EFFECTS OF MOTHER TONGUE LOSS ON INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES

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Drawing from the Kenyan experience, this paper seeks to address the situation in which individuals find themselves when they lose their mother tongue, either through language shift, language loss or language death. It thus seeks to respond to the question, “What does one lose when one loses one’s mother tongue?” People from minority language groups, be they indigenous or migrant, are often at the risk of losing their languages. They quickly establish which languages have prestige, power and preference, and focus their attention to keeping those vibrant in their lives. Also, with some of these languages living only in the minds of their speakers, without orthography or any other form of record, minority languages are at a risk of being lost with every death of an elder and every shift of a youth from speaking them. Attitudes toward language loss run deep and many people who lose their mother tongues tend to suppress their feelings of insecurity born out of loss of self-confidence and self-assertiveness. This insecurity is also compounded by the loss of one’s culture. The paper goes further to highlight the effects that language loss has on society.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Ostler (1999) the languages of the world are divided into three categories according to their health status: healthy languages, endangered languages and dead languages. A healthy language is one that is actively being learned by children as a first language. This is the language that is in everyday use at home, in the market place and at school. Generally, healthy languages are the languages in the public and private setting.

Endangered languages, on the other hand, are those that have experienced language shift. These are divided into three stages: First, there are the languages that still behave healthy because they have native speakers speaking them; however, for these languages, the percentage of children speaking them has fallen below that of their adult speakers’ population. The second stage of language endangerment occurs when parents, for different reasons, stop teaching their own children their native language. When this happens, the language in question falls into rapid disuse, and at this stage the said language is viewed as being severely endangered. The third stage of language endangerment is called the moribund state. Languages that are moribund will have native speakers among the adult population but are not being learned and used by the children at home or in school. This is probably what happens to minority languages when their speakers move to the urban and linguistically heterogeneous areas or to regions that have dominant majority languages. Due to prolonged periods of
disuse, these languages then become moribund.

Language shift and language endangerment are the precursor routes to language death and this is the fourth and final stage of language endangerment. Language death occurs when a language has lost all its speakers and has no living native speakers, it is therefore classified a dead language. According to Headland (1999) a language is endangered when it is in a fairly imminent danger of dying out. He states two ways to quickly recognize when a language is on its way to death. One is when the children in the community are not speaking the language of their parents, and the other is when there are only a small number of people left in the ethno-linguistic community: He states that:

“...the language dies because the entire people group dies... especially common in the Amazon and in North America in the 19th and 20th centuries; and I know of one recent case of in my own research in the Philippines”. Headland (1999:2).

2. LANGUAGE SHIFT

Language shift, also known as language transfer, is a process whereby a speech community reduces the functions of its native language or even stops using it all together, replacing it with another language. This other language usually being the language of prestige and upward mobility in society or one that gives these speakers social acceptance. This other is usually a language of wider communication or a majority language of a neighbouring community.

This scenario usually occurs when marginalized minority language groups are forced by their circumstances to shift from using their language to that of another community so as to destigmatize themselves and to access facilities such education, health, other social amenities as well as communal protection available to the speakers of the majority language group. The most severe form of language shift is known as assimilation. Assimilation happens when a community of speakers of one language becomes bilingual in another and progressively stops using its own native language in favour of that other language, a great threat, especially to the minority languages. According to Cheruiyot (2015):

...the threat of extinction to which some of the languages of Kenya are exposed is a gradual process, which tends to affect the minority languages most keenly. These ...experience intense pressure - economic, social and political - to give up their own cultures, including their languages, to embrace those of the majority groups. These minority languages include the Ogiek, Elmolo, Sengwer, Yaaku, and Waata, most of them traditionally hunters and gatherers. In addition, Kikuyu, Turkana, Luhya and Maasai in Kenya, being the majority languages, have gradually assimilated the minority languages of Ogiek, Elmolo and Yaaku respectively. (Cheruiyot, 2015: 2)

2.1 Causes of language shift
Language is useful as a tool for communication when it is widespread in usage and deemed useful by its speakers. All people, including children, will not bother to learn a language simply to be patriotic to their extended families and their ethnic background. They will learn a language that is widespread in usage and one that they deem beneficial to them. This reluctance to learn or teach (to the next generation) and use one’s mother tongue encourages the learning and using of another language; one that is viewed as more socially prestigious and economically powerful, and one that promises upward mobility and a better future (Mutiga 2006).

This reluctance is, therefore, the main reason for language shift and when it occurs, it sets in motion the first sign of language endangerment which, as mentioned earlier, is known as language shift. People from minority language groups, immigrants as well as migrants, in new neighbourhoods are very quick at distinguishing this state of affairs and according to SIL (2006) this is deemed to be the most important cause of language shift and eventual language death.

Today, speakers are shifting from speaking their indigenous languages for the single reason that these languages have not been passed on from the generation of their parents to them. No matter how large the adult-speaker population is, when the parents fail to pass their language to the children, the fate of that language is already sealed. The language, therefore, will become moribund as soon as the child population shifts from speaking it.

Political and economic dominance by larger communities and infiltration of western languages play an important role in the process of language shift. The global economy often forces non-industrialized communities to choose between their traditional languages and a language that gives them participation in world affairs. For example, in the East African region there is a need for the inhabitants of this bloc to speak Kiswahili for wider communication, and not any of its many other indigenous languages such as, Kikuyu, Kikamba, Luganda, Kinyankole or Kichagga. This happens so that the inhabitants of the region will be able to do successful regional trade in goods and services, transportation of people and commodities, the operations of the East African Parliament and for the East African Co-operation. The global community, on the other hand, needs to speak English for its inhabitants to access science and technology, and may use many other languages depending on the context of the interaction. The world needs to speak languages of wider communication to so as to open up global communication and interaction.

These languages of wider communication and upward mobility, be they Kiswahili for East Africa or English for the World, for example, should and do co-exist with local indigenous languages but more often than not, they tend to replace the indigenous ones as older speakers die and younger ones
adopt what they deem to be the more useful tongue.

Another reason why the minority language groups are dying is because they lack orthography and as such they are not written down or preserved in any form except in the minds and memories of their speakers. As stated earlier, these languages are not being taught to the children by the parents and are thus not spoken at home, with the death of every elder in the community therefore, a part of them dies. Aulakh (2013) illustrates this point as follows:

When Ouma Aenki Kassie, a wrinkled elderly woman, died in Upington, South Africa, she left a rare and endangered language teetering on the edge of extinction Kassie, who died in January 2013, was one of the last speakers of the Nj uu language, listed as “critically endangered” by UNESCO. With her death, there are perhaps seven people in the world who speak Nj uu.

As many as half of the world’s 7,000 languages are expected to be extinct by the end of this century; it is estimated that one language dies out every 14 days. Endangered languages, much like endangered species of plants or animals, are on the brink of extinction. A language is endangered when parents are no longer teaching it to their children and it is no longer being used in everyday life. A language is considered nearly extinct when it is spoken by only a few elderly native speakers. (Aulakh, R. Environment. Published by www.thestar.com, April 15, 2013)

3. THE KENYAN SITUATION

The Kenyan situation is not different from what is happening in the rest of the world, and the following structures have spurred the process of language shift: the choice of the language of instruction in school and the premium placed on the use of English, and to a lesser degree also Kiswahili, have been the main culprits in the ‘move’ that has led to language shift in the Kenyan scene. As Mbaabu (1996) states, in the school system, the Kenya language policy for education stipulates that in the first three years of primary school, teaching be done in the language of the catchment area of the school. This translates into teaching in the mother tongue in the linguistic homogenous regions where the school’s catchment areas uses one language. Kiswahili, on the other hand, is used in the urban areas and in other linguistically heterogeneous regions where the catchment area of the school comprises multiple languages.

The education language policy further dictates that, from primary school standard four, all class instruction be done in English. This change of the language of instruction so soon into the education programme seems to negate the position of the local indigenous languages as they quickly become non-useful languages in the classroom, and pupils are not allowed any longer to use them in school. These same languages, previously used as medium of instruction, become forbidden and are often blamed for interfering with good learning and mastery of English, especially, and sometimes also Kiswahili.
Premium is placed on English and Kiswahili as official and national languages in Kenya, where English is the official language for law and public administration and for international communication, and Kiswahili is not only an official and national language but also the lingua franca for business communication within the country and the East African region. As a national language, it is the language used to foster national and regional unity.

The local mother tongues do not play any major national role after the first three years of school. If anything, political nuances blame ethnic languages for promoting tribalism and dividing the people, while teachers and the school system, on the other hand, view mother tongues as interferences to the learning of English and Kiswahili, the languages of examination and future social-economic mobility of the pupils.

3.1 Effects of the current linguistic scenario on mother tongues

The situation on the ground is that more and more Kenyans are moving away from speaking their mother tongues. According to Mutiga (2013), the majority of these do so due to elitism; the elite social classes of the country neglect to use their indigenous languages at home with their children and choose to speak to them in English, the language of prestige and upward mobility. The lower income bracket of the Kenyan society, on the other hand, especially those living in urban areas and in the linguistic heterogeneous regions, often use Kiswahili and, or Sheng’. These two categories of the Kenyan population can therefore be said to promote language shift in the manner of favouring the languages of wider communication and those of presumed upward mobility, at the expense of their mother tongues.

This status quo has produced a generation of Kenyans, especially the urbanite, that has undergone language shift, from the native languages to English, Kiswahili and Sheng’, a patois that started as an urban vernacular among the Kenyan youth in the nineteen sixties.

Together with these, there is a sizable number of Kenyan language groups whose speakers have shifted to speaking, not the languages of wider communication, but rather have been marginalized and dominated by larger language communities, the so-called majority languages groups, who happen to be their neighbours. This sizable number comprises the minority language groups of Kenya.

According to Mutiga (2005), these languages include the Sabaot of Mt. Elgon, a minority language group that has lived side by side with the Lubukusu, a majority neighbouring language; the Tharaka of Eastern Kenya bordering the Kiimenti dialect of Kiimeru, a majority language in its neighbourhood. The Sabaot and the Tharaka had for a long time, to learn the languages of their dominant neighbours, Lubukusu and Kiimenti, respectively, as these have for a long time been the only languages of instruction in the
schools within their localities and the catchment areas of their schools. However, it is should be noted that Sabaot and Kitharaka have been revived from a shifting state to a point of vibrancy by creating their orthographies and, introducing and using them as the language of instruction in the local schools. This happened through the work of Bible Translation and Literacy (BTL), a non-governmental organization involved in literacy and community development (Mutiga 2006).

Other examples of minority language groups that have been linguistically dominated by neighbouring majority language are the Elmolo of Northern Kenya, being assimilated by the Turkana, a majority neighbouring language (Odero 2013) and the Yaaku, also known as Dorobo or Ogiek, a minority language marginalized by the Kalenjin language speakers. According to Blackburn (1974),

> Although they speak a Kalenjin dialect depending on who they border, as their first language, the Ogiek do not (even today) consider themselves to belong to either Tugen, Nandi or Kipsigis by virtue of speaking the language .... All Ogiek ... now have become like their non-Ogiek neighbours in language and to some extend culturally. (Blackburn, 1974: 4).

This status quo has diminished the value and use of these minority languages, and has even led to the indigenous speakers at times abandoning their languages completely for the neighbouring ones so as to access education, and acceptability in school and the society at large.

Due to this state of affairs, Elmolo has progressed beyond language shift, it is said to be moribund, while Ogiek, on the other hand has gone beyond language shift and the moribund stage and is actually classified as a dead language (Odero 2013).

Kenya has progressively neglected some of the mother tongues of its people and a progressive shift to the languages of wider communication has been ostensibly encouraged through the national language policy, and implicitly through negative attitudes towards minority languages and a positive one towards those deemed to be languages of upward mobility. Due to this state of affairs, the minority languages severely feel the effect of this neglect. However, although the majority language groups may not be feeling the effect of language shift and the general national attitude towards mother tongues as yet, as more and more elitist groups neglect to teach these languages to their children, effectively failing to pass them on from one generation to another, the effect of language shift will clearly come to be felt by the majority languages just like it has been felt by the minority ones.

We can, therefore, argue that all Kenyan languages are progressively being affected by language shift, which is a move from less prestigious languages to those that are deemed more prestigious. All mother tongues are thus endangered.
3.2 Effects of language shift

Language shift and language death go hand in hand and the result is language loss. According to Giles (1977), when speakers lose their language they lose their symbol of identity and this has a negative impact on their social-psychological well-being.

Language is not only an instrument of communication; it is the carrier of cultural norms and values of a people. Transmitting of a language from one generation to another ensures the transmission of their culture and value system. When this fails to happen these norms and values are lost. Using group language emphasizes group feelings and the out-group is excluded from the in-group internal transaction (Giles1977). When a people shift from their language, the in-group feeling of loyalty and solidarity is broken and destroyed. It is lost.

Language carries societal meanings and connotations; this is known as cultural or ethnic identity. It distinguishes one group of people from all others, it gives cultural identity. When language shift occurs, people lose their identity.

Language connects people to something greater than themselves, their god, their history and their science. When language shift occurs, these remain behind, they are lost

Mutiga (2013) argues that:

African people, for example, the Akamba of Eastern Kenya as well as the Kikuyu of Central Kenya, used to swear by the earth and would do so by simply touching the soil, thus invoking the earth, the power of something greater themselves, mother earth. By so doing these people were thus bound to telling the truth in any matter facing them. Today, the same people take the name of God and go ahead to tell falsehood. This is because they are swearing in languages devoid of their cultural meanings and connotations, in languages they hold no cultural identity in. The languages of their identity have shifted from these domains and, meanings have therefore shifted and functions lost. Mutiga (2013:8)

Speakers of a language, no matter how small, form a speech community, a physical entity which occupies a physical space in a region or a territory. When such a speech community stops speaking its language and shifts to speak another language, this entity dies, it stops occupying that physical space, it stops to exist.

Language shift therefore kills speech communities by replacing them functionally and physically with other communities.

As Headland (1999) says;
... the most salient reasons for language death are ethnocide or linguicide, or even genocide, of an indigenous group. Ethnocide is when a dominant political group attempts to purposely put an end to a people’s traditional way of life. Linguicide (linguistic genocide) is when such a dominant group tries to extinguish the language of a minority group; say by punishing anyone caught speaking it. Languages can also disappear quickly if its speakers die in some natural disaster (a tidal wave, severe earthquake, disastrous famine, or a measles epidemic), or are scattered in a way that breaks up the language community. These were common reasons for language extinctions in the 18th and 19th centuries. Today, however, minority languages more commonly die ‘naturally’, rather than by being systematically killed, (Headland 1999: 4)

Fishman (1977) argues that language is a symbol par excellence of a people’s ethnicity. This being the case then, it goes to show that language therefore, accounts for three human qualities: paternity, patrimony and phenomenology. Paternity is the human quality which links people with feelings of belonging and continuity. This comprises the way people name their children, the connection of siring and parentage, and the continuum between the living and the living-dead.

Patrimony, on the other hand, is the art of inheriting different occupations and apprentice to skills such as rainmaking, archery and medicine. This determines who can become what in terms of the skills passed through generational heritage and inheritance. This human quality defines collective behaviour and legacy. It also defines the supernatural phenomena of such matters as life, birth, and death, as well as self expression such as dress, dance, and food. It names and describes behaviour, philosophy and wisdom. All these values are passed on from generation to generation through one’s own language.

The third human attribute carried by one’s language according to Fishman, is phenomenology which is the meaning people attach to their continuing legacy, their self-worth and self respect. This includes who they define themselves to be without considering outsider opinion. This too is passed on from one generation to another through the vehicle that carries it, language.

In attempting to answer the question “What does one lose when one loses one’s mother tongue?” I will take a perspective based on my interpretation of Fishman’s argument as discussed above and argue that, when one loses one’s mother tongue, either through language shift, language loss or language death, whatever it may be that occurs and causes speakers to stop using their own native languages thus occasioning the loss of that language, makes the speaker to consequently lose their self worth and self-esteem and to be reduced to non self-respecting individuals. This individual will be lost to his own paternity and patrimony, and therefore lacking a sense of loyalty to own roots, having no affinity for continuity and legacy, and respecting neither self nor others.

That is what one loses when they lose their native language.
4. CONCLUSION

Having discussed the concept of language loss, the different forms it takes and its effect on individuals and the society, I would like to suggest the following as some ways for possible intervention and mediation:

Improving a people’s economic status: This can help maintain a peoples’ language because groups of minority language speakers for example have a relatively low economic status and this leads to a shift towards the majority language groups who may be well-endowed economically, making theirs the language of influence and upward economic and social mobility. In the United States of America, for example, people who cannot speak English, mostly the immigrant population whose main languages are not English, find themselves in low-income groups and struggling to cope with diminished resources available to their lot (Mutiga 2013), they associate speaking English with academic achievement and economic progress. If their economic status were to be improved, the language they speak would not matter.

According to Grenoble and Lindsay (1998), economic changes such as; modernization, industrialization and urbanization are important tools in language arrest and language maintenance. In the process of modernization, minority languages always suffer since they are spoken by people who cannot fully articulate their issues through policies couched in non-indigenous tongues, or cope with the reality of modern economic lives and life style. Giving people economic independence, therefore, would give their language a new lease of life in this context.

Another intervention strategy would be to give the minority language group a socio-historic status aimed at preventing their language from dying. Many groups can refer to periods in their history when particular happenings took place, for example, when they had to defend their ethnic identity or fight for their independence. Kenya has a clear historical account when some of these communities, for example the Tharaka, fought for Kenya’s independence from the colonial rule, and did this side by side with their economically endowed neighbouring languages groups. These historical milestones can be viewed as symbols for mobilization which influence and inspire people to struggle to keep their identity. The struggle for independence for many African nations gave them mottos, anthems and types of dress. The struggle also honed and nurtured certain coping skills, thus contributing to their patrimony and phenomenology. Not so long ago, the present day Democratic Republic of Congo had changed its name to Zaire as its citizens changed their French names to African ones, as a symbol of resistance from assimilation by France, a former colonizer. By doing this, the people of Congo were basically drawing from their history and leveraging on empowering an indigenous identity.
Giving status and function to a language, especially one that is marginalized by a majority other, or one in a multilingual society, gives function and fulfilment to a speech community, affirming it as equal to all other languages and speech communities. This is what one non-governmental organization (NGO), Bible Translation and Literacy (BTL), as mentioned earlier in section 3.1, has done for the Tharaka and Sabaot languages. BTL started literacy classes in these two language communities, developed orthographies in the languages and finally started mother tongue education programmes in both the communities. In an interview with this author, a Tharaka parent is quoted saying: “...this is our language. Our children are being taught in their own language, it can be read just like Kimeru”, and a local education official affirms, “Since we started teaching in Kitharaka, there are fewer cases of truancy from school, reported to us...” (Mutiga 2006:18)

Language and social status are therefore closely related and the latter influences the former. A language with low status is in danger of becoming obsolescent since the other competing languages determine this. In Kenya, the status of indigenous languages has not been protected and this has put them in a compromised position in the face of competition for resources with majority languages in the present face of globalization.

The demographic factor can be another mediating strategy, the number of people speaking one language, especially if they are concentrated in a specific region, gives a language numerical strength and this yields language maintenance. This may be brought about by inter-ethnic-management and the lowering of rural-urban migration so as to create a balance, especially in urban and in settlements areas.

Institutional maintenance also plays a role, whereby such institutions as schools for early schooling, for example, places of worship and even national and county governments open up to using the local languages in their regions to render services to the people they serve. They can use their languages in education by teaching the children how to read and write in their mother tongue, especially in a monolingual education system before a bilingual education system is introduced and before they learn a second language in a multilingual education system.

Mass media too plays a very important role in promoting minority languages and all indigenous languages. The FM radio stations, television stations, newspapers, regional, national and local broadcasting houses can choose to communicate in a minority language and not just in majority languages. In Kenya, for example, we now have Kameme, Inooro and Coro FM stations broadcasting in Kikuyu. Ramogi FM broadcasts in Dholuo and Musyi in Kikamba, to name a few.

Developing of orthographies for those unwritten languages as in the case of Kitharaka and Sabaot will place them at the same level with all written
languages, irrespective of the number of speakers they may have. A written language is able to keep records of its past, present and future. That way it will be preserved it for posterity.

Many languages in Kenya will die when the last generation of elders shall die, unless we develop their orthography and use it to write and record their history and culture.

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