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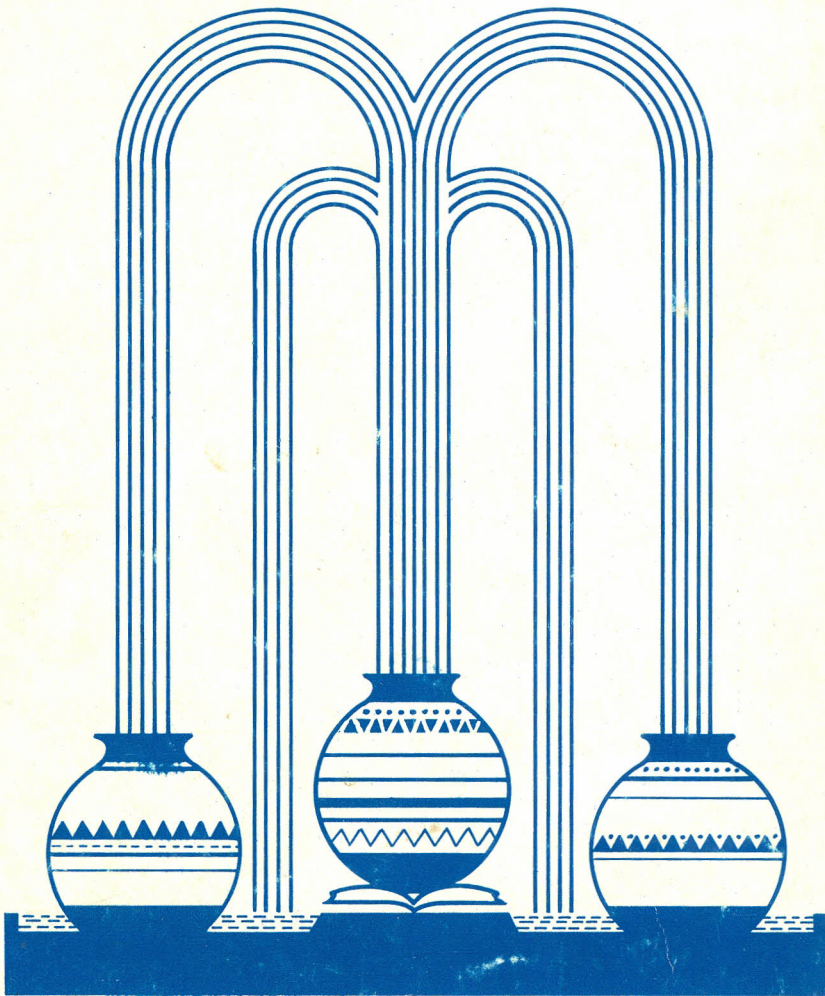
CHEMCHEMI

International Journal of Arts and Social Sciences

VOLUME 1

DEC. 1999

ISSN 1563 – 1028



Journal of the Faculty of Arts
Kenyatta University

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

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Language is primarily an essential tool for communication. People are endowed with vocal abilities so that they can pass messages and other information in verbal form whether it involves two or more participants. Language, therefore, enables us to convey our thoughts, desires, feelings and emotions. This communication is influenced by our geographic, regional, ethnic, clan or other cluster inclinations and expectations. We belong to certain groups and by virtue of our membership - real or imagined, we often communicate information that is either beneficial or harmful to us and the society at large.

Language can and has been used negatively as an identity symbol. People at times use language selectively to attain certain selfish goals and in so doing seek to co-opt and/or corrupt those they communicate with to achieve their aims. Of course languages positively identify and enhance people's culture, aspirations and heritage but often these collective gains are taken for granted and instead, people use language to denote identity and consequently derive some advantage. Language has for instance been used as an ethnic weapon to show either the superiority or inferiority of a people depending on the angle one looks at it from. Indeed as Parkin notes in Whiteley (1974: 186) "the ebb and flow of vernacular interchange among specific pairs of ethnic groups is a function of their positions of "dominance" relative to each other. "Dominance" is seen as resting singly on or on a combination of socio-economic status, political and numerical factors. People are constantly conscious about these social signifiers and they as a result strive to outdo each other in terms of achieving material or social well-being. Language itself is a distinctive feature and consequently people usually exploit it to maximize their sectarian pursuits. At the individual level, language is used by some people to achieve an immediate unfair advantage over those who do not identify with the same language. Envisage the following episodes:

Episode I:

A public office (for example a Registration Bureau). The attendant is issuing forms at a counter. A man approaches him, judges him by *his looks* and belches enticingly:

"Milembe! Uli mulamu Ko, mbekhu i fomu Njerebe khumihinzi"

(How are you? Will you please give me a form. I'm late for work).

The situation demonstrates the speaker's assumption that the attendant is a native speaker of Kihuya. This assumption is based first and foremost on appearance. People from certain communities have distinct physical features of identity. The man in this case succumbs to this judgement and speaks in Kihuya hoping to identify more closely with his target. It is also possible that the speaker's expressive power is better in his "L" hence this scenario. One cannot rule out altogether the possibility that language choice in this instance is meant to favour the speaker so that he gets priority attention. Language then can and is used to perpetuate opportunistic traits and intents.

Episode II:

A pub. Njoroge, a Kikuyu speaker is in the company of Otieno, a Luo speaker.

Kamau, also a Kikuyu speaker joins them and the salutations go:

Kamau: "Niatia Njoroge, Muri ega?"

(How are you Njoroge? (Singular focus)

Are you alright? (Plural focus).

Njoroge: "ii turi ega." (Yes, *we* are fine)

Meet my friend Otieno

Kamau's greeting like the speaker's in Episode 1, assumes that Kamau's friend shares the same linguistic identity with them. Another interpretation is that it is habitual to speak in one's first language. It is also to be deduced that Kamau takes Njoroge's companion for granted. This assumption is a reflection of the dominance cited above. What does it matter anyway - isn't Kikuyu after all familiar to all and sundry? Indeed Kamau's greeting may be interpreted to mean that he acknowledges Otieno through Njoroge, hence the second "you" in his greeting has the plurality in focus. Despite Kamau's unintended egocentricism if we adopt this understanding, he alienates Otieno and creates discomfort in him (Otieno) and his friend Njoroge. Such alienating greetings usually disrupt amicable togetherness. Njoroge's quick shift to English demonstrates such discomfort. Tolerance is usually a very heavy price to pay in such circumstances. A lot of us have suffered and also caused others to suffer such embarrassment many times. It is amazing that despite such discomfort, we still continue to seek favours and to discriminate against others on the basis of language differences.

Episode III:

You are in Machakos Town, probably attending a seminar. At break time, you drive into town. Of course you have every reason to do so since you are a tourist in your own right. You park near the bus stop and you sit in the car watching the mass of humanity rush around and about. A middle aged man clad in a three piece suit approaches your car window, his hands full of his baggage.

He accosts you:

"Uvoo waku? Uendete ata?"

Niwithiwa uendete Kitui?"

(Hello! Which way are you going?)

Might you be going to Kitui?)

The traveller has reason enough (by association) to assume that you too are a traveller by virtue of your having parked near the bus stop. Of course many people carry paying passengers to supplement the fuel cost whenever they travel up-country from major towns but it is not adequate justification for the man to speak to you in Kikamba even though it is the language of the local people in Machakos Town. Linguistically, the town is heterogeneous. Why not speak to you in Kiswahili? Perhaps the man wished to *identify* with you but misjudged you this time. He ordinarily judges correctly at other times and his identity aids him in achieving his goals. Similar travellers will at that

moment have sought *recognition* and *attention* by speaking in over forty languages across the length and breadth of this country. Our linguistic diversity continues to hinder our aspirations to belong together and be identified as one people.

Episode IV:

A rendezvous. Wafula is consulting with a friend, David. Juma, Wafula's colleague saunters in and on seeing the duo decides to join them:

Juma: "Hamjambo Wafula?" (How are you (Plural) people?)

Wafula: "Aha! Juma, hatujambo. Karibu. Huyu ni rafiki yangu David." (Oh! Juma, we are fine welcome. Meet my friend David).

Juma: "Asante. Hujambo bwana David?" (Thanks. How are you Mr. David?)

David: I'm o.k.

Juma: "Nashukuru kukufahamu." (It's nice meeting you.)

David: That's right. Thanks.

David's discomfort with Juma's continued introductory remarks in *Kiswahili* is truly telling. There are several explanations for this. Firstly, he is dismissive and obviously disinterested in speaking to Juma because he (David) detests Kiswahili - hearing and speaking it. He sees no utilitarian value in speaking Kiswahili hence his negative response. His "Colonial" education taught him to speak English and be *identified* with *civilisation*. To him Kiswahili was/is for rural, unschooled, illiterate folk. He belongs to an elite class and elitism is about mannerisms and of course language is one good way of articulating these mannerisms. Speaking the English language gives David prestige and an unmistakable identity. He chuckles as he struggles to articulate linguistic sounds and walks around with the "Roget's Thesaurus" in his coat-pocket to prove a point - his *identity* through language. Travestyng the white man's culture is an obsession. Such hang-ups are galore among the educated (read schooled) people. They are yet to unmask themselves and see their *true identity* as manifested through language; this they are able to do but are unwilling to because of being blindfolded by a colonial legacy of self-hate. On a more compassionate note, David may be viewing Juma as an intruder and hence he struggles to retain their relationship through speaking English which is a more formal code. That way he shuts out the intruder (Juma). The emphasis here is that each player here uses language to define their places/roles in this interaction. Language choice then can and does create conflict and disharmony in a variety of situations.

Linguistic variations as seen in these episodes can be manipulated to suit ethnic inclinations. Smith (1981:188-9) defines ethnic units as:

Subdivisions of some single racial stock, differentiated in the beliefs of those who do not belong to them by real or putative community of descent and cultural practice.

The episodes serve to show that despite the richness of our diverse cultural heritage, evident through language and other cultural manifestations, some negative attributes can be derived with intent to highlight our differences with a view to achieving selfish gains. Ethnicity also establishes and maintains social and cultural boundaries by focussing on real and assumed differences. People view others through stereotyped lenses. This observation is shared by Cohen (1988:23) when he says that ethnicity:

Is an ideological construct not an empirical social category; as such it signifies a set of imaginary properties of inheritance which fix and legitimize real positions of social domination or subordination in terms of genealogies of genetic difference.

In our Kenyan situation, multilingualism has been positively used in the enhancement of our cultural attributes such as music, dance and drama. A lot of scholarly research has been done on our languages and literatures. However, at the social and political arenas, our linguistic diversity has not been taken seriously.

Kiswahili is Kenya's national language but its unifying role has been taken for granted. There has been no concerted national programme to sensitize people about the need to identify consciously as one people with common goals. There is no language policy in place to inculcate in Kenyans a sense of nationhood through linguistic uniformity. Just like Cohen (ibid) terms ethnicity as "ideological construct", there is an urgent need for Kenyans to ideologically regard Kiswahili as the only neutral unifying language available to them and accord it the prestige it deserves. The current position of Kiswahili as a compulsory subject in our primary and secondary schools has a lot of curriculum (read examination) emphasis but lacks the ideological orientation. People still regard English as the language to identify with because it is accorded great prestige in our diglossic situation. Kiswahili should therefore not just be used for political gain at *barazas*; indeed it should not be seen as just another academic subject; Kiswahili deserves to be the language which Kenyans should identify with. It will help us get rid of the negative effects of untamed multilingualism which gives rise to the manipulation of language as has been cited in the episodes in this paper. It is the only language to help us become a detribalised community ready to forge ahead as one people.

Besides the episodes cited above, many of us are bogged down by ethnic attitudes that keep us on the alert when we confront people whose parole is different from ours. We judge people by their names and not by who or what they are qualitatively. We are quick to place people in certain clan, tribal or regional boundaries. You mention your name and the next question is, "You are a Mukamba, a Mumeru, ...?" These references to our *identity* are only useful if they contribute to our collective welfare as a Nation. Parochialism should be discarded and people should learn to denounce selfishness and to respect one another. They should indeed appreciate the wonderful "priceless" gift that language is, disabuse it of selfish manoeuvres and use it to enhance peace, love and understanding.

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