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Attitudes and Perceptions of Language Varieties: A Case Study of *Ekegusii* Dialects in *Kisii* County

 Vincent M. Angwenyi & Kenneth K. Ngure

Department of Literature, Linguistics and Foreign Languages,
Kenyatta University, Kenya.

ngure.kenneth@ku.ac.ke

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Abstract

Purpose: The size of the territory considered to be home for speakers of *Ekegusii* in Kenya is about 2230 square kilometres. The sheer size of the territory and also compounded by the fact that the terrain is mountainous makes contact between people from extreme ends of the territory a rare occurrence.

Methodology: This state of affairs contributes a great deal to the birth of regional dialects. *Ekegusii* has two notable regional dialects; *Maate* and *Rogoro*. This paper examines the attitudes and perceptions of speakers of the two varieties of the language as reflected in their speech behaviours. The study employed Language Use and Attitude Questionnaire (LUAQ) by Fishman (1965) to elicit attitudes and perceptions of speakers towards their dialect and that of the others.

Findings: It emerged that there is disparity in the treatment and perception of the dialects; *Rogoro* dialect speakers are favourably treated and their dialect is perceived to be superior to *Maate* dialect. The situation is attributed to the immense institutional support *Rogoro* dialect enjoys from the mainstream community.

Unique Contribution to theory, practice and policy: Thus, it has a strong network of speakers in a vast area as opposed to *Maate* dialect which is prevalent in South *Mugirango* only, a small portion of the entire territory. Speakers of *Maate* dialect do not perceive their variety as being any lesser but are aware of the preferential bias accorded to *Rogoro* dialect at the expense of theirs. The bias is manifested in, among other instances, distribution of limited resources such as government jobs and opportunities for social mobility in the region where the two dialects are spoken.

Key Words: *Attitude, Perception, Language, Variety, Ekegusii, Dialect.*

Introduction

Language is as an essential aspect of human communication and the defining feature of our cultural identities. It is an instrument of humans' communication with each other as social creatures. Sapir (1956) insists that "every cultural pattern and every single act of social behaviour involves communication in either an explicit or implicit sense" (p. 104). The tool for this communication is language. As far as language is concerned, Saussure's theory of sign is one of the main theories which had an effective and significant role in this domain. In this respect, Saussure (1974) believes that language is a system of sign. For him, a sign consists of a signifier (the sound-image or written shape) and the signified (a concept), in a manner that they are both inseparably linked with each other, that is, the two never part with each other. Generally, language is introduced by Crystal (1971, 1992) as "the systematic, conventional use of sounds, signs or written symbols in a human society for communication and self-expression." Similarly, Emmitt and Pollock (1997) believe that language is a system of arbitrary signs which is accepted by a group and society of users. The term 'dialect' in sociolinguistics is used to describe the speech characteristics of a region (regional dialect) or a group of people defined by social or occupational characteristics (social dialect).

The difference between language and dialect is controversial among linguists. There is no easy answer to the nomenclature problems of language versus dialect. In fact, the old adage attributed to Max Weinrich that "a language is a dialect with an army and a navy" is a quip about the arbitrariness of the distinction between a language and a dialect. There is usually a vague line between what is considered to be a dialect on one hand and what a language is on the other. There are those who contend that as long as there is a reasonable degree of mutual intelligibility between two varieties then the two constitute dialects of a given language. However, if the degree of mutual intelligibility between the two varieties is so low to the point of impending communication between the speakers of these varieties then what we have here is two separate languages. Weinrich's equip is useful when demonstrating the influence that social and political conditions can have over a community's perception of the status of a language or a dialect. The way a speech continuum is cut up and labelled in the 'real world' is often based on political factors. Therefore, the proposition that "a language is a dialect with an army and a navy" highlights the role of political power in shaping linguistic standards. Nevertheless, where the distinction between language and dialect is not significant for analysis being done, linguists prefer to use the term 'variety' (Chambers and Trudgill, 1980).

The idea of one language or dialect being superior to others is based on a fallacious assumption that certain languages or dialects possess inherent qualities that make them more advanced, expressive or logical. Such beliefs are often rooted in cultural biases, historical dominance or economic power. However, languages or dialects exhibit incredible diversity each with its own complexities, strengths and beauty. These differences do not imply superiority or inferiority; rather they reflect the creative ways in which humans have developed systems of communication to suit their needs and environments. Thus, instead of seeking superiority, we should appreciate the vast tapestry of the languages or dialects as valuable contributions to our shared heritage. Some linguists, however, believe that not all languages or dialects are equal. They believe that some varieties are superior to others. Such varieties are regarded as 'powerful', evaluated more favourably, considered 'standard' and accorded prestige and widely accepted in the speech community as supra-dialectal norm – the 'best' form of the language (Ryan and Giles, 1982). This view is contrary to the 'weaker' varieties which are stigmatized and often regarded as varieties for the minority group (Gibbons et al, 1991).

According to Brown (2000), attitudes can be defined as a set of beliefs that the learner holds towards a target language and members of a particular community or region. Fasold (1984) claimed that attitudes towards a language are often mirrored in the attitudes towards the members of that speech community. Within a single speech community, attitudes may vary concerning what constitutes 'speaking well' for members of a different region or community. In consonance with Weinrich's perception of the language-dialect dichotomy, this paper hopes to illustrate that the distinction between a language and a dialect are based on socio-political factors not linguistic ones and that no language variety is superior to the other. Further, it intends to show that the attitudes and perceptions people have towards speakers of a different dialect are determined by inferences we make from non-linguistic considerations that are associated with the speakers of the dialects concerned.

Background Information

Ekegusii is a Bantu language of South-Western Kenya, classified as an East Nyanza Bantu language, labelled E.42 (Whiteley, 1965 & Cammenga, 2002). The language is largely spoken in *Nyamira* and *Kisii* Counties, which are two of the 47 counties of Kenya. The speakers of the language border the *Luo* toward the south and the *Abakuria* to the south-east. To the south-westwards, are the *Maasai* and to the north, are the *Kipsigis* (a *Kalenjin* sub-community). The language is also spoken by a sizeable population in *Kericho*, *Nakuru* and *Nairobi* counties where members of the *Kisii* community have settled, having moved there for socioeconomic reasons.

Ekegusii has two notable regional dialects; *Maate* and *Rogoro*. These dialects are spoken in a territory of about 2230 square kilometres. The territory is mountainous and with valleys and rivers that make it difficult for people from different extremes to meet often. This state of affairs greatly contributes to the birth of regional dialects. *Ekegusii* dialects are region specific: *Rogoro* dialect is purely spoken in the entire of *Nyamira* County and all sub-counties in *Kisii* County except South *Mugirango* (as demarcated in the map provided below) where *Maate* dialect is dominantly spoken. The border points of *Bonchari*-South *Mugirango* and *Bomachoge*-South *Mugirango* are the geographical areas perceived to be affected by the dialect variation. At these areas, there is a linguistic overlap since the speakers occupy dialect continuum (Trudgill, 1986). The map provided below shows the administrative units of *Kisii* County and the areas perceived to be affected by the *Ekegusii* dialects variation:



Figure 1: Map Showing Administrative Divisions of Kisii county: Research Area

Methodology

Data was collected from fifty elderly respondents drawn from the geographical areas perceived to be affected by the dialect variation, that is, where *Bonchari* and *Bomachoge* constituencies border *South Mugirango* constituency. This category of the respondents were relied on because of their perceived experiences about attitudes on the dialects in the selected domains as well as knowledge of the territory of the case study, especially on what factors contributed to the birth of regional dialects. This study relied on purposive sampling to select respondents with desired characteristics, not just any one at random. As well, stratified sampling was used to obtain data from distinct areas within the region. While identifying respondents, gender was not considered important.

Since this study was interested in examining the attitudes and perceptions of language varieties, Language Use and Attitudes Questionnaire (LUAQ) by Fishman (1965) was heavily relied on as it was reckoned to have the potential of eliciting information regarding attitudes and perceptions of speakers towards their dialects and that of the others. This study was limited to the domains of education, job search (employment) and trade to elicit respondents’ attitudes on the dialect they considered important for education, getting a job (employment) and trade transactions within the territory. Data obtained from the speakers of the two dialects was identified and separated. This was followed by an analysis on the basis of responses given from the set of choices provided. The respondents were required to indicate their judgement on the importance of a dialect in a set of domains. The options provided were: (1) Important and (2) Not Important.

Findings

This section provides the respondents’ judgements regarding which dialect they considered important in certain domains that were provided in the questions. The responses to these questions were treated as observations since the respondents were not able to provide an authoritative position regarding which dialect was important for what domain. Respondents were, therefore, requested to indicate without reasons the dialects they considered important for education, getting a job (employment) and trade within their territory. They were issued with two options to choose from: Important or Not Important. From their responses, the attitudes towards one’s own dialect and that of others were examined.

Responses on Important Dialect for Education Domain

Respondents were asked to indicate which dialect they considered important in matters to do with education, for writing literary materials used in the instruction of indigenous language in lower grades of primary schools in their catchment areas. The responses obtained from this question are presented as indicated in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Responses on Dialect Considered Important for Education

Dialect	Choice	No of Respondents	Percentage
<i>Rogoro</i>	Important	49	98
	Not Important	0	0
<i>Maate</i>	Important	1	2
	Not Important	0	0
Total		50	100

Looking at the data presented in Table 1 above, it is apparent that in the domain of education, *Rogoro* dialect, rated highly at 98%, is considered important for writing literary materials used in the instruction of indigenous language in lower grades of primary schools.

Responses on Important Dialect for Getting a Job (Employment)

Respondents were asked to rate the dialects in terms of importance when searching for and getting a job within their territory. In this question, the respondents were expected to draw from their experiences and observations regarding job search. The responses to this question, tabled below, were almost a replica of what was obtained from the question on education domain.

Table 2: Responses on Dialect Considered Important for Getting a Job (Employment)

Dialect	Choice	No of Respondents	Percentage
<i>Rogoro</i>	Important	48	96
	Not Important	0	0
<i>Maate</i>	Important	2	4
	Not Important	0	0
Total		50	100

From the responses in Table 2 above, it is clear that nearly all respondents considered *Rogoro* to be the dialect that is useful for one to secure a job (or employment). Rated at 96% is an indication that the dialect is considered important in enhancing one’s chances of getting a job or employed in government premises within the territory. A real-life example was cited in which a *Rogoro* dialect accented speaker was favoured in a government job hiring exercise.

Responses on Important Dialect for Trade

Respondents were requested to state the dialect they considered important for transacting trade within their area. The respondents were expected to rely on their experiences as traders as well as observations and general knowledge gathered from business domain. The responses to this question are presented as indicated in Table 3 below:

Table 3: Responses on Dialect Considered Important for Trade

Dialect	Choice	No of Respondents	Percentage
<i>Rogoro</i>	Important	45	90
	Not Important	0	0
<i>Maate</i>	Important	5	10
	Not Important	0	0
Total		50	100

The results displayed in Table 3 above points out that in the domain of trade, *Maate* dialect slightly gained probably due to the fact that it is a dominant dialect in South *Mugirango* trading centres. However, due to the area’s small portion in the entire territory, *Rogoro* dialect was overall rated at 90% as a popular dialect and so important for trade transactions in the area.

Conclusion

This paper sought to examine attitudes and perceptions of language varieties, the case of *Ekegusii* dialects. The domains of interest were education, job search (employment) and trade. From the data provided in Tables 1-3, it emerged that the dialects in focus are not accorded equal treatment. *Rogoro* dialect is considered important for education, job search (employment) and trade domains. It is, therefore, evaluated favourably, regarded as more powerful with a strong network of speakers, and hence it enjoys immense institutional support from the mainstream community. Nevertheless, the notion of one dialect being superior to the other is a fallacious assumption based on cultural bias, historical dominance and economic power, or else their worth should be treated as equal.

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