

Linguistic Dominance Exhibited by Ekerogoro over Ekemaate Dialect of EkeGusii: A Bantu Language of Kenya

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Abstract

This paper identifies two areas of language that separate Ekerogoro (Northern) and Ekemaate (Southern) dialects of EkeGusii, a Bantu language spoken in South-Western Kenya in Kisii and Nyamira. The two features of language that cause variation between Ekerogoro and Ekemaate dialects of EkeGusii are found at the level of the articulation of the plosive sound /t/ and the existence of varying lexical items in the two dialects. The paper focuses on linguistic dominance and its effect on group identity. EkeGusii is a fairly homogenous language without visible isoglosses. However, the language is not free of variation. A form of linguistic dominance is exhibited by the Ekerogoro dialect speakers over Ekemaate dialect that results from attitude. The paper therefore identifies language dominance and inequalities experienced by speakers of the same language that result from attitude based on articulation of words and choice of the lexicon. Data for this research was collected through participatory observation in conversations by Ekerogoro and Ekemaate speakers. The researcher, being a speaker of Ekerogoro dialect, used own intuition to collect data. Findings showed that the Ekerogoro dialect is dominant over Ekemaate and that the Ekemaate dialect is not described. Since the paper takes a sociolinguistic angle, the social theory that is derived from Boasian anthropology and social identity by Tajfel and Turner applies. The paper recommends that structural differences between dialects of a language should not be used to rank dialects of the same language in a scale of superiority. A language archive and an academy should be set up to preserve dialects and languages that are not described.

Key words: Attitudes, Dialect, Intelligibility, Language variety Linguistic Dominance.

Introduction

EkeGusii is spoken in South-Western Kenya in Kisii and Nyamira counties though other speakers predominantly of Ekerogoro dialect have settled largely in Trans-Nzoia, Nakuru (Molo) and Kajiado counties of Kenya (Obwoye, 2014). Ekerogoro operates as the standard variety by virtue of it being used by the media, church hymn and liturgy as well as for instruction in lower primary school (grade one to three). The two areas identified in this paper that speakers of the language use to divide the two dialects are phonological and lexical variation. For instance, Ekerogoro dialect uses the voiceless alveolar plosive sound /t/ which is produced as a dentalised stop while Ekemaate uses the same sound /t/ produced as a retroflex /t/. The difference is on the aspect of voicing articulated by the curling of the tongue. At the lexical level, there exist lexical variations between the two dialects of EkeGusii which are quite significant. Ekemaate is neither used as a medium of instruction nor taught as a stand-alone subject in schools in the region. In high school, students who speak with Ekemaate accent are ridiculed and forced to change. This makes Ekemaate dialect speakers of EkeGusii feel embarrassed and consider their speech to be wrong.

Apart from the two dialects of EkeGusii that this paper discusses, there are variations which Obwoye (2014) refers to as *the circumcision social variety*. This is a variety of EkeGusii that speakers subscribe to upon circumcision. The Gusii (people who speak EkeGusii) practice male circumcision and female clitoridectomy. EkeGusii is used for intra-ethnic communication by a population of about 2.6 million speakers.

The morphological behaviour of EkeGusii makes it to be classified as an agglutinating language (Webb & Kembo-Sure, 2000). Most words, typically, consist of a basic root followed by one or more affixes. These affixes are for argument structure changing (Obwoye 2014:22). Lexical items such as *omware* (Northern dialect for initiate and *riburu* (Southern dialect for initiate) are words (nouns) which can be used to illustrate word formation processes.

A dialect is a variety of a language that differ in pronunciation, vocabulary or grammar, but not different enough to prevent understanding (Freeborn, 1992). This is different from diglossia in which two varieties of the same language exist throughout a speech community with clear functions for each variety. EkeGusii dialects are specifically, often realized in the spoken variety with relatively minor differences in vocabulary, style, spelling and pronunciation. Dialects are perceived to be the substandard variety of a language as it would be the case with Ekemaate dialect of EkeGusii. The distinction between the standard variety and the non-standard dialect of the same language is often arbitrary with different scholars giving discretions based on individual understanding.

Ekerogoro (Northern) and Ekemaate (Southern) dialects of EkeGusii are defined based on a contrast in the pronunciation that results from the articulation of plosive sound /t/. However, apart from isolated cases of lexical differences between Ekerogoro and Ekemaate, most of the vocabulary and grammar are similar. These properties of the dialects of EkeGusii are the cause behind dialect prejudice that is exhibited by Ekerogoro over Ekemaate dialects of EkeGusii. The linguisticism emanates from the perception that Ekemaate (Southern) accent is inferior to Ekerogoro (Northern) dialect. The issue of one dialect discriminating another dialect may have far reaching effects and for the case of EkeGusii, the presence of many loan words in Ekemaate dialect is proof of that.

Languages world over are not homogenous (free of variation). Some languages have isoglosses that have geographical boundaries while some other language dialects are mutually intelligible such as the Oluluyia (Luhya) of Western Kenya whose level of mutual intelligibility vary. Other languages have dialectal variations that make the languages unintelligible. Amid the fact that the variations identified between Ekerogoro and Ekemaate dialects of EkeGusii are so minimal, the paper identifies far reaching consequences resulting from this inequality. The paper identifies language inequalities which elevate one dialect to enjoy the privileges of a standard variety leaving the other to occupy the substandard position.

Language Attitudes

Language attitudes that exhibit dominance of Ekerogoro over Ekemaate dialects of EkeGusii are based on the contrasting articulation/pronunciation of the plosive sound /t/ giving stereotyping categorization of EkeGusii speakers along marked variations. It is argued that language and culture are inseparable. It would therefore follow that the culture of Ekerogoro speakers is also superior owing to the assumption that Ekerogoro would be the standard variety of EkeGusii. The categorization may not necessarily constitute what is documented in language typology. Scholars such as Guthrie (1967), Mbori (1994), Cammenga (2002), Ogechi (2002) and Ongarora (2009) have carried out extensive research profiling the various aspects of EkeGusii. Guthrie's (1967)

classification system does not however, place one dialect as being the dominant one or even recognize Ekerogoro as standard variety of EkeGusii.

Apart from classifying EkeGusii as an agglutinating language, the study by Webb and Kembo-Sure (2000) does not describe the dialects in the language. Recent research has only quoted earlier scholars regarding typology centring on the structure, phonology and grammar of EkeGusii. Any assumptions by speakers of EkeGusii that Ekerogoro dialect would be superior are only speculations since they are not supported by research. Language attitudes played on other speakers based on dialectal identity impact negatively on the way people perceive themselves. Saville-Troike (1982: 188) says that whatever choice is made regarding group membership, language is a key factor; an identification for both self and outside.

Theoretical Framework

The paper on linguistic dominance exhibited by Ekerogoro over Ekemaate dialect of EkeGusii is hinged on the principle of Fairclough (1992) that focuses on language use which is fundamental in presenting cases of linguistic dominance by Ekerogoro over Ekemaate dialects of EkeGusii. In analysing language in society, the focus should be what language and in this case what dialect use means to its speakers. This is because language operates differently in different environments. It should be noted that the two dialects of EkeGusii operate in different ecological zones in Gusii. In order to understand how language works, we need to contextualize it properly to establish the relationship between language usage and the particular purposes for which, and conditions under which, it operates (Obwoye, 2014: 8). The contextualized forms of language that occur in society focus on varieties in that language, for such variation, is at the core of what makes language social. The principle of Fairclough (1992) on language use may also represent inequalities and probably, explain why linguistic inequalities between languages of the world and dialects of the same language exist. It is because language users have repertoires containing different sets of varieties; these repertoires are the material with which they engage in communication. The distribution of elements of the repertoires on any society is unequal (Obwoye, 2014:8). That would explain why we have standard and sub-standard varieties of language.

Further, the social identity theory that applies in psychology by Tajfel and Turner (1979) is used in this paper. This theory predicts certain intergroup behaviours on the basis of perceived group status. The social identity theory explains how people identify themselves (using language) and how they can increase their self-image in order to enhance the status of the group to which they belong.

Methodology

Data for this paper was collected from native speakers based on participatory observation, researcher's own intuition and organized conversations with Ekerogoro as well as Ekemaate dialect speakers of EkeGusii. Further, eight EkeGusii language experts were consulted to provide information on the existing variations between the two dialects. The researcher being a native speaker of Ekerogoro dialect was able to comprehend the linguistic dominance exhibited over Ekemaate.

The research is considered an ethnography having collected data from native speakers within their natural setting through long interactions. Ethnographies have to do with a people's culture within the society. The researcher took part in the study through participatory observation and conversations with both Ekerogoro as well as Ekemaate dialect speakers at home, in church, and school. The researcher analysed content of documented work on EkeGusii centring on

classification and morphology in order to explain the aspect of variation in the two dialects of EkeGusii. The analysis of documented work was, however, limited to the standard variety considering that Ekemaate dialect is undocumented. Narration analysis approach was used to analyse data. 'Narrative approach is concerned not only with the story-telling component of an account...but with the social interaction' (Gilbert, 2008: 428).

Linguistic Dominance of Ekerogoro over Ekemaate Dialects of EkeGusii

Research on EkeGusii has focused on Ekerogoro dialect probably because researchers find it difficult to collect data from a dialect that is not documented. On this account, very little research if any has been done on Ekemaate. Ekerogoro dialect cannot represent the ideas and thoughts of Ekemaate dialect comprehensively. Radio broadcasts are not covered in Ekemaate even within the geographical zone covered by the dialect. Textbooks used to teach and learn EkeGusii also referred to as *Tujifunze Kusoma Kikwetu* (TKK) are written in Ekerogoro dialect which is considered to be the standard EkeGusii. Mass and liturgical activities are carried out in EkeGusii standard (Ekerogoro).

The paper identifies some of the studies carried out on EkeGusii to illustrate cases of linguistic dominance by Ekerogoro over Ekemaate dialect of EkeGusii. Bosire (1993) has studied a cognitive analysis of woman metaphors in EkeGusii. He identifies EkeGusii as a language with two dialects; namely, Rogoro (Northern) and Maate (Southern) but quickly adds that his study used Ekerogoro dialect because it has more speakers and is considered to be more prestigious. He further points out that the AbaGusii are rich in culture yet fail to expose the rich culture of AbaGusii of Ekemaate dialect speakers.

Another study that fails to capture the sociolinguistic profile of Ekemaate dialect is the one carried out by Obwoye (2014). The study analysed the various semantic categories through word stems of EkeGusii lexemes used during the circumcision rite of passage. The study took a sociolinguistic perspective and data was collected from a sample using the snowball method. Even though the sample was considered sufficient and representative of the characteristics found in the entire community of EkeGusii speakers, data collected did not single out the disparities exhibited in the circumcision social variety of Ekemaate dialect. The omission is eminent yet data was collected from Kerina in Kisii South where the Ekemaate dialect of EkeGusii is predominantly used. This shows the extent of Ekerogoro dominance over Ekemaate. Studies by Ongarora (2009), Cammenga (2002) among others only go as far as the recognition of the existence of Ekemaate as a dialect of EkeGusii but tilt their studies to focus on Ekerogoro dialect.

Research carried out on inequality in language by Tollefson (1991) depicts similarities with the linguistic inequalities exhibited by Ekerogoro over Ekemaate. Tollefson (1991), for instance, considered current and past (im)migration patterns with regard to how these patterns have contributed to the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in many nations. His findings depict a sorry state for minority languages amid the investment of financial and human resources in language minority education. These groups (minority languages) still do not fully participate in many modern societies. Tollefson (1991) attributes this paradox to the institutional constraints which have been created by dominant groups to prevent linguistic minorities from accessing social and political institutions. In this way, majority groups are maintained, hence unequal social structures in a society. In a nutshell, Tollefson's findings are not different from the inequalities found in EkeGusii in which Ekerogoro dominates over Ekemaate dialect.

The social identity theory by Tajfel and Turner (1979) applied in the study of linguistic dominance in order to explain issues of dominance of one group over the other and the social,

economic, political as well as educational constraints realized on the group considered to be the minority. The theory enables the understanding of, for instance, why Ekemaate continues to be limited for use within the home environment, or for intra-ethnic encounters. Ekerogoro for instance, has gained prominence and exposure while Ekemaate dialect is rendered functionless to the extent of either declining in use or facing death. There are many causes of language decline and language death.

According to Batibo (2005: 87), language death is the state of extinction; that is, the language is no longer used as a medium of communication or socialization. Language death may occur through the abandonment of a language by its speakers or the non-functioning of its structure. Cases of abandoning Ekemaate dialect abound with its speakers taking up Ekerogoro voluntarily in order to belong to a social group, or by coercion through drills in school or even indoctrination by Ekerogoro dialectal speakers.

Language Death in Relation to Ekemaate Dialect

The dialect of Ekemaate speakers of EkeGusii owes its existence to oral transmission by and within its speakers since the dialect is not documented. This shared heritage faces imminent death since it is not exposed to any media and so as much as there would be that essential element(s) of the dialect that may remain static, the dialect may eventually be phased out. This is because as language and culture keep on changing to fit human requirement, some aspects of it die. In the event that the dialect is denied opportunities within its environment, it dies by having a reduction of the lexical items of the dialect in the mental archives of its native speakers.

Language death by whatever means may take the process schematically shown in figure 1.

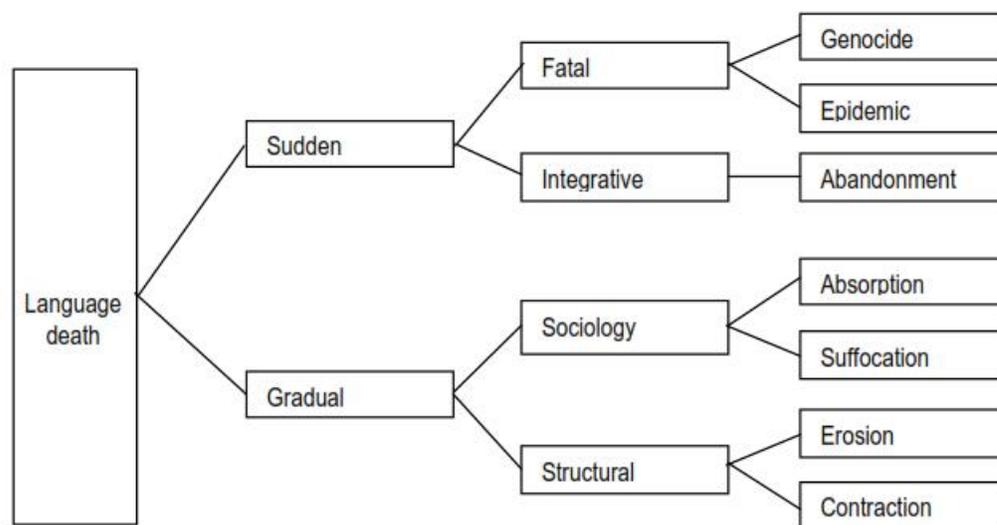


Fig.1: Language Death

Source: Batibo (2005)

Two cases of language death may eventually affect Ekemaate dialect of EkeGusii as observed in the schematic diagram in figure 1. Gradual death of Ekemaate dialect may be structural since it is only within the classroom process that the rules and structure of a language get preserved. The dominance of Ekerogoro over Ekemaate dialect may suffocate the latter since it may be rendered functionless. The abandonment of Ekemaate dialect may also take the gradual

perspective of language death. The effect will be felt in the mental archives of EkeGusii speakers of Ekemaate dialect.

Social Dominance by Ekerogoro over Ekemaate Dialects of EkeGusii

Some expressions of language are valued more than others in a way that is associated with some people being more valued than others and some ideas expressed by people through language being more valued than others.

EkeGusii of Ekemaate speakers, for instance, express their desire to be like EkeGusii speakers of Ekerogoro dialect. This can be illustrated using a conversation with a High School teacher of Ekemaate dialect who revealed her desire to speak English with the competence of Ekerogoro dialect. Her speech reveals a struggle to omit the articulation of the retroflex /t/ in place of a dentalised sound /t/. She further reveals that being a high school teacher, she needs to reduce her mother tongue interference in English by first speaking the correct form of EkeGusii. The correct form of EkeGusii according to her is the one spoken with Ekerogoro accent. She also reveals that students who participate in the Kenya National Music Festival in presenting poems and speeches in both English and Kiswahili do not progress to higher levels because of the way they articulate the words.

The effect of not realizing effective communication is felt in academic performance since English is the medium of communication and instruction in school from level four. Low performance in turn affects chances of being successful academically and lowers chances of getting employment. Ekemaate speakers who want to succeed in academics and eventually, in career have to be intrinsically motivated to speak what is considered to be the 'correct' form of EkeGusii language. Others are forced or even coerced into using the 'correct' form of EkeGusii. Teachers of mother tongue, for instance, insist on the articulation of sound /t/ and they use drills to realize their objective in order to achieve competence in mother tongue. In this way, Ekerogoro dialect being the considered standard EkeGusii gain more speakers and spread in use thereby dominating over Ekemaate. Ekemaate, the less desired dialect accordingly will lose speakers and continue becoming less functional and less powerful.

Visible Lexical Variations between Ekerogoro and Ekemaate Dialects of EkeGusii

Amid the absence of isoglosses, EkeGusii just like other languages of the world has variations and dialects. These variations have divided Gusii into two ecological zones; namely, Rogoro (Northern) and Maate (Southern). EkeGusii dialects follow these ecological zones realising Ekerogoro and Ekemaate dialects as shown below:

Ekemaate (Southern Dialect)

1. Iburu (circumcision)
2. Orogare (plaited basket/trayFor sifting grain)
3. Ekemoni (black jack)
4. Ekebusi (cat)
5. Riororo (cockerel)
6. Koragora (cock crow)
7. Chweya (go)
8. Ebeti (panga)
9. Ntoragende (we would go)
10. Ntorache (we will come)
11. Nindache (I will come)

Ekerogoro (Northern Dialect)

- Bware (circumcision)
- Oroteru (plaited basket/tray for sifting grain)
- Ekemogamogi
- Ekemoni (cat)
- Etwoni (cockerel)
- Kogweya (cock crow)
- Genda (go)
- Omoro (panga)
- Ntogende (we would go)
- Ntoche (we will come)
- Ninchiche (I will come)

12. Kogendanyaro (to be circumcised)

Kwaroka (to circumcise)

It is worth noting that the Bible is written in Ekerogoro dialect yet it is also read by speakers of Ekemaate dialect who would wish to read and understand the word of God in their own dialect. Consider the verse in John 14:2-3 in standard EkeGusii:

Nkogendande kobaroiseria aase ninchiche naende ...nimbaroisie asende...

Translation:

I go to prepare a place for you...I will come again and receive you...

Source: *Yohana* 14:2-3, John 14:2-3

In Ekemaate dialect, the verse would read as follows:

Nindagende kobaroiseria aase nindache naende...nindabaroiserie asende...

Translation:

I go to prepare a place for you...I will come again and receive you...

The lexical variations identified in the dialects that make EkeGusii are helpful in enhancing a Sociolinguist's understanding of language use in society.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Languages/dialects dominating over others may not be a permanent phenomenon. They may however hinder expansion and growth of dominated language(s). Language dominance should not be encouraged because some language dialects may decline in use and die. One language dominating other languages may create serious consequences in education and other spheres of life. The effect is felt more when one dialect dominates over another thus limiting access as well as socio-economic mobility of the dialect considered to be inferior. Populations are forced to confine themselves because they cannot communicate thereby affecting their psychological wellbeing. It causes classification of people into social classes and stratification thus denying them a sense of equality.

The fact that Ekemaate dialect is not documented implies that it is denied the opportunity to contribute in communication and excluded from being used by its speakers in development. It would be recommended that mitigation measures be undertaken in order to accord the dialect linguistic support such as encouraging publications in which the dialect is used. It is also suggested that some form of a linguistic archive be established to preserve minority languages and dialects of the world. At the same time, Ekemaate dialect of EkeGusii should be given an opportunity as a medium of instruction in lower levels of learning within the geographical zone in which the dialect is spoken as a way of raising its value and reducing the existing linguistic imbalance. This recommendation is coming at a time when Kenya's education curriculum (within which EkeGusii is found) is under review.

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