Role of Indigenous Languages in the Development of County Governments in Kenya

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Abstract

This paper discusses the place of indigenous languages in the development of County Governments in Kenya. Eight counties were selected for this study; they included Meru, Bomet, Kericho, Nakuru, Baringo, Uasin Gishu, Nandi and Bungoma. The paper also highlights a model of language use as a tool of development with a close reference to the said counties. Finally, the strengths and the weaknesses of using indigenous languages in the development of selected County Governments are discussed.

Ikisiri

Makala hii inahakiki nafasi ya lugha za asili katika maendeleo ya Serikali za Kaunti nchini Kenya. Kaunti nane ziliteuliwa katika utafiti huu; nazo ni Meru, Bomet, Kericho, Nakuru, Baringo, Uasin Gishu, Nandi na Bungoma. Aidha, makala imebainisha kielelezo cha matumizi ya lugha kama zana ya maendeleo, hasa kwa kujikita katika kaunti teule. Hatimaye, katika makala hii tumefafanua manufaa na madhara ya kutumia lugha za asili katika maendeleo ya Serikali za Kaunti zilizoteuliwa.

1.0 Introduction

A shift in centres of economic development from the central government to county governments was ushered in by the new constitutional dispensation in Kenya in 2010. Language as a system of arbitrary sounds that are used for communication has a stake in the economics and politics of development in the devolved county governments (Halliday, 1973; Sawe & Ngetich, 2012). This is the main reason why this study sought to establish the role of indigenous languages as agents of rural development.

Development is a multidimensional transformation process which brings about welfare, economic, attitudinal and infrastructural change to an individual or a people (Todaro, 1994). Effects of regional or devolved development in our view will thus include improved living standards, better income, reduced crime rates, alleviation of poverty, illiteracy and diseases, growth of socio-political freedom and decline in impunity and injustices (Republic of Kenya, 2003).

The term indigenous is used in this study in reference to low and ethnic variety language in a situation where the speakers learn two forms of the language and ordinarily use the indigenous language which is the low language but utilize the other (high variety) such as English in special or formal contexts (Ferguson, 1959; Nabea, 2009). The low (L) or ethnic variant in Kenya is the indigenous language, while the special variant is the high (H). We are therefore using this term in reference to ethnic languages spoken by different communities in Kenya.

The role of language and language planning in the national and even international development in Africa has been discussed by many African scholars such as Shitemi (2001), Maru (2001), Mafu (2001) and Webb (2002). Their conclusions demonstrate that language planning has a great role in socio-economic development of post-colonial Africa. The findings from other countries such as South Africa show that the use of English, which is not an indigenous language, has boosted development by promoting human rights, democratic values, equity and non-discrimination, national unity and development across the divide (Webb, 2002). The use of Kiswahili in Tanzania has been associated with social and agricultural development (Mafu, 2001). On the other hand, this paper seeks to explicate the fundamental functions of indigenous languages in decentralized system of development in Kenya. In the section below we have shown the methods employed in data collection, explained the language situation in Kenya, discussed the functions of indigenous languages in the development of County Governments, illustrated a model of language as a tool of development, discussed the challenges of using indigenous languages in development, then concluded the paper and finally proposed some recommendations based on the study.

2.0 Research Methodology

This paper is an outcome of the findings of a survey study which was conducted on a sample of 8 out of the 47 counties of Kenya in relation to the relevance of indigenous languages in devolved development. The survey method was chosen because it provides descriptions which can be representative of the entire population. The study used stratified sampling technique in targeting learners, teachers, business persons, native speakers of indigenous languages, media personnel and lay persons across the selected counties. Two respondents were interviewed in each category. The counties which were surveyed are Meru, Bomet, Kericho, Nakuru, Baringo, Uasin Gishu, Nandi and Bungoma. Some of the counties namely Eldoret and Nakuru had speakers of different indigenous languages as because they are multiethnic in their composition. Other counties are largely monoethnic and thus they are covered extensively by one indigenous language.

3.0 Language Situation in Kenya

Language situation refers to the general configuration about how many languages exist in a locale, what are they used for and by whom (Nabea, 2009). This implies that a language situation is a description about how many languages exist in the area of reference; statistics of their users and what kind of linguistic attitudes are attached to them. Such a description entails facts about linguistic statuses of the constituent languages in multilingual situations. Kenya has a complex trilingual

situation which consists of indigenous languages, an endogenous national language (Kiswahili) and another exotic official language (English) as explained below.

Firstly, there are approximately 42 ethnic languages in Kenya. These ethnic languages which we have also referred to as indigenous languages in this study are used by speakers to mark their ethnic identity. In most cases, these indigenous languages are the first languages acquired informally in rural settings as the mother tongues. In terms of aerial spread, indigenous languages are mostly local and their domains are restricted to areas such as homes and community meetings. It is the register that is used in the family unit and in a number of communal communications. Indigenous languages are ethnolects that are used by different tribes as markers of ethnic identity.

Secondly, there is Kiswahili which, as one of the ethnic languages, serves as a national lingua franca. Kiswahili is a national and official language which is primarily learnt through formal education. In terms of aerial spread, Kiswahili is spoken across the nation. It is used in a number of domains including most urban homes, markets, schools, mosques, rural and urban churches and community meetings. It is also used in official functions as a meta-language in Kiswahili classes and volitionally in parliamentary deliberations. Kiswahili is a neutral code which is used to unite Kenyans across the social and economic classes.

Thirdly, English is another key language in the Kenyan multilingual scenario. It is the main official language which is often learnt formally in schools. It plays a number of roles in both national and devolved development. For instance, a good understanding of English increases the speaker's chances of getting employment; it is also a lingua franca used between Kenya and other nations and even between the county governments to facilitate collaboration and cooperation that is geared towards development. It is used extensively in undertaking development related research and in accessing development information; it is also used for communication in the service industry such as in the embassies, with tourists, students and workers. Lastly, English is an impartial language and because of its neutrality, it supports multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity especially in contexts of tribal disharmony.

4.0 Functions of Indigenous Languages: Examples from County Governments

Indigenous languages play a number of roles as agents of socio-economic development in the county governments and especially in the rural areas. They are used in informing the rural population about available resources, opportunities and new ideas. The study revealed various functions of indigenous languages in the devolved development in Kenya. The following are some of the functions:

Firstly, they are used as tools of persuasion. This study established that politicians such as the Governors and the Members of the County Assembly (MCAs) often use indigenous languages in their pre and post-parliamentary

discussions to persuade and convince each other concerning issues which include development agenda. The same indigenous languages are used to persuade the populace to embrace and participate in the development plans of the county governments.

Secondly, this study established that indigenous languages are used in the devolved governments as an instrument of thought and a tool for exchanging ideas. We found that monolinguals use indigenous languages as the only languages they understand to make innovations and generate new ideas. These indigenous languages are used to exchange the new ideas within and even across the borders of the devolved governments in the cases whereby the constituents are speakers of the same indigenous language or its dialects. By generating, sharing and utilizing relevant ideas, respective communities will then be rolling the wheels of development.

Thirdly, indigenous languages are used as agents of cultural conservation, transmission and even change. For instance, most of the selected counties usually have cultural weeks which are held occasionally in the main cities of the said counties. From the study it was evident that the local languages play a vital role in uniting the residents of each county.

Fourthly, rural communities in Kenyan devolved governments use indigenous languages as contrivances for socio-economic interaction**.** Our study noticed that more than 50% of the rural population use indigenous languages in their daily social interaction. These include buying and selling of goods and services, performing marriage practices, among others. Such kind of language use is pertinent in their social development. Further still, about 90% of small scale businessmen and women in the villages use indigenous languages to interact with their customers. However, we established that a number of them sometimes code-switch between indigenous languages and other languages while undertaking various socio-economic transactions.

Fifthly, this study also found that, as an aspect of positive ethnicity, indigenous languages are used in various counties across Kenya to promote internal or regional integration. We noted that individuals with the same ethnic and linguistic background use their indigenous languages as a means of association with members of their ethnic communities and thus foster internal integration. It was clear from our study that indigenous languages are only appropriate for ethnic integration while Kiswahili as a national language fits for inter-ethnic integration function within and across counties. For this reason, indigenous languages are not suitable as bridges to inter-tribal integration. Instead, our interviews with our research respondents showed that in the past, national disintegration and tribal clashes have been a function of abuse of indigenous languages. This means that misuse of (indigenous) languages affects the scope, growth and the sustainability of devolved economies.

In addition, indigenous languages serve as the medium of instruction and training in devolved governments. For example, communities are taught about new technology and business ventures such as rabbit and quail farming by using indigenous languages. They are also trained on hatchery skills and greenhouse technology using indigenous languages as the languages that are best known to them. Most of these farmers are trained through groups, NGOs, Field Officers and in fields of successful farmers.

5.0 Model of Language as a Tool of Development

Development is the actual product of the process of communication through language as shown in the model that we have developed below. Languages link the innovator (who is using the language to think or create) with the recipient and the expected final effect is development.
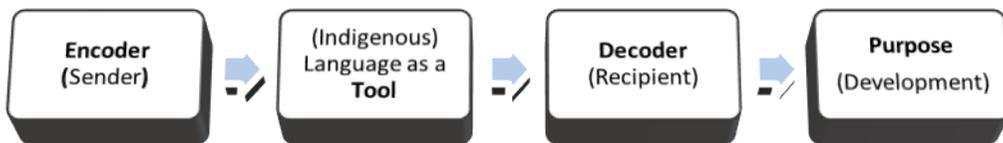
According to this model of communication which we are using in this study, the encoder refers to the initiator of the process. An encoder is the addressor or sender of the development message who encodes the message in a particular linguistic system and sends it. The encoder could be an individual, a group or a (county) government. In relation to devolved development, this study observed that innovators putting their ideas in particular languages or rural extension officers are examples of encoders in devolved development. The common codes used in most rural setting by encoders are often indigenous languages of respective speech communities.

After being coded, the message is then conveyed through a selected channel. The message could be a work plan, a translated strategic plan, summon, an idea, problems that need to be solved, a vision, new policies and directives. Brown and Yule (1983) describe a channel as the how of maintaining the contact between participants during communication. The language used in putting across the message should be corresponding to the recipients' level of linguistic competence.

Interlocutors use different means as channels of communication while using indigenous languages. These include the print media, electronic media, writing, smoke signals, face-to-face and many others (Ogechi, 2006). From the questionnaires administered, our study established that less than 5% of the communication is done in the internet using indigenous languages. About 0.3% of the sampled population use pure indigenous languages in their communication through *Facebook*. Very few magazines are written in indigenous languages in

various counties and only a handful of readers can read them. There are less than 10 television stations broadcasting information using indigenous languages across Kenya whereas we have 42 plus speech groups which are associated with indigenous languages. Whereas information is power, these statistics illustrate that the use of indigenous languages in our modern technology is seriously insufficient. This is a negative pointer in devolved development platform.

The receiver (decoder) can also be an individual or a group of people. In two way communication, interlocutors may be senders and receivers in different turns. Always the process of communication will not be possible without the message and the recipients.

The last point in the conduit is the purpose which is the reason behind the communication process. Upon receiving the message, the receiver decodes (interprets) the message and may then translate it into development. Other factors, besides language, are in play during the implementation of development related communication. The ultimate function of language as a tool of devolved development will be injured if the used language choice and style are not suitable.

6.0 Extra-linguistic Skills Required for Development

The term extra-linguistics is used in this study to refer to knowledge which operates with linguistic competence of a particular speaker in his or her indigenous language. Extra linguistic skills therefore comprise of paralinguistic knowledge, non-verbal communication and language skills. Paralinguistic knowledge refers to the non-verbal language which relay message through pitch, accent, facial expressions, gestures, and body movements. Body language is essential in social development and is an important aspect of communication in health related issues. Health workers should not only understand the paralinguistic features that are common in particular indigenous languages but they should also understand why, when and with whom to apply them if the same is to achieve positive results. This may be important in handling stigmatization cases related to HIV/AIDS and others. Language use amongst professionals should go beyond linguistic competence and performance if it is to achieve the purpose communication (development). This means that professionals such as lawyers, field officers, health officers and many others should be able to develop interview skills, listening skills and even counselling skills in the respective indigenous languages which they are using in different counties.

7.0 Indigenous Languages as Tools of Development

Our research established that indigenous languages in radio stations such as Mulembe FM, Radio Ramogi, Kass FM, Kitwek FM, Cooro FM, Kameme FM and Inooro FM were used as agents of social change and thus were pertinent in devolved development in various counties. It was reported that values and norms

of the recipients have transformed over time since the inception of the said FM radio stations. Two of our respondents for instance confided that they learnt about the availability and reliability of rehabilitation centers from the indigenous language radio stations. These indigenous languages have been used in the stations to handle development topics such as new farming methods, industrial investment and management, environmental conservation, family planning and so on. From the operations of these FM stations, we inferred that indigenous languages have been used to create a conducive devolved development environment, to motivate developers and in ensuring there is sustainability of development programmes.

Interlocutors are able to receive and understand the message which is conveyed in a language which they understand well. There is a relationship between the level of advancement achieved by such as Japan, England and Russia and native language use (Mazrui & Mazrui, 2002). This study supports the theory that development is better understood and realized by a people if it is communicated in a language which they understand better, and in this case, indigenous languages. Failure of participants in communication to meet the linguistic threshold will hamper development especially if listeners are 'semilinguals' (Mac-Swan, 1997; 2000). In 'semilingual' realities, speakers or their recipients often have some little knowledge in the non-indigenous language that has been selected as a tool for development such as English. The language users in such contexts have no native competence in the sense highlighted by Chomsky (1957, 1965) and Sawe (2015). This denotes the strength of indigenous languages (which are usually acquired as the first languages) as opposed to English (which is in most cases learned as a second language) in Kenya.

8.0 Challenges of Using Indigenous Languages

This study found out that a number of indigenous languages in Kenya limit their users to a restricted world view as they are often spoken within the confines of a county or a tribe. We noticed that most of them are unable to give individuals a deeper understanding about new technology or research findings. It is easier for speakers of international languages to learn about new products and techniques from other speakers of those languages across the world. This limitation affects the utilization of opportunities which could have improved production, income and the living standards within the developed economies.

Our observation showed a new trend whereby most children (60%) who are 10 years and below have not acquired their parents' first languages as their first language too. Many in this age bracket speak Kiswahili and are poor speakers of the indigenous languages or are unable to use them completely. This trend as we found from our study could be as a result of a number of reasons as highlighted below:

   (a)   Indigenous languages have been broadly associated with tribalism;

(b)   Some parents have intermarried across tribes and have resorted to using Kiswahili and/or English and consequently passing that to their children;

(c)   Indigenous languages are not associated with academic progress, securing of employment opportunities or career promotion;

(d)   Indigenous languages are not given proper attention by the Kenya Institute of Education in preparing the curriculum. Our study found out that a number of primary school teachers are incompetent in indigenous languages and thus they cannot speak, write nor even teach them reliably;

(e)   It is costly to prepare adequate teaching and learning resources for more than 40 indigenous languages that are used across the 47 counties of Kenya;

(f)   Some of our respondents in this study noted that some teachers in the lower classes use the time set for indigenous language classes to teach other subjects that will eventually be examined by the Kenya National Examinations Council;

(g)   Publishers shy away from publishing indigenous language books because they fear that such books may not attract buyers and thus it will not be cost effective to publish them;

(h)   These languages have not been developed to handle technical topics. The existing lexicon has no capacity to meet the prevailing communication needs;

(i)   Very few indigenous languages have grammar books, literature books, dictionaries and other materials;

(j)   These indigenous languages have always been facing competition from foreign languages such as English. Language policies from pre-independent days to post independence period have always favoured other languages at the expense of indigenous languages;

(k)   Singular reliance on indigenous languages may limit individual's or community's world view;

(l)   Unlike other languages such as French, English and Arabic which can access funding for their research, growth and development; indigenous language researchers are underfunded;

(m)   Indigenous languages are not as effective as the official language (English) or the national language (Kiswahili) in bridging the gap between development stakeholders such as the literate and the illiterate, professionals and non-professionals and many others;

(n)   Whereas universities are meant to search and disseminate knowledge, very few universities in Kenya have given attention to indigenous

language studies. Little has been done in promotion of indigenous languages as tools for development;

Some of these reasons are valid whereas others are inconsequential. They may also serve as cues to linguistic strategies such as language policy and planning.

9.0 Conclusion

This study concludes that indigenous languages play an important role in the process of devolved development in Kenya. However, they are not the only resources in this process. As a matter of fact, the national and the official codes have an exclusive contribution in devolved development. These indigenous languages have an integration function in the various counties and sub-counties. For that reason they form a very vital secondary component of devolved development because with integration, it is easier to mobilize human capital and other resources for development. Whereas the numbers of weaknesses highlighted are more than the strengths, our findings have shown a rich contribution of indigenous languages especially in rural development.

Indices of development will be seen in the change of knowledge, attitudes, socio-cultural transformation plus positive changes in physical and economic infrastructure among others. In the process of time, development in the society will eventually be reflected also by the changes in the indigenous languages themselves. From the above discussions, generally, indigenous languages are significant in poverty eradication in the devolved units of governance and thus policies must put into consideration their contribution to development.

10.0 Recommendations

We recommend that technical languages which are used in writing research reports ought to be simplified and translated into indigenous languages so as to improve the quality of information received by the rural communities through such languages in devolved governments. Development related research findings should not be disseminated using formal languages only if development is to be inclusive. Extensive use of indigenous languages in devolved development will give them the environment for growth. Further studies on indigenous languages should be encouraged by language experts in partnership with county governments. Universities should not abdicate their duty of empowering development by neglecting indigenous languages. Instead, they should lead in indigenous language research.

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