# LANGUAGE USE AND CHOICE: A CASE STUDY OF KINUBI IN KIBERA, KENYA

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## Abstract

*This article analyzes the domains of language use and choice of the Kinubi speaking community in Kibera, Kenya in relation to Kinubi maintenance in a multilingual location. Language use and choice has been a debated issue whenever languages come into contact. It refers to a situation where members of a speech community try to keep a language the way it has always been used despite linguistic challenges emerging from a multilingual convergence. In this paper we argue that Kinubi, a minority language spoken in Kibera, is expected to face maintenance challenges. However, the findings reveal that it has defied this logic and seems to thrive in various domains of language use and is the natural choice at home. Thus, Kinubi's ethnolinguistic vitality particularly in the home domain in a region of linguistic diversity is quite evident.*

**Key words:** Ethnolinguistic vitality, Kinubi, language choice, multilingual, domains of use

### 1.0　INTRODUCTION

A language is an important factor in human communication. The ability to use ones language well is a sign of good interaction as the intended message will be passed and understood well. However, the moment one lets a language to diminish, one automatically loses a certain part of one's culture, prestige and integrity. In Kenya, for example, Batibo (2005) asserts that of the fifty six indigenous languages, about thirteen are highly endangered while a dozen others are extinct or nearly extinct. Hence, in Kenya, as in other African countries, indigenous languages suffer the disadvantage of existing alongside English, Kiswahili or a mixture of both (known as Sheng in Kenya) which may be attributed to the difficult choices based on the politics of policy in a multilingual set-up. Mugambi (2002) also asserts that Kenya is a multilingual country in which over 40 languages are spoken; however, English and Kiswahili dominate in all spheres of life in that they are given official recognition while indigenous ones are not. Since the indigenous languages are themselves never the same in vitality, relatively smaller ones have experienced greater pressure, sometimes from a neighboring other, in addition to English and Kiswahili.

Most areas, in several parts of the world, are inhabited by diverse linguistic families and groups. This diversity of language within a given area or locality also means that a people's social and economic structures are also varied. Dorian (1981), states that the diversity of languages leads to the unavoidable concept of bilingualism among the local speakers. It is then expected that instances of partial and complete language shift shall occur and even diglossia may set in at some point in time. There is a well documented tendency for some speech communities to change over time from ones first language to another (Gal, 1979). Fasold (1984) states that language use has been extensively studied in three disciplines, namely sociology, social psychology and anthropology. From the perspective of a sociologist who is interested in searching for language use through the study of social structure, Fishman (1968) posits domain analysis.

Under domain analysis, 'domains' are regarded as institutional contexts in which one language is more likely to be appropriate than another and are to be seen as constellations of other factors such as topic, location and participants. In other words, what language an individual chooses to use may depend on whom he/she is speaking, about what he/she is discussing and where the conversation is taking place. Baker and Prys Jones (1998) state that the concept of domain may include such notions as formality and informality. They also add that minority languages are linked with informal situations while majority languages are connected with formal situations. Although different studies employ different domains, common domains include home and family, neighborhood, schooling, mass media, business and commerce, and so on. Data concerning domains of language use are generally obtained through questionnaires and interviews and studied by means of statistical analysis (Fasold, 1984). It is against this background that this paper attempted to answer the following questions: To what extent is there Kinubi retention/maintenance within the home domain of the Kinubi speakers in Kibera and which factors may explain it? Is bilingualism having a negative effect on Kinubi? In addressing these questions this paper intends to show how the home domain of language use and choice enhances the maintenance of Kinubi.

Language use is critical to a good understanding of the linguistic situation in a multilingual set up like Kibera where the majority of the population is multilingual. When people have command of two or more languages, they make choices as to when and where to use a certain language. The choices speakers make of when to use what language rests on their attitude concerning the language of choice. As group patterns begin to emerge, implications about the roles of languages in a multilingual community can be translated into explanations about how that community operates in general. Looking at the Nubian community in Kibera, it is clear that they have managed to accord each domain the language choice it deserves. Kinubi has been accorded its position as the home language therefore its communicative role is clearly spelt out and its vitality is assured.

## 2.0 Emergence and spread of Kinubi in Kenya

Heine (1982) posits that Kinubi has often been called an Arabic Creole since about 90% of its vocabulary is of Arabic origin. It is termed a creole as many of its structural and developmental features resemble those of known creoles such as Jamaican Creole, Bazaar Malay, Nigerian English, and so forth. Kinubi 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. None of the native languages dominates in prestige or number of prestigious languages. The structure of pidgins may develop from very rudimentary and variable to stable and expanded. Pidgin languages are learned by their speakers as a second language. A pidgin language may develop into a creole when it is nativized, whether as an instantaneous or as a gradual process, when children born in mixed marriages are confronted with the pidgin input and learn it as their mother tongue. Kinubi underwent such a stage and became creolized over a period of time and now has speakers who use it as a first language (Heine, 1982).

The history of the Nubians in Kenya can be traced back to the end of the World War I, when the Nubians who came to Kenya were rewarded with land in Kibera, Nairobi because of their service in the British Army (Heine, 1982). Kibera is a corrupted word from the Kinubi word 'Kibra' which means a place of many trees or forests ([www.nubiansinkenya.com](www.nubiansinkenya.com)). The Nubians still strongly associate with Kibera though it is now a crowded slum area of people from virtually every community in Kenya. Kibera as an informal settlement within the city of Nairobi, started more than a hundred years ago. Kibera is like Kenya in microcosm and is home to members of all Kenyan (African) ethnic groups (Makoloo, 2005). The settlement is divided into a number of 'villages', each with its own characteristic ethnic make-up and although most villages have people of all ethnic groups, often one group is dominant.

The Kibera slum is now a location of diverse ethno-linguistic background. 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. It is expected that a majority language may now be predominantly employed for in-group communication among the Nubian community. However, this paper intends to show that the multilingual presence in Kibera may not have had a negative effect on Kinubi especially in the home domain.

### 3.0 ETHNOLINGUISTIC VITALITY THEORY

This paper used the theory of Ethnolinguistic Vitality (EV) as its analytical tool. This theory comprises sociostructural factors used to explain language maintenance and shift within a community. Giles, Bourhis and Taylor (1977) first introduced the concept of ethnolinguistic vitality and in their typological approach, proposed three variables, which may combine to permit an ethnolinguistic minority to survive as a distinctive group. These three variables are status, demographic and institutional support. Each of these variables consists of a sub-set of variables.

However, this paper has subjected Giles *et al's* (1977) framework to several amendments and modifications to provide a more comprehensive approach to the Kinubi question. These are the eight indicators of EV proposed by Landweer (2008) and they include:

1. Relative position on the urban-rural continuum.
2. Domains in which the language is used.
3. Frequency and type of code-switching.
4. Population and group dynamics.
5. Distribution of speakers within the speech community.
6. Social outlook regarding and within the speech community.
7. Language prestige.
8. Access to a stable and acceptable economic base.

These eight indicators are a collection of factors that have been documented in sociolinguistic literature. For the direct purpose of this paper, the second indicator on domain analysis proved relevant.

The second indicator alludes to language use and choice which can function as a mark of group identification and solidarity. Practically speaking this means identifying the domains of life where language choice becomes a factor and determining in just how many domains each language is used. Speakers choose which language to use every time they interact within a given sub domain. The cumulative choices then suggest which of the languages in the community's repertoire the language of choice for each domain is. This paper concentrated only on the home domain as its scope of investigation.

### 4.0 METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research study was carried out amongst the Kinubi speakers of Kibera, Nairobi County, Kenya. Descriptive design was used as it involved the usage of primary data collection methods as the most suitable route for the attainment of the study objectives. A population sample of 30 respondents and 3 homes were studied in the larger project (cf. Adams (forthcoming). Because this paper is a preliminary report, only a brief part of the data collected and analyzed will be reflected in the findings section. The samples were arrived at through both purposive and snowballing techniques. Data was collected through the use of interview and observations schedules. Comprehensive data analysis was done using the ethnographic approach of quotations and descriptions following Landweer's (2008) second indicator of Ethnolinguistic Vitality.

During the period of data collection, the researchers interviewed family members and observed their language use. The unobtrusive observation by the researchers proved worthwhile as it provided the paper with an independent conclusion of the linguistic processes in the homes. The three sampled homes exhibited almost homogenous linguistic processes among the members. The Nubian homes sampled were dyadic and were expected to encourage Kinubi maintenance. The adults in the extended families were mainly the engineers of communication and this was done mainly in Kinubi. The various responses from most of the respondents showed that they favoured speaking Kinubi at home.

### 5.0 RESULTS

For the purposes of this paper, interview transcripts from four respondents out of the thirty used in the larger project (cf. Adams (forthcoming) were deemed sufficient to reflect the research findings. In order to identify which language is used most at home, the interview schedule elicited several responses related to the language used between the respondents and their family members. Of the four people interviewed, three respondents showed their commitment to speak Kinubi at home with their families.

When the researchers posed the question *'Which language would you use at home?'* one of the respondents stated that *'When I am at home I use Kinubi, when I am with my kin, I use Kinubi everywhere…'.* Another respondent who is a non-Nubi but fluently speaks Kinubi and has a Nubian spouse, even foresees his children speaking Kinubi. He responded: '*I will want them to speak Kinubi because I am here forever…It is the language I will be using at home'.* On further interrogation, he asserted that he has no plans of leaving Kibera in the near future and has absolute liking for the language. This respondent is included under this domain to ascertain what some of the speakers are planning for when they have children in the family. This may not work in future but it shows the researchers the dreams such respondents have for Kinubi. Similar sentiments to those of the two respondents were expressed by a third respondent who posited that '*In my home I use Kinubi'.* These three respondents were quite categorical on their language use at home. They would choose Kinubi all the time as the home and family language.

However, the fourth respondent, a Nubian mother of two children affirms the multilingual situation in Kibera in that Kiswahili, a majority language, competes for space as a home language in this family. In subsequent interviews with her, it was found that she believes her children will still learn the language as time progresses. She said she at times speaks Kinubi with them. This is attested when she says *'At home I speak mostly Kiswahili and a little Kinubi'.* This respondent seems to have confidence that Kinubi is under no threat even from a majority language such as Kiswahili. Her assertion that her children will still learn Kinubi affirms her commitment to the continuity of the language.

Furthermore, the use of Kinubi was encouraged by the existence of extended families. The presence of grandparents, children, and grandchildren, which is still common in most Nubian households, was found to play a major role in the usage of Kinubi as a home language and as a cultural vehicle. Responding to the researchers' question on what has influenced Kinubi use in the homes, one of the respondents actually stated that it is '*because my own parents were speaking Kinubi so I also do so now. I got used to it'.* The respondent attests to the fact that language is passed down by parents to children. He asserts that his own parents were speaking the language so he had just to speak it. He said he '*…got used to it'.* This has extended to what he is doing presently even to his own grandchildren in Kibera. It was also observed that the grandparents and their sons would always speak strictly in Kinubi to the children.

However, during observation of one of the three homes sampled, the mother in the home was observed to mix codes when talking to the children. This code-mixing by the lady could indicate being motherly and probably understanding the children's preferences in code-mixing the various languages they pick from the neighbourhood. This family though exhibited Kinubi as the dominant language spoken at home. The fact that even the children speak Kinubi in their own interactions without adult interference points towards the dominance of Kinubi.

The researchers had the opportunity to observe a conversation among several members of the family, namely an eight year old boy, his mother, and his grandmother, who have lived in Kibera since 1981. The mother asked the little boy, in Kinubi, about his school day and he replied in Sheng. The grandmother, who always speaks to him in Kinubi, was not sure of what the boy had said and asked for an explanation. The boy turned to her and, in faltering Kinubi, quickly summarized his day at school. In fact, this was a norm in the family in that the communication established between the respondents and their grandparent was almost totally confined to Kinubi.

From the observations carried out during the researchers' stay in Kibera, it was noted that some of the parents relaxed their insistence of Kinubi speaking at home. This was observed from some of the mothers of the children. One of the respondents stated that '*My children speak in Kiswahili but I do teach them Kinubi also. I speak with them Kinubi a little bit'.* They would speak in Kiswahili to their children but still insist that their children would learn the language regardless of their contribution.

When asked the language their children speak, one respondent said that he speaks Kinubi with his children (*I speak with them in Kinubi a little bit)* and another respondent said *'All my children speak Kinubi. For us at home, the actual language spoken here is Kinubi*'. Thus the respondent has no problem with Kinubi being spoken in the family home. He felt that Kinubi would be passed to his children and grandchildren the way his own parents passed it to him. It can then be said that the choices speakers make of when to use what language may rest on their attitude concerning the language choice. As noted during the observations, the children found it easier to speak in Kiswahili or Sheng to their mothers, playmates and younger siblings than with the older people particularly in the family.

The grandparents were seen to be very much concerned about the language choice of the children. In the third family sampled, the grandmother strictly let the youngsters know her preference for Kinubi as the language of the family. The children's leisure time activities involved certain games that would be better played in the languages of the games. The languages involved specific codes used during play. There were some games like *Blada, hide and seek, tapo* among others that required Sheng and Kiswahili for them to be played as per the 'rules'. The children in most cases would have other playmates from the neighborhood that were not Nubians and thus would use mostly Sheng and Kiswahili to communicate with them. The children among themselves would most likely use a mixed form of the languages they know in the multilingual Kibera. The parents spoke mostly in Kinubi at home among themselves except in the presence of non-Nubian visitors who may not know the language. This would be for purposes of courtesy and to make the visitor feel comfortable and not offended. From the observations and interviews carried out in the family/home domain, this paper notes that the older members of the Kinubi community chose Kinubi in interactions more than the younger people whose language choice and preference ranged between Kinubi, Kiswahili and Sheng. However, the interlocutor types in these speech events were seen to influence individual language choice patterns.

## 6.0 DISCUSSION

The sociolinguistic notion of domain was formalized by Fishman (1972), who stressed that different settings characteristically call for the use of different languages in a multilingual society (or varieties of the same language in a monolingual society). Landweer (2008) ranks domains of language use along a scale, noting that as language shift takes hold in an ethnolinguistic community, the vernacular is typically replaced by a second language in progressively more domains along the scale. The home is the 'anchor' domain and is usually the last to be replaced. After this come domains such as social events, cultural events, education, business, travel, and writing. The more domains in which the vernacular is used, the more vital the language. Domains are seen as constellations of other factors such as topic, location and participants. Although different domains are employed in different studies, in this paper the domains pertaining to Kibera Kinubi speakers include home, neighbourhood, religion and business matters.

In relation to the results from the respondents' reactions on language use and choice in the home domain, it can be ascertained that Kinubi is still relatively strong. Landweer (2008) talks of the home domain as the centre of relative strength as an indicator of vitality. The fact that these respondents point out Kinubi as a home language confirms what Landweer (2008) calls a language of instruction, correction or scolding, information, comfort, humour and religious observance within their speech events. In fact evidence has it that the last domain to be lost in any potential language allegiance battle is that of the home and parents play a major role in this (Fishman, 1972). From another point of view, Veltman (1983) in his study, reasons that the language used by parents has the strongest impact on the language chosen by their children. Thus, if some first generation parents decide to use a specific language with their children, those, in turn, adopt the use of that language with their parents. Moreover, the interviewee's responses confirmed Crystal's (1992) position that the feelings people have towards a variety of languages will dictate their preference regarding the choice. It is noteworthy to say that Kinubi is the language of choice when it comes to speech events between parents and children at home.

The use of Kinubi at the home domain has been noted as still quite vibrant. The respondents confirmed their use of Kinubi in this domain. There was no discussion as to which language was to be used at home. To most of these respondents, there was no need for a discussion of which language to use at home as it was obvious that Kinubi was the authentic choice. Kinubi as the most approved choice at home strengthens its survival as transmission is assured. The results presented in this paper, agrees with Gal's (1979) assertion that setting, occasion and topic are less important factors than identity of the speaker and his/her interlocutors. This study observed that the language of choice would matter the most depending on the interlocutor present. Kinubi speakers would resort to a lingua franca like Kiswahili the moment they were joined by a non speaker of Kinubi. This scenario was reflected even in the home domain.

## 7.0 CONCLUSION

This paper has presented findings and discussions of Kinubi usage and choice in the home domain. From the findings, it can be concluded that Kinubi speakers encourage the use of Kinubi and their language choice is influenced by the way the people use their language. This ethnic language is clearly passed on from the grandparent to parent generations to the grandchildren generations.

As noted within this domain, the grandparent and parents' generations were seen as putting efforts to maintain the language. However, the grandchildren generation was exposed to many linguistic challenges and required cushioning from the ravages of multilingualism in Kibera. It can also be confirmed that the home/family domain is the core domain of language use and choice. A shift may occur when a weaker language is being replaced by a more dominant one. Coulmas (2005) state that a shift can be detected from a speaker's language choice in the home domain, which is generally agreed to be the last bastion of language maintenance. From the results and discussions in this paper, Kinubi seems to be the preferred language at home.

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