kenya's major cities into rural areas. Its grammatical base is Kiswahili, but its lexicon is drawn from English, Kiswahili and Kenyan local languages, especially Dholuo and Kikuyu. Abdulaziz and Osinde (1997) describe Sheng as a variety that grew out of the less affluent neighborhoods east of Nairobi. It is therefore not surprising that a few decades ago Sheng was a highly stigmatized variety and viewed as a language used by thugs and young *matatu*² touts from low income neighborhoods. However, through the liberalized airwaves highlighted in section (2.1.2), Sheng has now transcended socioeconomic class boundaries and is used by many youths irrespective of social class or gender. It is now gradually spreading to some rural areas by way of radio and young people who travel between urban and rural areas. This variety has also attracted the attention of business people and politicians who use it to promote their products and policies to young people.

The spread and appreciation of Sheng has also been made possible due to avenues that are usually appealing to the youths and the public in general. For example, young people especially in Kenya and to some extent in Tanzania and Uganda, have adopted hip hop music that is usually sung in Sheng or Swahilinglish as this hybrid form is referred to in Tanzania (Higgins 2007). During recent national elections in Kenya, politicians have been capitalizing on hip hop music to show that they are trendy and that they identify with the youths. Such instances usually affect people's attitudes towards Sheng even though it is not a legitimate code in formal institutions.

In summary, Sheng is pervasive among Kenyan youths and they have adopted it as an identity marker. It is a variety that unifies them, creating in-group solidarity against outsiders. Rural youths also attempt to align with their urban counterparts because they view their way of speaking to be trendy. Although these rural youths can hardly speak like their urban counterparts due to their lack of

² This is a Swahili word that refers to passenger vans that operate on Kenyan roads. In Tanzania these vans are known as daladala.

knowledge of English and exposure to a variety of mass media, their temporal identification with them is something that most rural youths would like to project in non-threatening situations.

3. Previous research on language and identity

In this section I focus on previous literature that links language and identity. I review briefly this phenomenon at the general level before focusing on the African scene where a few studies have been undertaken. The idea here is to show how this study connects with more recent work on language and identity elsewhere in the world, and to consider how the resulting identities can affect language maintenance and shift among Kenyan youths.

3.1. Previous studies in language and identity

Language is inevitably at the center stage of identity construction in multilingual and multi-dialectal contexts where language choices have to be made. In this section, I examine the construct of identity by reviewing some recent research that has focused on identity and language choice.

The essentialist approach that dominated earlier studies is based on pre-established social categories such as gender race, nation, among others, in explaining an individual's identity. Other predetermined categories which are used in this model for identity construction include sex, nation and race. For example, in Labov's (1972) New York study, language identity was correlated with a speaker's socioeconomic class. In that study Labov showed how socioeconomic class could be used to index a speaker's language identity. Conversely, using a speaker's phonological features, one can determine their socio-economic class.

However, while such socially constructed categories are still important in language research, recent studies have found them to be inadequate, because they focused too narrowly on social factors and assumed identity to be static. Thus scholars (e.g., Bucholtz and Hall 2004, 2005, 2008), characterize identity as an emerging construct. These researchers view identity as a construct that continues to emerge and is negotiated based on different situations. Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 586) define identity as "the social positioning of the self and other". In this definition the idea of others in identity construction is acknowledged. Ultimately this approach should help the reader to see how Kenyan youths negotiate their identity through their daily language performances.

One way that helped to contextualize how speakers construct identity in bilingual situations is by Gumperz (1982) whose work shows how the *we* code and *they* code, represent an individual's group identity in relation to others. The *we* code presents the speaker's variety as being informal, familiar and proximal in terms of social distance. In multilingual settings this code would be the local language. The other people's code which is the *they* code, denotes unfamiliarity, formal and social distance. Again this is what one could associate with English or French in postcolonial multilingual contexts where official languages and local languages are ever competing for communicative space in public domains. However, this approach has been found to be inadequate because of intermediate varieties such as urban varieties that do not fall in either of the two categories of official or ethnic languages. As a result, some researchers who use them have had to modify how it can be applied to their local contexts as I shall illustrate below.

Bailey (2000) shows that among Dominican Americans he studied in Northeast USA, the key to the construction of their identity was language but that it was not a straight forward process. Dominicans could at times speak African American Vernacular English to align with African Americans, and at times they spoke Dominican Spanish as a strategy to contest Black/White dichotomization and to reject those who would view them as African Americans.

Jaffe (1999) discusses how the French dominant ideology has helped create mixed ideologies. There are Corsicans who want to identify with Corsican because of who they are, but there are also young people who do not live on the Corsican Island and therefore do identify with French. Jaffe also shows how the school influences young people to abandon their Corsican language and instead embrace French for a better career and future. In her study one sees how the dominant French ideology was used by Corsican teachers to demonize the Corsican language. She notes that in Corsica

as was the case in other French dominated colonies elsewhere, teaching the colonized people French was viewed as an important means of elevating them culturally – cultural assimilation. Clearly the school in this case had a very influential role in inculcating assimilatorily-bound French reasoning in the minds of youths which eventually emerged in a mindset that Bokamba (2008) characterizes as *ukolonia* in the case of Africa.

Another recent study on language and identity is by Williams (2008) who shows how Chinese Americans in California unify as an in-group, but also acknowledge their different identities as Cantonese and Mandarin. In this study parents temporarily identify with Mandarin Chinese not because they have positive attitudes towards it, but because they realize that it is instrumental for their children and it has become a dominant Chinese language among Chinese Americans. People's prior knowledge about Mandarin is brought along to have a negative attitude about it but acknowledge that they still identify with it only for instrumental reasons.

3.2. *Language and identity in Africa*

Africa's multilingual situation presents an important context where language and identity should be at the forefront. Unfortunately, there are very few empirical studies that strictly focus on language and identity. These include Kamwangamalu (2007) who adopts Gumperz's (1982) approach to show how blacks in South Africa, a society in transition, demonstrated multilayered identities of English language depicting a *they* code before apartheid, an ideological *we* code during apartheid when they used English to protest against apartheid, and a pragmatic *we* code after apartheid for those who access the language to communicate with other people in South Africa. Kamwangamalu (2007) uses the naturalized *we* code to refer to the identity of those blacks in urban areas who have shifted from indigenous African languages to English.

This different characterization of English shows the dynamic nature of language identity and how participants continually construct their identity in response to the situations they face. An interesting point which Kamwangamalu (2007) shows and which I pursue in this paper is that in any given society, a language is assigned not one, but several identities at various times in its history.

A related and important study is by Githinji (2006) who examines how Sheng speakers in Kenya identify with their specific base to distinguish themselves from other Sheng speakers. He notes that speakers from low income neighborhoods may also accommodate speakers from affluent neighborhoods by using lexical items that such speakers understand. Githinji's study shows that although Sheng is spreading vertically and horizontally, some speakers use basic Sheng vocabulary with out-group members to facilitate communication. There are other studies which address the question of language and identity in Kenya but largely in-group identity among Sheng speakers (see for example, Abdulaziz and Osinde 1997; Bosire 2008).

In summary, what is apparent in most recent research is an attempt to view identity as dynamic due to different times and situations. These include the already long established aspects such as age, to the socially constructed aspects such as one's gender, race, ethnicity, social class or role. As I examine language and identity among Kenyan youths, I draw on Bucholtz and Hall (2004) model that foregrounds the evolving and dynamic nature of identity. This ties in very well with ideological perspectives about which Williams (2008) reminds readers that contribute to identity formation. She notes that people have a past they build on. These past aspects are an individual's history, previous interactions, and ideological expectations, among others. These are the ones she terms "brought along" or inherited identities. I will now draw on the background information presented above to analyze the data that emerge in the study conducted in Kenya.

4. The current study

The present study builds on an earlier report of language use among Kenyan youths (Muaka 2009) that was carried out in two urban settings of Nairobi and Mombasa and two rural settings of Kakamega and Kangundo. Data were collected through surveys which focused on participants' background, language practices, language attitudes, self evaluations, as well as a translation task that targeted the

evaluation of the participants' proficiency levels in their linguistic repertoires. A total of 273 questionnaires were analyzed in the categories outlined above. Apart from these questionnaires, I also used participant observation and interview strategies to aid in the gathering of data. Similarly, in the analysis of the results the use of an eclectic sociolinguistic approach helped to unravel the ideological contestation inherent in participants' language practices. Ultimately these strategies led to a better understanding of the deeper meanings of the ambivalent nature of the speakers' language perceptions and practices.

4.1. Findings and discussion

Although the main focus of the study was on youths' language practices, a small sample of adults was also included. This was necessary specifically because in order to see the trend in the youths' language perceptions and practices, one needs to compare and contrast their language behavior with that of adults. As I will show in the discussion that follows, there were some noticeable differences in perception compared to actual language practices as evidenced from the survey, observations and interviews. One of the major questions that I sought to answer was whether participants had noticed a decline in the use of indigenous languages in rural areas. It was revealed through questions that there was a decline. This came mostly from the young rural participants who reported that the use of indigenous languages in the rural areas was declining. However, although the urban respondents showed some agreement with this statement, they did not overwhelmingly agree with it. In Table 1 below, I summarize the results.

Place of the subject		The Use of Indigenous Languages has been Declining in the Rural Areas				
		No Idea	Disagree	Somewhat	Agree	Total
Kakamega	Count % within the place of the subject	9 9.0%	18 18.0%	9 9.0%	64 64.0%	100 100%
Kangundo	Count % within the place of the subject	1 2.6%	11 28.9%	3 7.9%	23 60.5%	38 100%
Mombasa	Count % within the place of the subject	5 11.9%	9 21.4%	10 23.8%	18 42.9%	42 100%
Nairobi	Count % within the place of the subject	6 6.9%	25 28.7%	13 14.9%	43 49.4%	87 100%
Total	Count % within the place of the subject	21 7.9%	63 23.6%	35 13.1%	148 55.4%	267 100%

Table 1. Table shows perceptions about language decline in rural areas

As can be observed from Table 1 above, the majority of those participants who perceive a decline in indigenous languages' functionality are from the two rural areas of Kakamega (64%) and Kangundo (60.5%). On the other hand, those who do not highly agree that indigenous languages are declining in functionality are from Nairobi and Kangundo, both with the highest numbers of around 29%. An obvious question that one must ask in light of these facts is why should the participants in rural areas be the ones claiming that indigenous languages are declining in functionality, yet they are supposed to be the custodians of these languages? The answer lies partly in what I observed during the study whereby some speakers would temporarily switch into English or Kiswahili. These were very temporary switches but when this occurs, speakers who were accustomed to speaking local languages

only, perceived such instances as a decline in functionality of these languages. On the other hand, participants in urban areas do not notice the decline to be substantive. For these speakers one can argue that although some of them are not well informed about the rural language situation as their counterparts, their held belief is that rural people are very traditional in their practices and therefore the use of indigenous languages remains one of their major identity markers. Based on the responses in the survey most young people's perception is that indigenous languages have been declining in functionality. However, following further analysis that stems from participant observations and interviews, there is one thing that can be said: The Kenyan society is dynamic. In the recent past people have been very mobile and communication systems have expanded rapidly. My observations show that rural areas have started noticing broader use of languages other than their local languages due to inward migrations. Within vilages, people no longer live only close to those who speak the same language variety. Interethnic marriages and internal migration within these rural areas continue to increase for one reason or another. This has resulted in the need to diversify media of interpersonal communication among rural Kenyans to include Kiswahili, the indigenous language of wider communication. In urban areas, rural urban migration and interethnic marriages enhance the need for the use of both Kiswahili and English.

Another crucial finding is how exposure to different broadcast media continues to make official languages permeate domains that were initially a preserve of local languages. As explained in section (2.1.2), a proliferation of mass media in Kenya has made broadcast and print media readily available to many Kenyans. Access to other forms of communication has increased tremendously and almost every family has a cell phone, a radio and some have even started owning television sets, things that were very rare just less than a decade ago. For example, the survey revealed that 49.5% and 60.5% of the participants in Kakamega and Kangundo, respectively, come from homes with televisions. In Nairobi 95.7% reportedly come from homes with TV sets, while 89.7% of those in Mombasa have access to a TV. Clearly, these electronic gadgets are important because they expose participants to different languages, and more importantly the official languages. As mentioned in section (1) above, English and Kiswahili dominate the media and literacy. Therefore, as people continue to be exposed to different forms of mass media, their products become a part of their lifestyles, building their confidence in their use. Although at the time of undertaking this study only a few young people had been exposed to social networks such as facebook and instant messaging, currently most young Kenyans connect with their friends on facebook via their cellphones. It is also important though, to point out that with the emergence of more broadcast media, vernacular FM radio stations have also emerged thus serving an important role of sustaining programs in the local languages. While a dynamic community does not necessarily mean that local languages are declining in use, it however, shows that Kenyan official languages are now increasingly competing for the same communicative space in informal domains and continually help in constructing youths' language identities.

The foregoing discussion leads to another important point that warrants discussion in an attempt to understand speakers' perceptions and actual performances. A look at the language policy as already highlighted above in section (2.1), focuses on English and to some extent Kiswahili. However, the official language policy in schools also shows that at the initial stages of schooling, local languages should be used as a medium of instruction in linguistically homogenous communities while Kiswahili should be used in areas that are multi-ethnic in composition. Participants' reaction to this inquiry on the survey clearly showed that they had mostly had their education delivered in the official languages. Specifically, 43.2% of the participants reported that at all levels of their education (namely, primary, secondary, and university, if applicable) the medium of instruction was English. Another 44.7% of the participants stated that the media of instruction were Kiswahili and English. Those participants who claimed to have used their mother tongue, Kiswahili and English were only 10.3% of the entire sample. Most of the respondents in this group came from the rural areas of Kakamega (7.9% and Kangundo (23.9%).

These statistics clearly show that there is a disconnect between the official language policy and what is actually implemented on the ground. If there was harmony between policy and practice, we should have seen more participants reporting that their first language, Kiswahili and English were all

used in instruction at different stages of their education. However, the mother tongue even at the early stages of education has been marginalized. It is not surprising therefore, that most participants stated in the survey that they felt comfortable speaking and writing in English and Kiswahili. In contrast, there was consensus among the respondents that their writing and reading skills in their mother tongues were poor. Teachers admitted to deliberately imposing a ban on the local language in order to improve academic performance.

No society wants to lag behind. What is however, misleading is the dominant ideology that knowledge can only be transmitted through English. In Kenya, teachers emphasize knowledge of English over all other languages. This ideology is forced down on both parents and pupils through teachers and other public officers to make them believe that their local languages impede English learning. Local languages are viewed to be unnecessary in education, a perception that sometimes leads to negative attitudes towards them. These ideologies impact how pupils negotiate their language identities. For example, in the presence of teachers and those who can evaluate their intelligence level, pupils fearfully and falsely identify with English but when they are away from these authoritative agents, their local languages become their identity markers. Language policies in Kenya are clearly realized in institutions such as the school where children are required to use English at all times and as observed in many cases, punishment is the reward for those who fail to adhere to this rule. This belief has permeated the minds of the rural youths I studied and now they “blindly” support punishment for those who do not speak English in school. However, this approach is based on a false belief that local languages are the enemy at most or useless at best for the pupils’ success. Although students always face tough consequences when they flout school rules, it is important to note here that some teachers shift between their local and formal language identities even within the school premises with impunity, including in teaching a lesson. While this may be interpreted as a sign of double standards, it clearly demonstrates how local identities are continuously projected in Kenyan rural areas even among teachers. Table 2 below, summarizes participants’ views regarding the punishment policy.

Punish students who don't speak English at school

	Your Place				Total
	Kakamega	Kangundo	Mombasa	Nairobi	
No Idea Count % within your place	2 2.0%	1 2.6%	1 2.2%	5 5.7%	9 3.3%
Disagree Count % within your place	27 26.7%	18 47.4%	24 53.3%	54 61.4%	123 45.2%
Somewhat Count % within your place	6 5.9%	3 7.9%	3 6.7%	8 9.1%	20 7.4%
Agree Count % within your place	66 65.3%	16 42.1%	17 37.8%	21 23.9%	120 44.1%
Total Count % within your place	101 100.0%	38 100.0%	45 100.0%	88 100.0%	272 100.0%

Table 2. Table shows participants’ responses to the punishment policy

As Table 2 reveals, Kakamega youths highly supported the punishment policy by 65% of their participants, compared to 42.1% in Kangundo. These numbers drastically decrease within the urban samples with Nairobi posting only 23.9% and Mombasa 37.8%. The overall survey revealed a split between those who support the policy and those who do not. However, as can also be seen from the statistics, rural participants supported this policy more. It is very probable that the participants in rural areas understand that they lack high proficiency in English, and as was the custom for a long time in Kenya, punishment has been used as a corrective measure in many schools. This is not always the case. Based on the current study, it is the fear instilled in young people that makes them perceive punishment as a cure for not speaking English.

In this study, the impact of the English dominant ideology was clearly evident in the surveys in which most young participants indicated that their writing and reading skills in local languages were weaker than their skills in English and Kiswahili. This trend, which is not surprising or unique to Kenya, was observed in all the four regions that were investigated. The school has been viewed for a long time, and more recently by scholars such as Bourdieu (1991) and Hellier (2006), as a site which the state uses to impose its norms such as the use and reproduction of official languages. According to Bourdieu (1991) such linguistic forms have symbolic power and therefore teachers as agents continue to instill in their students the need to master these legitimate languages for the projected, albeit it false unattainable benefits for most of the students. Given that these are examinable languages as well as media of instruction, it is very clear that the school has an impact on how an individual's perspective is shaped.

The school introduces and sustains the hegemony of the official languages by marginalizing the indigenous languages. Jaffe (1999) observed a similar situation among the Corsican students whom teachers warned that their Corsican language could not take them anywhere, and instead pushed them to embrace French. In the Kenyan situation, students, especially those in rural areas are similarly convinced from the onset that in order for them to succeed they have to abandon using their local languages and instead focus on speaking and writing in English as the only window to success. The consequences of these policies are a lack of literacy proficiency in the local languages. Surprisingly, these speakers are very comfortable speaking and listening in their local languages. Their success is, therefore, still hampered because although the school system expects them to excel in their education, they do not allow them to use the language resource they already have to succeed.

Language is like a vehicle by which an individual can travel from point A to B. Since these students already have a vehicle which they know very well, they should be allowed to use it until they are comfortable to ride in a different vehicle. However, as Bokamba (2008) highlights in what he terms *ukolonia* in African language policies and practices (see also paper in this volume), the failure to do this stems from a misguided language policy that fails to benefit from the reality on the ground. This perception was evident in many of the interviews I conducted, where teachers constantly lamented how difficult it was for them to have students speak in English throughout. Some teachers reported that students always reverted back to their languages or Sheng and those who felt threatened or overwhelmed by this imposition of English especially in rural schools, would skip school. In rural areas, it was not unusual to observe students on school premises speaking in their local languages during break time when their teachers were not in view. In such situations schools have had to impose local rules contrary to the official policies from the ministry of Education. In the two rural areas I visited teachers indicated that they have had to explain things in the local languages. It is only logical that the school system realizes that most of these students are multilingual and they should be allowed to resort to their languages to fully comprehend what is being taught. From an ideological perspective, participants in these contexts are continuously being influenced through the dominant ideology of the so-called inadequacy of their own languages. Although younger participants in rural areas claimed to have higher proficiency in the use of English and Swahili, than their local languages, the reality is that they are not. What is known is that these are the languages in which formal education takes place and therefore students have the consistency of writing and reading in them. On the other hand, these participants have not had much practice in writing and reading in their local languages except for a few church practitioners in whose languages the bible has been translated. Thus, the lack of literacy in the local languages leaves the students with the impression that they do not have good proficiency in them. While it is clear that the pupils in the rural areas that I investigated have not fully developed all the language skills in English, it was apparent from the surveys and interviews that they had more major weaknesses in English than in any of the local languages they speak.

The parents whom I interviewed in the two rural areas where I conducted my fieldwork understand the stigma and predicament associated with people who cannot communicate in English. Such people are viewed as uneducated and unintelligent. Unfortunately for most of these rural parents, the highest level of education they had attained was a primary school certificate. Therefore, because of the high profile that English has been assigned in the society, most parents noted that it would make

them proud if their children could speak it. They pointed out that this would show that their children are also educated. In this case it did not matter that they, themselves were not highly educated. In fact it is this lack of education that made them erroneously equate knowledge of English to intelligence and prestige. However, these parents who were mostly small scale farmers who also made up the small adult sample realize that their local language are the main media of interpersonal communication, and they clearly doubted the possibility of English or even Kiswahili ever becoming the dominant language in their rural areas.

Now, what are the actual levels of performance of these youth participants in these local languages? Based on the data collected, most urban youths lacked adequate proficiency in their local languages. They, however, almost always communicated in Sheng when speaking among themselves and code-switched with their parents. As highlighted in section (2.1.4) this urban group finds it more difficult to speak and write in local languages compared to how they carry the same language tasks in English, Kiswahili or Sheng. Djité (2008) has commented on the current urban generations by noting that some of them are born into middle class homes where their parents speak and encourage them to speak in English or French. In the case of Kenya it is English (see, e.g., Kamwangamalu 2004 with regard to South Africa). For such groups, although they identify with a given local linguistic group, their actual linguistic competence in these languages is highly inadequate and they can only passively participate in interactions conducted solely in these local languages.

In contrast to what one observes in urban settings, the rural youths whom I observed and interviewed felt more comfortable and at ease when speaking in their local languages. Indeed our interviews showed flawless conversations in Luhya and Kamba among most of the participants in the two rural areas. This is contrary to what some participants would report in the surveys about their proficiency in the languages that they speak. Clearly, this confirms what other researchers have noted regarding the command of either English or French which is still very low for most of Africa (Alexander 2003, Djité 2008).

As observed above, there were some discrepancies between language perceptions and the actual language practices of some of the participants. Certainly, there are some reasons that can explain this discrepancy. First and foremost, I argue that there are two ideologies at play: the *dominant ideology* and the *local ideology*. The dominant ideology which is passed on to the institutions to implement pressures the participants to show that they have achieved the system's expected outcomes. Participants will, therefore, through what Bokamba (2008) calls *ukolonia* – a mental disorder, try to show that they speak the English language. They do this because they have been brain-washed to believe that their languages are worthless, and therefore they do not want to display their stigmatized languages to outsiders. This is clearly erroneous thinking that should be corrected given what is accomplished through Africa's indigenous languages. As highlighted in section (2.1.3), although these languages have been denied communicative space in public domains, they are the media that carry the burden of the thriving informal business sector of Africa. Kenya's economy depends on informal *jua kali*³ sector which thrives because of ordinary Kenyans who do not need English or French to carry out their transactions. Stated simply, these are the languages in which Kenyans conceptualize ideas very well. Michieka (2005) indirectly alludes to the same idea when she observes that because English is synonymous with literacy, most speakers would want to claim that they speak and write in it very well. As I have noted elsewhere (Muaka 2009), teachers reinforce the use of English all the time when the students are on school premises, but teachers also switch into their local languages just as students do whenever there is an opportunity to do so. This shows how language identity is continually constructed across the board.

On the other hand, the local ideology, which is the *habitus* in this case, has an upper hand in the speakers' actual performance. Most of these rural youths are born in families and around people who speak the local languages on a daily basis. These are therefore the languages that are more transparent

³ The Kenyan informal sector where people work on the open workshops or markets that literally means "hot sun."

to them and they are the ones that come to the fore. Yes, the school system is in the process of transforming these young people so they can become fluent speakers of English, but they have not succeeded. Therefore, what predominates unconsciously for these speakers is either the local language or Kiswahili. For the urban youths their informal style of speaking takes the center stage through Sheng and therefore it is the variety within which their expressions come out naturally. These are areas that were observed and upon further probing through interviews and observations with some of the participants it clearly emerged as an explanation for the discrepancy that exists between perceptions and actual performances. One student who was interviewed observed that it is rare to find predominant use of English or even Swahili in their rural setting. Such occurrences can, however, be observed with visitors, or during Christian crusades when people from different ethnic backgrounds may travel to a rural area for an evangelization mission. In such cases, the use of Kiswahili is what you hear with interpreters at hand as well.

It is also important to note here that although political leaders and government officers operate in domains where the use of English is predominant, they realize that the ordinary people do not necessarily have a good command of English language. It is not surprising, therefore, that during political campaign seasons politicians use the local languages or Kiswahili to present their agenda. During the study, I also observed and participated in talks with teachers not only in Kiswahili and English, but also in the local language of the people on school premises. These kinds of interactions among teachers demonstrate that code-switching is a very common phenomenon in formal domains. This reality is what is ironic in the Kenyan language situation. Whereas the policy makers want to emphasize the use of English, often times they come to the realization that the language of currency for most people is Swahili in urban settings and the Kenyan local languages dominate in the rural areas.

What is important for the policy makers to realize is how entrenched these local languages are in their speakers' minds and by this token foster multilingualism instead of destroying the very cultural identity of the people. These local languages can survive harmoniously with the official languages and so instead of putting pressure on the speakers at a very early age, their use should be viewed as a resource and allowed whenever and as long as it is needed.

5. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that Kenyan youths live in a diverse and a dynamic society which exposes them to different linguistic varieties. As a habit, they are able to use these different codes for different functions. These different situations lead them to construct and enact different language identities that are influenced by their experiences that are also ideological.

The foregoing discussion has also shown that Kenyan institutions, especially schools, have adopted language policies that pressure Kenyans to abandon an important part of their identity – local languages. Because of this pressure, participants live with two competing ideologies. In domains where they are expected to demonstrate their competence in English and Kiswahili, the Kenyan youths temporarily perform a language identity that portrays them as proficient users of the official languages. Unfortunately, their lack of proficiency in English leads to their inability to constantly project this identity. However, within their in-groups, outside official domains, when interacting with those who do not judge their English, they project their local language identities with which they are very comfortable. These dynamics demonstrate similar situations described by scholars such as Bailey (2000), Bucholtz and Hall (2004) in their language and identity studies.

Another critical finding that emerges from this study is the different identities that the youths themselves project. Rural youths wish to identify with their urban counterparts in speaking Sheng even though in reality what they do are occasional borrowings from English. In such situations, urban youths accommodate them by gravitating towards them by using lexical items that are universal and which most youths can comprehend in interactions. On the other hand, urban youths use Sheng mostly among themselves, but shift to either codeswitching or standard Swahili and English when speaking to their parents or adults.

The foregoing language practices lead to what may be considered discrepancy in the speakers' language perceptions and actual language performance which reveal that they are more at ease and comfortable expressing themselves in their local languages or varieties such as Sheng. In other words, as House (2003) has argued, for such speakers, English is simply used for instrumental purposes. Their true identity lies in their indigenous languages which are still alive and vibrant (Bokamba 2007; Mufwene 2008). In urban areas Sheng has entrenched itself to an extent that most speakers find it appealing and cool. To these youths and anybody who uses the variety, Sheng is an identity marker, but it can also be used as an equalizer between the formal and the informal way of communicating. It may also be a form of covert resistance to the enforcement of the use of English, a practice in which some of the rural youths are trying to engage. They have not yet, however, achieved the level of proficiency found in the urban speakers, because of the infrequency of the use this variety. In the rural areas, however, participants often fall back to their indigenous languages, but when they interact with people from outside their linguistic codes, they resort to Kiswahili and very few of them occasionally borrow lexical items from English.

Finally, it is clear that Kenyan language policies fail to reflect what Kenyans project as their language identities. This calls for a revision of its language policies to acknowledge the diversity that exists in Kenya and Africa as a whole. For example, in Kenya, people have introduced cultural nights throughout major urban cities where everything is performed in the local language of that particular group. This is a reality which Williams (2008) alludes to when she describes the experiences of Chinese Americans in California. The perennial fear that promoting local languages will lead to tribalism should be abandoned, and instead encourage the growth of these languages through well articulated policies that are disseminated through them. This approach will encourage people to cherish their identity as Kenyans, and all other socially constructed categories into which they fall.

This study is important because it shows that Kenyan local languages are still vibrant. The only undoing agent is the Kenyan official position which continuously attempts to curtail the vitality that Kenyan languages enjoy among their speakers. Theoretically, this study has followed an approach that helps to view youth's language and identity as dynamic. Different language identities have been projected, with some of them being temporal and serving instrumental purposes; while others are personal and recur frequently both as a fall back and as a reflection of who the speakers are. This is an approach that seems to describe best youths' language in multilingual settings and could be applied profitably to other contexts.

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