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INFLUENCE OF ISLAM AND LANGUAGE PRESTIGE IN KINUBI MAINTENANCE IN KIBERA, KENYA

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Abstract: This paper strives to point out a how a language used in religious practices and a people's prestige can influence the maintenance of an indigenous language such as Kinubi. Kinubi is an indigenous language of the Nubi people that has some linguistic homogeneity with Arabic. The linguistic relationship between these two languages has played an important role in enhancing the usage of Kinubi in the multilingual setting of Kibera, Kenya. Kinubi, in Kibera, is a minority language faced with the competitive presence of majority languages such as English and Kiswahili. The study discerned that the way the Kinubi speakers view their language with prestige is an indicator of ethnically identifying with it. Moreover, the study found that Kinubi thrives in domains it is least expected such as the religion domain. Thus, Kinubi, in Kibera, has maintained its vitality.

Keywords: religion, linguistic homogeneity, vitality, domain, prestige

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper considers Kinubi in Kibera as an urban ethnic-minority language. In a linguistic perspective, minority and majority languages derive their notions from the number of speakers

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and from literary, political or educational status (Alcock, Taylor & Welton, 1979). However, this dichotomy between minority and majority becomes blurred when a minority language employed at the national or state level assumes the status of a majority language. The United Nations proposed a definition for the term 'minority' in 1950. On one hand, the term refers to a culturally, socially and/or politically non-dominant group. The non-dominant group, though part of the country, is marginalized due to its characteristics. Usually, these characteristics are strongly linked to language, cultural, religious and racial issues which are different from those of the majority group (Alcock, Taylor & Welton, 1979). On the other hand, Wirth (1945) in Alcock *et al.*, (1979) defines a minority as:

Any group, racial or ethnic (cultural), the members of which, because of their physical or cultural characteristics are singled out for differential and unequal treatment (p. 2).

This paper is particularly interested in exploring the relationship between Kinubi as an ethnic minority language in Kibera and the religious composition of the Kinubi speakers in order to show how religion is a factor in language maintenance. In a context of language contact region such as Kibera, minority languages of ethnic groups are prone to change, attrition, and loss. According to scholars like Annamalai (1990), because the tribal languages are considered as languages at the lowest rung of the linguistic hierarchy, they receive a nominal and inadequate patronage. As a result, the languages generally tend towards shift as language maintenance becomes quite difficult. However, Kinubi, as spoken in Kibera, seems to contradict this assumption.

This contradiction may have arisen from the linguistic development of Kinubi. Several scholars, such as Heine (1982), state that Kinubi is generally considered to be a creole language, having originated from an Arabic pidgin spoken in southern Sudan and northern Uganda. Heine adds that pidgins typically come into being in multilingual groups, when no common language is present to satisfy the need for communication. There is a sense in which Kinubi can be considered a creole language. This is in relation to the socio-historical conditions under which Kinubi became established as a native language. Kinubi is a language commonly spoken in Kenya and Uganda. Furthermore, in South Sudan, it is mutually intelligible to Juba Arabic.

In the formative years of Kinubi, Wellens (2005) posits that there was a lot of trade between the Arabs from the northern part of Africa, particularly Egypt, and the indigenous people of the Sudan. During the rule of the Viceroy of Egypt, Mohammed Ali, trade and military camps were established in the southern part of Sudan. These camps collected a huge population of different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds that became detribalized through enslavement or incorporation into the army (Mahmud, 1982). The Arabic of the soldiers known as Bimbashi Arabic developed into three further varieties: Turku in Chad, Juba-Arabic in southern Sudan and Kinubi in Kenya and Uganda. This Arabic connection that Kinubi has may have contributed immensely to its maintenance even in areas where it is deemed as minority.

Arabs were then politically and sociologically a dominant force in the southern Sudan such that Arabic was the language capable of acting as an integrating force in the establishment of a lingua franca. This was a time when the southern Sudan opened up to slavers and traders who were mostly Arabs from the North. Kinubi was thus born amongst the diverse speech communities, such as Bari, Alur and Mundu, which existed in the southern Sudan. The Nubians who had moved to Uganda (a British protectorate then) were conscripted into the British Army by Captain Lugard who had heard of their prowess in war. Subsequently, at the end of the World War I, the Nubians who came to Kenya were rewarded with land in Kibera, Nairobi because of their service in the British Army (Heine, 1982).

The Kibera community being in a location of diverse ethnolinguistic background is bound to experience certain linguistic challenges. Originally a Nubian only locality, it is now inhabited by the Luhya, Luo and Kikuyu, among other tribes. The linguistic differences in this region have created the need for the emergence of a language of convenience and contact. The aspect of the urban setting has further necessitated the need for a common language of contact among these diverse speech communities. Because of this contact, it is believed that a majority language is now predominant in Kibera but this seems not to have threatened the vitality of Kinubi.

It is expected that when speakers from communities of different languages come into contact with each other, communication can only take place when one or both communities accommodate to the language of the other in some way. This accommodation will normally, to the detriment of the minority language, be towards the majority language. This paper therefore sought to ascertain the factors that have enabled Kinubi to remain maintained in an environment

that should otherwise encourage its shift or death. The factors under focus in this article are the roles that religion and Kinubi prestige play in its maintenance and subsequent spread.

2. RELIGION AND PRESTIGE

Clyne (2003) posits that one of the best maintained languages in Australia is Arabic. In their study on the Arabic community in Melbourne, Australia, Clyne and Kipp (1999) believe that one of the determining factors for the use of Arabic among Arab Australians, especially Muslims, may be related to their religious affiliation since the Qur'an and classical Arabic are essential to Muslims. Thus, even in families with Muslim Arab fathers and non-Muslim, non-Arab mothers, the children and the mothers had learnt to speak Arabic well (Clyne & Kipp, 1999, discussing Penny & Khoo, 1996). The motivations for maintaining Arabic among Muslims in Australia are: access to the Qur'an, communication with family members and visits to home country. The Arabs in Australia have Arabic schools in which children learn Arabic. They also have Arabic language broadcasts on the government multilingual radio station. The study at hand wanted to ascertain whether the religion domain assisted in Kinubi language maintenance thus Clyne's study stood relevant as it could be applied to the Kinubi perspective.

In an earlier study related to Clyne and Kipp (1999), Lenk (1987) mentions religion as an institution that enhances maintenance of a minority language. He asserts that:

...especially if religion is deeply rooted in that culture. It is an institution that may also bring together different ethnic groups who share the same religion, mostly using the dominant language or divide people from the same nation, as is the separation of the Hindustani lingua franca into Hindi and Urdu for the Hindu and Muslim communities (p. 33).

Moreover, if the minority language is the language of religion, the language will be maintained, as was German in the United States, due to the influence of the Lutheran Church (Appel & Muysken, 1987) and Hebrew, due to the influence of the Jewish religion (Fishman, 2001). This study borrowed knowledge from these studies on religion as a domain in language maintenance. The present paper establishes the role that religion plays in Kinubi maintenance in Kibera.

Walbridge (1992) discusses the maintenance of the Arabic language in the Dearborn mosque among Shi'a Lebanese in Dearborn, Michigan. Furthermore, she discusses the role Islam plays in

the preservation of the Arabic language, especially because immigrant languages in the US are most likely no longer in use after the third generation. She reports that Muslims in the Dearborn area in Michigan seem convinced that religion more than anything else differentiates them from the mainstream US life. Thus religion appears to be the strongest basis of group identity among the Shi'a Muslims in the Dearborn Mosque.

In a related study, Ajrouch (1999) views religion as a force that contributes to the development of social identity and in turn ethnicity is a social identity. Subsequently, both ethnicity and social identity have religious undertones (Ajrouch, 1999). This is based on observation and focus groups of Muslim Lebanese families in Dearborn, Michigan. In this research on focus groups conducted by Ajrouch (1999), it was observed that even though the moderator did not introduce religion as a topic to discuss, it emerges as a recurring theme by the participants who find it represents a meaningful system to interpret cultural identity. Religion might not be a significant factor to all Arab-Americans in defining their ethnic/cultural identity or in preserving their ethnic language, yet it is important to many Muslim Arabs who believe in the role of Islam in encouraging the maintenance of the Arabic language and the formation of a more interconnected Arab-American community. Relating this to Kinubi in Kibera, it can be noted that the use of this language in Kibera mosques by the Imams encouraged its maintenance and acquisition by non-native Muslims. To this end, the essence of identifying with the religion would accord Kinubi prestige.

Language prestige among speech communities encompasses all the other indicators such as domains of language use, social networking among others. Language prestige as an indicator of ethnolinguistic vitality addresses questions such as: does the target language have prestige among other neighboring or regional languages? What is the relative prestige of the language within the linguistic repertoire of the speech community? A descending scale of relative prestige could be as follows: a nationally recognized language having the greatest prestige and thus a greater potential for use in the foreseeable future, and locally disparaged varieties having the least potential for continued use in the future. These issues raised by the indicator on language prestige directed the analysis on data related to determining ethnic identity and Kinubi maintenance.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework that informed the parameters that were used to critically measure the vitality of Kinubi as spoken in Kibera was the Ethnolinguistic Vitality (EV). According to Giles, Bourhis and Taylor (1977) “the vitality of an ethnolinguistic group is that which makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in intergroup situations” (p. 308). They suggest that groups that have little vitality are likely to cease to exist as distinctive collection while those that have high vitality are likely to survive. They, hence, propose three structural variables that are likely to influence ethnolinguistic vitality: demographic, institutional support and status factors. These are the parameters that can be put in place in determining whether a language is maintained or is experiencing shift. In this study, these are significant factors that were explored within the indicators of ethnolinguistic vitality as proposed by Landweer (2008).

As an additional study to Giles *et al.*'s proposal on ethnolinguistic vitality, Landweer (2008) developed indicators that show the probable direction of language maintenance and shift of a speech community. For the purposes of this present study, two indicators are used to enable the process of a scientific analysis of the collected data. One of the indicators refers to the domains in which language is used (speakers choose which language to use every time they interact within a given sub domain) while the second one concerns language prestige whereby the expectation non-negative speakers have regarding their own language in relation to the prestigious language is openly demonstrated. The indicator for domains aided in analyzing the objective on religion while the prestige indicator was used for denoting ethnic identity.

4. METHODOLOGY

The paper is based on the data collected in different parts of Kibera where the native speakers of Kinubi are concentrated. A specially prepared open-ended interview schedule was administered to a number of respondents of both sexes belonging to different age groups, educational backgrounds, and professions. Data consisted of several audio recorded Kinubi transcripts which were then translated into English.

The observations conducted for this research were made in the local Mosques in Kibera. These mosques serve as religious, cultural, and linguistic centers for Kinubi, Arabic and Kiswahili.

They are the places where Muslims in the community conduct prayers and other religious and culturally related practices such as marriage. In the larger project from which this article is extracted, thirty participants were involved in the interview sessions. The sessions aimed at eliciting data covering a variety of objectives. However, this article is restricted to one of the objectives handling the issues around religion and ethnic identity. The observations and interviews revolved around findings on how Islam enhances Kinubi prestige and subsequently its maintenance.

5. DATA AND DISCUSSION

The results in this study show that religion and ethnic identity play an important role in language maintenance as demonstrated by the data collected among the participants. What is presented in this article is a small section of the discussion from the main study that was carried out.

During the interviews, the respondents were asked questions concerning language use and choice during the Friday Congregational prayers. The respondents were asked to identify the mosques they attend and the language of preference when they pray. The researchers were also particularly interested in the languages in which the *Imams* delivered the sermons. It was observed that there were ten mosques in Kibera that served both Nubian and non-Nubian Islamic faithful. The study selected the Friday congregational prayers known as *jumma* because of the large number of ethnically diverse worshipers and the accompanying sermons absent during the other prayer days.

One of the researchers, a Muslim faithful, observed Kinubi usage alongside liturgical Arabic and Kiswahili during the delivery of four Friday sermons in four different Kibera Mosques. Even though the attendance at Mosques also included other Muslims who are not Nubians, it was observed that the *Imams* still delivered sermons in Kinubi alongside Kiswahili and Arabic. The use of the various languages should, however, not be mistaken to be translations of the same items in the different languages as is normally seen in Christian Pentecostal churches because the *Imam* would just use the languages in a way that they complemented each other without necessarily translating from one language to the other. It is then noteworthy to point out that Kinubi permeates this domain inasmuch as Islam is a religion of diverse speech communities in Kibera. This conforms to Giles, Bourhis and Taylor (1977) who support the role of religion in a language's vitality status by stating that when a language is linked to religion, it will favour

group cohesion and language maintenance. This may indicate why Kinubi still thrives in urban Kibera among several other communities. In relation to this study, some of the interviewees attributed the close knit aspect of the Nubians to the Islamic religion which encourages the concept of humility and friendship towards fellow Muslims. Such a social network impacted positively on the language behaviour of the Kinubi speakers.

The researchers found that that the *Imams*, particularly those in Makina, Kambi Muru and Lindi Mosques, would use Kinubi alongside Kiswahili and Arabic during religious commentaries. Besides its religious duties, some respondents stated that the Friday prayers at the Mosques also encouraged Nubian linguistic and cultural values, as it promotes an environment where children, youths and adults alike meet and socialize with their friends and kinsmen.

The transcripts of the interviews collected demonstrate how the Islamic religion plays a part in Kinubi maintenance. This important role of linguistic and cultural maintenance played by the Islamic religion supports Grosjean (1982) who states that, "when a religion is closely linked to a particular national group and to its language, it is an extremely powerful force for language maintenance" (p. 109). One of the respondent interviewed posits that *'In the mosques, most of the sermons are done in Kinubi....when they have these religious functions, they speak in Kinubi'*. Another respondent states that *'Imams in Kibera use some Kinubi during the Friday sermon delivery'*. He also added that *'Of course, they (Imams) deliver the sermons in Kinubi although they read the Quran in Arabic'*. This study may draw the closeness between the Islamic religion and Kinubi as being the fact that Kinubi is a creole with an Arabic background. The language would thus, to a point, be mutually intelligible with Arabic. To echo Grosjean (1982), it can be stated that Kinubi gains in maintaining its vitality because of religion, as one of the factors.

The respondents stressed the Islamic factor in cementing the closeness of the Nubi people. This was in reference to out-group interaction. One respondent said that *'you know first of all as a Muslim you must start with those places owned by fellow Muslims so that you build your religion.....even if they are not Nubians'*. The members of the linguistic group apply the Islamic principle of unity among the faithful. This encourages the people to keep track of one another. This respondent views Islam as the tool of cohesion amongst the Nubians. This relationship between religion and speech community can be drawn due to the fact that the Nubians in Kibera are mostly Muslims. The respondent would first want to associate with those who are Muslims and this will bring contact amongst the native Nubians. The Islamic religion acts as the

preference that creates the close-knit nature of the community. This follows Milroy's (1980) assertion that individuals who interact almost exclusively within close-knit communities tend to share common communicative preferences and to exert pressure on others in their network to follow the same norms.

The Nubians in Kibera have not shifted their cultural values much but have seemingly complemented it with the Islamic culture. They still wear their traditional dress and celebrate festivals with their songs and dances in the traditional ways. The older women particularly still wear their *Gurbaba* traditional dress and maintain the same food habits in *Gurusa*, *Kisra* and *Layu*. The weddings and *doluka* dances are still celebrated in the Nubian way. They feel that retaining their own cultural values will help them maintain their independent identity and this means a feeling of prestige about their identity.

Apart from the cultural values, language prestige is manifested in many other ways. One of them is in the expectations native speakers have regarding their own language in relation to the prestigious language. Concerning this concept of prestige in one's language the researchers asked certain questions concerning what the members of the Kinubi speech community perceived about their own language. Most of the interviewees, in this study, expressed their pride in Kinubi and this was a positive pointer towards the maintenance of the language.

A respondent, who is in formal employment, averred that he uses Kinubi at work place and asserted that he would not change his Kinubi language choice if a fellow Nubian called him at his work place. That notwithstanding, he is equally competent in Kiswahili, English, Dholuo and Arabic. He said that *'when I speak the language myself, people do marvel and they want to know the language...if a Kinubi speaker calls me at work I just use Kinubi. It makes people really ask me about the language'*. He also posited that he is never *embarrassed to speak Kinubi* even in a place where no one knows the language. This points at the way the language is so prestigious to him that there is no need hiding the Kinubi fact from non natives who do not understand Kinubi. The prestige that Kinubi is accorded by its speakers is in conflict with what Landweer (2008) expects to be a prestigious language. Landweer (2008) states that a language of prestige should be a nationally recognized lingua franca or the language of religion, education or trade. Kinubi hence is penetrating domains not meant for it as a minority language. This indicates its vitality in Kibera.

Another respondent stated that he would not shy away from using Kinubi in public. He asserted that he would choose Kinubi over English even though English was an international language and therefore a more prestigious language. The respondent added that even in the presence of his relatives who know English and Dholuo very well, they still conversed in Kinubi. This is clear when he said that *..like now, I have my kin Alambo...know Dholuo very well...Kiswahili very well..English very well...still choose to speak Kinubi*'. This places Kinubi in a more prestigious position than English or Dholuo albeit in a Nubian context. The reaction by this respondent agrees with Landweer's (2008) question concerning the relative prestige of the language within the linguistic repertoire of the speech community. The Kinubi speakers view Kinubi as prestigious even though they are fluent bilinguals.

When the researchers sought to find out if there were Kinubi speakers who felt embarrassed to use Kinubi in other places except at home, the general response to this question was categorical in stating that Nubians were proud of their language and the respondents were yet to find any Kinubi speaker who was like that. This can be attested from a respondent who stated that *'I have not yet seen. All Nubians are proud of their language. I have not yet seen one who is embarrassed'*. This indication enhanced positive Kinubi perception by its speakers. The study can then borrow Landweer's (2008) conclusion that the language of choice serves as a marker of ethnic identity and can influence the status of a language. Kinubi is the choice of its speakers even during speech events which involve Kinubi speaking interlocutors outside the home domain. The Nubians themselves view their language with a lot of pride and feel that the language needs to be maintained. The researchers deduced this from responses of several respondents for example, *'Kinubi is very good...'* *'All Nubians are proud of their language'* and *'even here in Kibera these youths are very very proud of speaking the language...'*. The responses emphasized the way the Nubians themselves look at their language.

Another response was generated when the researchers asked if there had been any arguments in the respondents' houses regarding the language to be used. The reply by most of the respondents was that they have no language problem to decide on as Kinubi was the natural majority language in their homes. In his response, one of the respondents said *'I have not yet had any argument at home concerning language choice. We just speak Kinubi'*. As Nash (1987) alludes, the strength of a language lies on the speech community's identity with the language. The Kinubi speakers seem not to have a problem of choosing Kinubi above other languages even though

they are bilingual. This reveals their positive perception of their own language hence its vitality is assured.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper set out to discuss the influence of Islam and language prestige in the maintenance of Kinubi. It was noted that Kinubi vitality is found in the domain of religion (Mosques) which most respondents asserted encouraged Kinubi sermons. The choice of Kinubi in such a multiethnic significant religious domain pointed at the language being understood by many people, including non-native Nubians, hence its usage. The usage of Kinubi in the religious domain mostly occurred when the Imam was delivering the Friday congregational prayer sermon (*Khutbah*). The language the Imams used seemed to enhance the status of Kinubi on matters that were quite official and sacred. This puts Kinubi in a prestigious position in the eyes of the speakers. The Kinubi usage in such domains widens the number of speakers to include non natives to learn the language. This is an unlikely domain for Kinubi going by the fact that minority languages do not enjoy use in formal situations. The use of Arabic and Kiswahili was the most natural but Kinubi has seemingly entered the religion domain. The use of Kinubi therefore means that its domain scope is widespread.

The observations carried out also revealed how prestige in the Kinubi ethnic identity promoted Kinubi maintenance. For instance, the presence of the Nubian cuisine made up of *Gurusa*, *Kisra* and *Layu* exhibits a people's positive perception of their ethnic practice. It was likewise observed that the identification with such *Gurbaba* traditional dresses and wedding *Doluka* dances are evidences of prestige in perception.

From the foregoing conclusions, it can be summarized that Islam has influenced Kinubi maintenance due to the liturgical influence it has on the speakers. Their being Muslims has encouraged the use of Kinubi which is a creole with Arabic as the dominant language thus enhancing its prestigious status.

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