

Language Maintenance and Shift among Kenyan University Students

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1. Introduction

This study examines patterns of language use among a group of Kenyan youths to establish whether multilingualism is thriving or the local languages are threatened by a potential shift. To address the question, several Kenyan university students were surveyed by use of a detailed questionnaire with four distinct sections that investigated language use patterns. Results show that, while most users still consider themselves bi/ multilingual and therefore supporting the argument for a thriving multilingualism situation, the functions these users allocate the indigenous languages are quite limited. The factors contributing to maintenance of indigenous language or shift include, among others, national language policies, context of one's upbringing (whether rural or urban), parents' educational levels, nature of parents' marriages (inter-ethnic or intra-ethnic) and users' attitudes towards the languages in question.

Studies have revealed that languages do not necessarily die just because their speakers die but languages also die, and often so, as a result of shift of allegiance by their speakers to other languages (Landweer, 2000). Studies on ethnolinguistic vitality also show that the trend of language loss tends to exhibit a particular fixed pattern normally beginning with a forced or voluntary language shift followed by a gradual or sudden language loss (Allard, & Landry, 1992; Gal, 1979; Huffines, 1980; Pandharipande, 1992). How fast a language shifts depends on the amount of pressure or attraction from the new language that receives allegiance.

1.1. Is endangerment of major Kenyan indigenous languages an oxymoron?

Kenya, like most African countries, has several ethnic groups and over forty ethnic languages. These various languages generally fall under three major language families: Bantu, Nilotic and Cushitic, although there are a few such as Gujarati and Hindi that do not fit into any of these classes. As is common in most multilingual communities, Kenyans have always juggled their languages to fit various contexts. Most speakers have in the past maintained a triglossic situation where English, Kiswahili and indigenous languages co-exist and are used in various domains. Kamwangamalu (2000) cites a typical trilingual scenario in an urban Kenyan context where a young boy uses mother tongue/ ethnic language at home, Kiswahili or Sheng at play and English at school or in church (p.100). For the most part, urban centers are highly multilingual and as a result trilingualism has always been a common feature among Kenyans, especially the elites. Most educated Kenyans speak Kiswahili, English and at least one ethnic language. Individual multilingualism in Kenya, just like in the rest of Africa, has been assumed for a long time and as Thomason (2001) observes, "in Africa, educated people in former English colonies speak English as well as one or more African languages a great

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many Africans speak at least one indigenous lingua franca...in addition to a local language, and there are also many Africans who speak more than one local language' (p.32)

Recent studies, however, indicate that this co-existence of languages in Kenya and in the rest of Africa is being threatened especially in most urban settings (Kamwangamalu, 2003a; Kamwangamalu, 2003 b; Michieka, 2005; Mugane, 2003; Mugambi, 2002). Young Kenyans no longer maintain this trilingualism pattern, and unfortunately, it is the indigenous languages that are being lost. Mugane (2003) talks about a generation growing up in "linguistic strandedness" (p.1). He raises a number of questions on the current language situation in Africa and Kenya in particular. In his article, Mugane argues that, clearly, there is a language shift taking place and the shift is about "conquest" and that, "language shift...is about erasing specific cultural and social identities and taking on those of the dominant other" (p.11). Mugane further argues that while the causes of language shift are many, the ultimate cause is "power". The reason some languages will die while others continue to flourish is because languages carry with them the power of the speakers. If a language is used by powerful speakers, then that language will continue to be maintained while that of powerless speakers will weaken. Mufwene (2008) has made a similar argument. He argues that, "Languages do not engage in wars either, though they co-exist in competition like biological species sharing an econiche and vying for the same resources. The species that has the less access to the resources is endangered" (p. 223). How do languages hold more power and more resources than others?

The Kenyan education policy illustrates the distribution of power among languages. The policy has not only sidelined African languages from use in intellectual realms, but has also given priority to some languages over others. English commands a lot of power; it is the language of instruction, of national exams, of job applications, of well paying jobs, of prestigious churches, of elite neighborhoods, of travel, of good and entertaining mass media, of great novels and most newspapers. What place or special role is left for the Kenyan indigenous languages? Again to quote Mugane, there is really, "no explicit benefit associated with the mastery of local languages except Kiswahili" (p. 14). Presently Kiswahili is used alongside English in parliament, in churches, in education, on the radio and TV, in the public service and in most inter-ethnic communication. Ethnic languages are mainly used in the home domain, but is there any possibility that they might fall into non use even in the home domain, especially among young people and future generations?

In Kenya, language is often closely linked with ethnicity, and to a large extent, as Swilla (2005) argues "Language choice, maintenance and shift concern the issue of identity" (p. 25). If language is an important symbol of group identity and group members recognize and value their membership in that particular group, then they will strive to maintain the language. How valuable is group identity to young people in most urban settings in Kenya? What identity are they seeking? Dorian (1982) observes that language loyalty persists when the economic and social circumstances are conducive. Are there any economic or social advantages of using an indigenous language that could attract loyalty from young users?

1.2. Possible causes of language endangerment

Language has a life of its own and just like with other living beings, language death is not caused by a single factor. Language death, like that of human beings, can be sudden or gradual. A calamity that strikes a group of language speakers could bring about sudden death of not just the speakers but of the languages as well, especially if the language was not documented (Mufwene, 2008). Other social causes that may result in language loss include factors such as a country's language policy, urbanization, industrialization, urbanization and contact with other cultures. Landweer (2000) extends this list coming up with several factors: (1) relative position on the urban-rural continuum (2) domains in which the language is used (3) frequency and type of code switching (3) population and group dynamics, (4) distribution of speakers within their own social networks (5) social outlook regarding and within the speech community (6) language prestige (7) access to a stable and acceptable economic base. The degree of a language endangerment or vitality will therefore depend on how many of these factors are operational and at what level.

2. Research questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the vitality or threat on the Kenyan indigenous languages by exploring language use patterns among the Kenyan youth. Since language lives through its speakers, the patterns of language use among the youths will reflect the state of the indigenous languages. The questions I took up were, (1) What languages do Kenyan university students prefer in various domains? (2) In which domain are ethnic languages preferred? (3) What might the language preferences reveal about indigenous language vitality? (4) What is the level of self-declared fluency in ethnic languages? (5) What factors are contributing to maintenance or possible loss of fluency in indigenous languages among the Kenyan youths?

3. Methodology

3.1. Selection of participants

Since the study was on Kenyan students, any data from non Kenyan students was not used. Selection of the participants was based on the assumption that college or university students represent the trends of elite youths from all around the country. The university students come from diverse language backgrounds, and, for a pilot study, this group could reflect language trends across the nation and not just one specific language group. The subjects were also selected based on convenience sampling since their semester was still on, and I could get as many students as were willing to participate. The only requirement was that they be Kenyan university students.

3.2. Description of participants

The subjects in this study were 240 Kenyan university students: 57.4% female and the other 41.3% male. Three participants (1.3%) did not indicate their gender on the questionnaire. The participants were from various parts of Kenya and represented over 32 different ethnic languages/mother tongues. Participants were categorized into age groups as follows: age 18-20, age 21-30, age 31-40 and those above 40. The largest percentage was of those aged 21-30, who made up 66% of the participants. Over 92% of the participants were aged 18-30 and thus could rightfully be considered to be youths. Participants were also categorized according to areas of upbringing: rural versus urban. More than half of the participants, (56.9%), reported that they were raised in urban areas.

3.3. The survey items

To address the research questions, participants were surveyed by use of a questionnaire that investigated language use patterns. The questionnaire had four sections but this paper has focused on section one and two of the survey. The first section was an in-depth exploration of the participants' biographical information to assess how various family backgrounds and upbringing enhance or hinder language maintenance and shift. This section sought information such as participants' age, gender, ethnic group, place of birth and parents' educational levels. The second part explored language use patterns seeking information on languages preferred in various contexts. The third part had several items that surveyed language attitudes. The final part was an open-ended question asking for comments on individual factors influencing their fluency or lack of fluency in their ethnic languages.

The questionnaires were distributed to all willing participants along with necessary instructions. Since all the students were in an institution where English is the medium of instruction, the questionnaire was in English and no translation was required.

3.4. Data analysis

The data collected from the questionnaire items was analyzed using descriptive statistics. Results are presented below with a few tables given for illustration. Open-ended questions were categorized so that they would be interpreted for possible generalizations.

4. Findings

The results are reported in the order in which the questions were asked beginning with the language preference in various contexts.

- What language do you prefer to use in the following contexts?
- Do you consider yourself fluent in your ethnic language?
- What factors have contributed to your fluency or lack of fluency?

4.1. What language do you prefer to use in the following contexts?

The purpose of this question was to elicit information on the domains of language use among the participants. Generally in multilingual communities, various languages are allocated specific functions and one could expect that the ethnic languages, if they are still vibrant and not under threat could be the languages used at home with family members and close associates from the same ethnic groups. Several functions were listed including questions on language used in reading novels and other books, in reading magazines, in listening to music, listening to the radio, conversing with friends, in church, in social gatherings and in conversing with family members.

Most participants prefer English (89%) as a language of choice for reading novels and other books (See Table 1). Several participants also reported a preference for English when reading newspapers and magazines (90%). In addition, English was reported to be the preferred language of writing letters (86%), of listening to music (49.2%), listening to the radio (63.3%) and conversing in social gatherings (50.8%). Since the question on social gatherings did not specify the nature or context of the gathering, chances are that results could be different if respondents were asked about specific social gatherings. Whatever contexts they visualized, it is still interesting that more than half of the participants preferred English. That English is the preferred language of reading and writing was not surprising considering that the participants have always been in English medium of instruction schools and also by the fact that English is the main language of most available printed materials.

Table 1. Language preferred in reading novels and other books

Language	Percentage
Missing	0.4
English	89.0
Mother tongues	0.8
English/Swahili code switch	8.5
Swahili	1.3
Total	100

Evidently, while most of the participants (66%) still prefer English as a language of texting, as Table 2 below shows, the next language that is competing for that place is Sheng with a total of 17% of the participants. The mother tongues/ ethnic languages are preferred by only 0.4% of the participants.

Table 2. Language preferred in text messaging

Language	Percentage
Missing	2.1
English	66.3
Mother tongues	0.4
English/Swahili code switch	10.8
Swahili	2.1
Sheng	17.1
Trilingual	1.3
Total	100

Generally it is at home where the ethnic languages rule and where their vitality is proven, and this question was intended to find out how well the indigenous languages are doing in the one and main domain where they are supposed to reign. As Table 3 shows, unlike the other domains discussed above, English is not the most preferred language in the home context. Some of the participants, (37.5%), reported that they preferred to use their mother tongues at home. While the language of choice at home is a mother tongue, Kiswahili follows very closely behind with 35%. Therefore over 62% of the families represented in this study do not prefer use of mother tongues at home.

Table 3: Language preferred in conversing with family members

Language	Percentage
Missing	2.5
English	10.4
Mother tongues	37.5
English/Swahili code switch	7.1
Swahili	35.8
Trilingual	6.7
Total	100

4.2. Do you consider yourself fluent in your ethnic language?

Several questionnaire items were used to elicit responses on self declared fluency. In one of the items, participants were asked if they can communicate in their ethnic languages. In another item, participants asked if they considered themselves fluent in their ethnic languages. A number of participants (40%) reported that they were not fluent in their ethnic languages while 53% said they believed they were. The remaining 8% did not respond. In a final question on self declared fluency, participants were asked if they can read and write in their ethnic languages. In response to this last question, 41 % of participants reported that they can read and write in their ethnic languages while 52% said that they cannot.

4.3. What factors have contributed to your fluency or lack of fluency?

In this open ended question, participants were asked to report on factors that have led to their fluency or lack of fluency in the ethnic languages. While responses varied widely, there were recurring factors. Respondents argued that their fluency was hindered because of several factors including limited use of the language at home and even influences from national language policies. Some of their responses are recorded verbatim.

“My parents are from different tribes “

“Not being taught my tribal language early enough by my parents”

“Tribal language is not useful”

“Relating and having friends who are not from my tribe”

“The distance from those people speaking in mother tongue has influence my language”

“Brought up in urban areas where its [rear] to speak my tribal language”

“Living in the urban areas where the tribal language is not regularly spoken”.

Those participants who reported fluency in their ethnic languages gave factors that they considered important in the maintenance of their ethnic languages. These factors were a reversal of the hindrances discussed above. Many participants who consider themselves fluent felt that the fluency was an obvious result of spending time in the rural contexts or in homes where the language is spoken. Some of the responses have been included below.

“I stay in rural area where many people use it”

“Visiting my rural area during holiday”

“I was raised in a rural area so I have known it and can’t forget, I usually joke with my family in my tribal language, I consider it important knowing my tribal language”

“being brought up in family where mum and dad speak the same language”

5. Discussion

The general trend of language use shown in the data above seems to indicate that there might be a shift taking place. As an official language, English is expected to be the language of most reading and writing, especially formal reading and writing. In earlier studies such as the work done in the early 70's by Whiteley (Whiteley,1974), English use was reported to be restricted to official domains such as use in the schools and in official communications. The indigenous languages on the other hand were mainly used at home and they tended to be the key languages preferred in the home domain. This study suggests that Kenyan youths are shifting from the usual trilingual which has been the case in the past.

5.1. Language preferred

English seems to be the preferred language in most domains. It is the preferred language in reading, writing letters, texting and sending email messages, listening to music, to the radio, and the language of most social gatherings. Kiswahili is the preferred language of talking with friends followed by English and Sheng. Mother tongues only feature in conversations with family members and even at home; these languages are preferred by a relatively small percentage (37.5%). Other languages seem to be taking over even in the home domain where I had hypothesized that indigenous languages could take the lead.

5.2. Factors that hinder or enhance proficiency in indigenous languages

As mentioned earlier, language shift and ultimate death cannot be attributed to just one factor. As the participants of this study show, the shift from the indigenous languages is attributed to several causes including

- Interracial marriages resulting in limited or no use of ethnic languages at home
- Parents giving priority to English and Swahili acquisition during early childhood
- Limited contact with extended family members who are proficient in mother tongue
- National language policies that include early childhood education which gives priority to English and Swahili
- Being raised in urban neighborhoods where the language of the playground is either Kiswahili or some kind of code switching
- Lack of pride in the ethnic languages.

Those participants who are proficient in their languages believe they have maintained fluency because they stay in rural areas where these languages are used, and also as a result of encouragement from parents who insist on the use of ethnic languages at home. The urban dwellers who are fluent in their indigenous languages attributed that fluency to constant communication with relatives and family members, such grandparents, who are proficient in the language.

6. Conclusion

The reported trends in language preference by the participants in this study seem to point to the process of language shift. Although there are no statistics from previous generations to back up this conclusion, general observations such as those made by Kamwangamalu (2000) support the existence of a triglossic situation in a recent past, especially among urban residents. It is evident from this study that the ethnic languages are losing ground to other languages even in interpersonal domains such as communication with family members at home. The shift is not necessarily towards English, as data shows, but to several languages. Kiswahili is the preferred language of talking with friends followed by English and Sheng. In fact, as this data shows, it is Kiswahili and Sheng that seem to be in the greatest competition for the interpersonal domain. Most young people, especially those raised in urban areas, have grown up in families where Kiswahili or a code mixing between Kiswahili and English, is the main home language. Naturally then, these young people do not just prefer Kiswahili, but have not developed enough proficiency in the indigenous languages to allow for interpersonal usage.

The findings of this study indicate that Kenyan indigenous languages are not the preferred languages in most domains. English is preferred in most domains, especially formal ones. This could not be a problem if that preference was restricted to formal domains; in any case, in most multilingual contexts such coexistence is expected. The official language is used for instruction and hence becomes the language of reading and writing; it is used to keep official records, it is the language of the law and ultimately the language of governance. As long as the domains of use are clearly delineated, the indigenous languages can continue to have their place. What is problematic and disturbing in this study though, is the fact that indigenous languages are no longer the preferred languages in most homes as reported by the participants. These languages are also not the preferred languages of other forms of informal interpersonal communications. The threat to the indigenous languages is not necessarily English, but Kiswahili and Sheng or other forms of code switching. While young users might remain bilingual and capable of code switching, the languages in which they are proficient do not include their ethnic languages. Clearly, then there is an indication of a shift in language use and steps need to be taken to ensure the maintenance of these languages. Future research will focus on a comparison between rural and urban statistics to see whether the shift is more of an urban than rural trend. Research will also need to explore ways of controlling this shift and thus maintaining indigenous languages. Linguistic diversity is a treasure that we should all strive to maintain.

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