

Socio-Cultural Factors Influencing Language Use and Identity Construction Among Women in Kitui West Constituency, Kenya

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ABSTRACT: *This research seeks to examine and describe the complex interaction between language and identity in the lives of the women of Kitui West Constituency, Kitui County, Kenya. Grounded in ethnography, this study explores the cultural and social factors that inform language variations and identity construction in diverse women's collectives. The targeted institutions include church-related organizations, SACCOs, and informal community-based organizations. The combined focus on qualitative and quantitative methodology: in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and sociolinguistic questionnaires fills a gap in knowledge pertaining to language and identity in multilingual African settings and provides impetus for reflections on language policy as well as women's rights and emancipation reveal the gendered interdependence between the patterns of language choice and societal factors such as education, religion, urbanization, and economic activity. The analysis of the data provided shows that women in Kitui West have diverse linguistic resources that they negotiate every day while juggling between cultural and socially imposed roles and rights. Consequently, it fills a gap in knowledge pertaining to language and identity in multilingual African settings and provides impetus for reflections on language policy as well as women's rights and emancipation.*

KEYWORDS: sociolinguistics, identity construction, gender, multilingualism.

INTRODUCTION

Language is a basic means by which people shape and define social roles in the social world (Joseph, 2004). When it comes to language management in multilingual societies, language choice and language distribution in various domains can greatly influence how people construct their identity and how they are positioned by others in the society (Djité, 2008). Such connection

between language and identity becomes more engaging when looked at from the gender and socio-cultural perspectives in various diverse communities globally (Eckert, 2019). Women in Kitui use Kikamba as a local language, Kiswahili as a national language and English as an official language. This multilingual setting offers a lively background to understand how women adhere to or resist the linguistic construction of gender roles and the claims to subjectivity within their families, communities, and society at large (Adnan, 2013). Therefore, the main objective of the study is to analyze the concerns of language choice and the construction of gendered identities in Kitui West women in different groups that are relevant to this socio-cultural context. In this case, we foreground women's organizations – church-associated women groups, women SACCOs, etc., as well as other informal women-based local groups to dissect how language works to empower and provide an orientation to personal identity and social landscape (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). This study was grounded in several key theoretical frameworks.

These were Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979): This framework proves crucial when understanding how women in Kitui West position and categorize themselves as well as others in different social structures. Indeed, Social Identity Theory aids in understanding how the identification with these groups impacts on their conception of self and behaviors. In light of the ways in which language facilitates group categorization, the study aims at identifying how the language use of women influences their self-identity categories and resultant group memberships, thereby yielding understanding of the effects of language on the social identities of women.

Language Socialization Theory (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984): This view is fundamental in making sense of how women in Kitui West acquire and use language cross culturally. Language Socialization Theory informs the analysis of women's language use and, therefore, focuses on the role and position of women in their families and communities. It discusses how the language they employ demonstrates and facilitates their social roles and skills and how these practices help them to navigate and claim their areas in the sociocultural context.

Poststructuralist Approaches to Identity (Weedon, 1997): These theories conceptualize identity as dynamic, composite, and constructed through discursive practices and interaction. It is useful in understanding the manner in which women's identity in Kitui West is constantly re/constructed in discursive ways and engagements. It also highlights how gendered self-representation is a process in progress due to constantly changing social contexts as it presents how women reposition themselves in society by renegotiating their roles based on the cultural scripts available to them.

Linguistic Anthropology (Duranti, 1997): This framework offers a cultural lens through which this study can explore language use and language development among women in Kitui West. Linguistic Anthropology and the focus on the role of language within culture are key to understanding the influence that sociocultural contexts may have on language and identity. It enhances the study of the research question on the use of language practices in the representation of cultural values and social interactions in the community.

This study was also grounded on Bucholtz and Hall's work as it explores the relationship between language and identity and extends their focus on how people undertake identity with and through language use in several communities. Building on this knowledge, Bucholtz's (2014) work that is devoted to gender and social roles also helps in the study through providing information on way women's language use can both perpetuate and be shaped by their gendered and social roles. This framework remains vital for understanding how language use among women in Kitui West adheres and subverts traditional societal roles and positions the women in those norms.

A number of reasons make this research important. First, it builds on the existing and limited knowledge concerning how language gender and identity play out in specific regions of Kenya. Second, it offers knowledge about the way women from the districts, especially those living in semi-rural areas, assert them and define themselves in language amid sociocultural transformations (Mercuri, 2012). Lastly, based on the findings of this study, the recommendations of this study will have some ramifications for language policy, women's Empowerment, and community development programs in the multilingual African settings (Akoto, 2018).

Sociolinguistics and related areas of research interest have investigated the link between language and identity comprehensively. In this context, Ochs (1992) rightly pointed out that there is a set of intricate systems of meaning interweave themselves between language and gender identities. This kind of perspective is more relevant to the present research context due to the emphasis it places on the investigation of language usage in specific communities.

It is also important to note that social and cultural factors are as important as linguistic factors in speakers' identity construction and language utilization in societies characterized by a high degree of traditionalist. This is important in order to understand the forces that exist in Kitui West due to the modernity of those previous cultural practices that have influenced not only sociolinguistic interactions but also beliefs of the people of the region.

According to Alshammari (2008), it is necessary to taking into account cultural factors as social factors that define identity and language when it comes to the conservative culture. This is a very important point to ponder when discussing specifics of Kitui West, as this area has always remained quite shrouded in traditional beliefs and cultural expectations that are reflected in the choice of words and interactions.

The research done by Lakoff in the year 1975, which deals with 'women's language', has helped in analyzing the relationship between gender, language and power. Although her work had been criticized for its foundational approach, she has been credited for raising awareness of how language practices mirror hegemonic relations. On this basis, Cameron (2005) analysis of language and the power relations involved in it offers a view on how women become empowered or disempowered through the use of language.

Linguistic imperialism and language decolonization, as described by Agyekum (2018) are ideals necessary to refine the understanding of how history and politics determine language usage and identity construction in Africa. This understanding is very important within the multilingual social context of Kitui West involving formal and informal languages.

Milroy and Milroy's work on close-knit communities (1992) also provides understanding to specific linguistic practices as carried out within social networks. This concept of "network strength" may explain how women's groups in Kitui West can act as spaces for retentions of language and local identities during processes of social transformation.

METHODOLOGY

Using an ethnographic research approach, this study employed a framework of mixed-methods research that involves the use of both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques within an ethnographic setting. This design is quite well suited to looking at the highly nuanced and multifaceted interactions between language and identity in a specific cultural sphere (Delve & Limpaecher, 2022). The ethnographic method enables a comprehensive examination of the kinds of social and cultural factors that shape how language is used and what kinds of subjectivities are produced in the community. The design employed the techniques below:

Participant Observation: Flexible and regular arrangements of the data collection process means outlined above will be useful to document actual language practices and interactions of the group members in different settings.

Triangulation of Methods: This approach of integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis will also increase the validity and reliability of the results, as pointed out by Bloommaert, (2004)

Emic and Etic Perspectives: It has both insider (emic) and outsider (etic) perspectives, and this enables coming up with a balanced way of analyzing data

It is particularly effective in documenting the complex processes of how and why individuals employ language to build and define their identities in groups; it examines cultural and social practices that inform the use of language and construction of identities; and it measures the extent and ways language is used and people's attitudes towards those use and provides detailed qualitative data that explain such observation.

The study area is Kitui West Constituency in Kitui County, Kenya. It was selected based on its unique sociolinguistic profile and the fact that there are various women's organizations. That is why there are several related reasons that would make Kitui West a good place to study the interconnection between language and identity. First, its multilingualism: This is a multilingual

community where Kikamba, the local language, and later introduced Kiswahili, the national language, as well as English, the official language, are spoken at different points, thus creating an environment that best supports the study of code-switching and other linguistic and sociolinguistic decisions that women make in the creation of their identities. Kitui West Constituency gives an insight into how aboriginal Kamba culture transforms into an increasingly liberal society. This is exactly where one can observe how women fare in a transformation of society, especially in the linguistic approach. English, Kamba, and Swahili are used by women, with such elements occasionally interchanging between one language and the other.

The comparison of the language used in the different contexts is informed by the constituents' membership in a church organization, a Savings and Credit Cooperative Society (SACCO), or an informal community group. Some major considerations that made the area suitable for the study include:

Rural-Urban Continuum: The area includes farms and other countryside settings, thus enabling a study of language use depending on the degree of the population's urbanization and the identity of the inhabitants.

Socioeconomic Reach: Kitui West branches across the spectrum of the economic scenarios, which makes it easy to compare the manner in which the economic background influences the use of the particular language and the development of identity.

The study subject is the population of adult women (18 years and above) in the Kitui West Constituency engaged in women's groups. From the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) Population and Housing Census Report of 2019, a projection of the target population of women in this study is estimated to be 450. These women belong to one of three main types of groups: The church-based women's groups stand at approximately one hundred and fifty groups; the SCCS groups are approximately two hundred; and the community-based women's groups stand at one hundred roughly.

Traits used to identify the target participants were:

Group Diversity: Categorizing the women by the specific group they represent enables a cross-comparison of women and their patterns of language use and identity creation in certain contexts.

Active Participation: People in these groups are generally always occupied in meaningful and productive activities—most of the time it is easy to follow the use of language in action.

Age Range: Adult women make sure that there is a population with set language usage and a well-developed self-identity and, at the same time, speaks of the changes across generations.

Socioeconomic Representation: The selected groups include women of different classes; this makes it possible to find out how the rise and depletion of the economic status affects language and identity.

Cultural Embeddedness: These women's groups are an essential part of the society within the district of Kitui West; hence, they are perfect places to analyze the relationship between the use of language and cultural and social identity. By concentrating on this heterogeneous but well-defined population, the study intends to include as many aspects of the speakers' practices and identities as possible in the context of Kitui West Constituency.

The study uses methods of multi-stage cluster sampling with purposive sampling to choose the participants. This approach is selected because it allows the researcher to achieve maximum variation in the geographically dispersed population of women's groups while controlling for the type of group (Lavrakas, 2008). The number of samples used in the research work is established using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table for proportionate sampling. For example, if the targeted population size is 450, the size of the sample that is recommended should be 210. This number is then adjusted for potential non-response by adding 10%, therefore arriving at the final sample of 231 women. In this study, the final target sample size is 231 women since we have factored in the non-response rate. In addition, our goal is to obtain at least 210 of the questionnaires' responses. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data collection instruments to capture the multifaceted nature of language use and identity construction. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with a sample of participants ($n = 30$) are used to investigate individual experiences and perceptions of language usage and identity. The interview guide includes issues such as personal language biographies. Perceptions about the function of language in identity development, experiences with language usage in various social situations, perceived social impacts on language choices. Six focus group talks (two per group type) are held to gather collective viewpoints and group dynamics surrounding language and identity. Each group has 6–8 participants. The FGD handbook analyzes shared language behaviors within communities. Collective conceptions of language and identity, group-level impacts on language choice, negotiating identities in collaborative environments

A structured questionnaire is administered to all participants who agree to take part in the study, with a target of 231 respondents. The quantitative data gathered is on: demographic information, Self-reported language use in various domains, attitudes towards different languages, perceptions of identity markers, group participation, and roles. The questionnaire includes both closed-ended and open-ended questions to facilitate statistical analysis. A subset of participants ($n = 20$) is asked to keep language diaries for a period of two weeks. These diaries provide insights into daily language choices and code-switching practices, contexts of language use, and self-reflections on language and identity

The reliability of the instruments is established through:

Inter-rater Reliability: For participant observation and interview coding, multiple researchers code a subset of the data to ensure consistency in interpretation. A Cohen's Kappa coefficient of 0.80 or higher is targeted.

Internal Consistency: For the sociolinguistic questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha is calculated for multi-item scales, with a target value of 0.70 or higher.

Test-Retest Reliability: A subset of participants (n = 20) completes the questionnaire twice, with a two-week interval. A Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.80 or higher is sought for key variables.

Triangulation: The use of multiple data collection methods allows for cross-verification of findings, enhancing overall reliability.

Qualitative data analysis will be done using NVivo software, while SPSS will be employed for quantitative data analysis. The data analysis process involves both qualitative and quantitative techniques. The following three methods have been incorporated into the research:

Data Transformation: Quantify qualitative data where appropriate (e.g., frequency of code-switching observed) and qualify quantitative data through narrative descriptions.

Comparative Analysis: Juxtapose findings from different data sources to identify convergences and divergences in results.

Case-Oriented Analysis: Develop in-depth case studies that integrate quantitative and qualitative data to illustrate complex language and identity dynamics. By employing this comprehensive mixed-methods ethnographic approach, the study aims to provide a nuanced, contextually grounded understanding of language and identity construction among women in Kitui West Constituency. Such an approach enables breadth as well as depth in understanding the relationship between the linguistic practices of a community, its dynamics, and the process of identity construction in the context of this Kenyan community's sociocultural context.

The data collection process for this study is a well-grounded, ethically-sound methodology aimed at producing high quality linguistic data from the Kitui West Constituency. The research initially requires approval from the ethics committee, which includes the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI), and Kitui West Constituency authorities. This important step confirms that the research complies with all ethical standards and requirements. After ethical approval, the researchers will move into community entry, establishing relationships with local leaders and group representatives to explain

the study and gain community buy-in. It is important for developing trust and for the successful implementation of the research. With community support in place, participant recruitment will begin according to the sampling strategy described above.

Prior to data collection, the investigators will seek written informed consent from each participant. The process includes describing the study, its voluntary nature, and how confidentiality is being maintained to preserve participants' privacy. The data-collection process will take place in two distinct stages. The preliminary stage consists of carrying out sociolinguistic questionnaires and beginning participant observations of certain group situations. The second phase will consist of in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and language diaries, which participants will be asked to fill out.

During the data-collection phase, the investigators will continually analyze the data. This method lets you get some early guidance to guide future data collection, and it gives you the option to do theoretical sampling if you need to. To validate the interpretation of cultural and linguistic subtleties, the researchers will use member checking, in which they will present preliminary findings to a select number of participants. Lastly, all data gathered will be stored securely and pseudonyms will be used to preserve participants' anonymity. This holistic method of data gathering and handling guarantees an exhaustive, ethical and culturally sensitive study of Linguistic Landscape of Kitui West Constituency.

This study followed proper ethical standards. Participants are informed of their rights and give consent, and every participant is informed that they can withdraw any time they want to. All data to be collected is de-identified in order to maintain the participants' anonymity. For the confidentiality of the information, the storage is done securely. The research proposal was reviewed by the Catholic University of Eastern Africa's Ethics Review Board and meets the NACOSTI set criteria on research conduct in Kenya.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The findings revealed that a significant proportion of women in Kitui West experience pressure to use specific languages, particularly Kikamba, in domestic settings. This pressure appears to be more pronounced among older age groups, with 75% of women aged 50 and above reporting high pressure to use Kikamba at home, compared to 45% of women aged 18-35.

A 38-year-old participant's statement encapsulates this tension:

"At home, I am expected to speak Kikamba by my in-laws, as they say it is part of being a proper Kamba wife. However, in my leadership role at the Sacco, I need to use English and Kiswahili to show a professional front and be taken seriously. It feels like I am juggling different versions of myself depending on where I am."

This testimony highlights the complex balancing act that women in Kitui West must perform, negotiating between traditional expectations and their evolving identities in various social spheres. It aligns with Ochs' (1992) assertion that the relationship between language and gender is mediated by cultural factors and social meanings specific to particular communities.

Education and language prestige

Our data showed a strong correlation between higher levels of education and increased use of English and formal Kiswahili. Among participants with tertiary education, 85% reported regularly using English in professional and social settings, viewing it as a marker of their educational achievement.

A 32-year-old university graduate shared:

"Getting an education opened doors for me. Anytime I speak English, I feel like I have my degree with me. It is not just about communicating, but showcasing what I have achieved as an individual and the opportunities that my education can get me."

This sentiment reflects how language choice becomes a symbolic representation of educational attainment and social mobility. It supports Cameron's (2005) perspective on the relationship between language and power, demonstrating how proficiency in prestige languages like English can be a source of empowerment for women in this context.

Urban-Rural Dynamics

The study revealed significant differences in language use between urban and rural areas of Kitui West Constituency. Women in more urban areas reported higher rates of Kiswahili and English use (60% combined) compared to those in rural areas (30% combined).

A 45-year-old woman who had moved from a rural area to a more urban part of the constituency noted:

"In town, you hear so many languages. Using Swahili and English helps me fit in and do business with people from different backgrounds. But when I visit my village, I switch back to Kikamba. It's like my language changes with the landscape."

This observation highlights how geographical setting influences language choice and, by extension, how women present their identities in different contexts. It aligns with Milroy and Milroy's (1992) concept of network strength, suggesting that rural areas may serve as strongholds for local linguistic practices, while urban areas foster multilingual identities.

Religious Influence

Church-based groups showed a strong preference for Kikamba in spiritual contexts, with 75% of participants stating that they felt closer to God when praying in their mother tongue. This finding underscores the deep connection between language, spirituality, and cultural identity.

A 50-year-old church leader explained:

"Kikamba links us to our ancestors emotionally. When we pray in Kikamba, it's like our whole history is praying with us. It's powerful and unifying."

This sentiment reflects the role of indigenous languages in maintaining cultural and spiritual connections, even as women navigate multilingual identities in other aspects of their lives. It supports Alshammari's (2008) emphasis on the importance of social and cultural elements in language use and identity formation.

Economic Empowerment and Language

Women involved in SACCOs and entrepreneurial activities demonstrated a pragmatic approach to multilingualism. 70% of SACCO members viewed their ability to communicate in multiple languages as an asset for business growth.

A 36-year-old small business owner shared:

"Speaking Kikamba helps me connect with local customers; Swahili is great for suppliers from other parts of Kenya; and knowing some English helps me understand product information and feel confident with more formal clients. Each language is a tool in my business toolkit."

This approach to language use illustrates how economic motivations shape linguistic practices and aspects of identity related to work and financial success. It aligns with Agyekum's (2018) perspective on the practical implications of multilingualism in postcolonial African contexts.

Generational Transmission of Language Attitudes:

Our study revealed a generational divide in attitudes towards language use, particularly concerning the perceived decline of Kikamba among younger generations. 80% of participants aged 50 and above expressed high concern about this trend, compared to only 20% of those aged 18-35.

A 60-year-old participant from an informal community group shared:

"I am concerned that in the future, they won't even know what the correct Kikamba language is. It is disappointing to see our kids not interested in practicing the language; instead, they prefer to stick to English or even Sheng'. Every time I speak in Kikamba, it is not just a mere conversation but a transfer of culture."

This concern reflects broader issues of cultural continuity and the role of language in intergenerational cultural transmission. It highlights the tension between preserving linguistic heritage and adapting to changing sociolinguistic landscapes, a theme that resonates with Agyekum's (2018) work on linguistic decolonization.

Generational Transmission of Language Attitudes

Older women often expressed concern about the perceived decline of Kikamba use among younger generations. This generational divide was reflected in language attitudes and choices within families and community groups.

A 60-year-old participant from an informal community group shared:

“I am concerned that in future, they won't even know what correct Kikamba language is, it is disappointing to see our kids not interested in practicing the language, instead they prefer to stick to English or even Sheng'. Every time I speak in Kikamba, it is not just a mere conversation but transferal of culture.”

It is this that suggests a more general consideration about issues of cultural continuity and language, and most specifically the idea that language is widely considered to be an important element of cultural continuity between the generations.

CONCLUSION

From this study, one can deduce that the process of language use and identity construction among women in Kitui West Constituency is shaped by multiple and intertwining socio-cultural factors. Gender stereotyping, education, place of residence, religious beliefs, economic status, and generational disparities all influence how women with linguistic personalities perform themselves in different social settings. The evidence presented here supports our argument that women living in Kitui West are not mere conduits of linguistic norms but are engaged actors who navigate different languages as ways of articulating themselves, seeking work, and preserving culture. The use and learning of more languages identified in these practices points to both the complexities and possibilities of a pluralistic language context. They therefore illuminate the continuous transformation in social relations in Kitui West within the journey between tradition and modernity as depicted in the distinction between language uses. Hence, church-oriented, economically-oriented, as well as community-oriented women groups are other significant contexts through which such changes are debated regarding language use.

Recommendations.

From the study, some of the recommendations were:

The ministry of education should continue to encourage the use of multiple languages in public areas and schools and promote the idea that different languages are resources.

There is a need for community-based programs that will enhance the retention of Kikamba and at the same time facilitate multilingualism, which is relevant in the modern world as it is today, a cultural asset and flexibility of language.

To address the research problem, a language assistance program should be offered to women in managerial and decision-making positions to improve their leadership skills within SACCOS and religious groups regardless of the linguistic contexts.

Implement information campaigns directed at prevention and deconstruction of gendered language and stereotyped representation of genders.

Encourage the generation of the content in multiple languages, given the media and public information dissemination in various linguistic structures.

Encouraging intergenerational conversation and language exchange whereby the young people can learn from the elders or young people can teach the elders.

Make sure that some particular service delivery channels are offered in different languages to support different language speakers in the society.

These recommendations aim to support women's empowerment through language, preserve cultural heritage, and promote inclusive multilingual practices in Kitui West Constituency. Future research could explore the long-term impacts of these interventions on women's identity construction and socio-economic participation

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