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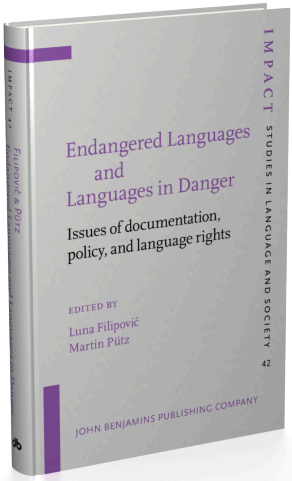

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Language shift and endangerment in urban and rural East Africa

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In this paper we present empirical data on three places in East Africa where language shift is occurring, two urban and one rural. In doing so, we hope that both the similarities and the differences will illuminate some of the underlying factors which influence communal choices about language maintenance and shift. All three case studies are drawn from our own work, and one is part of a larger ongoing project concerning urban language shift in East Africa. Bagamba and Gibson (forthcoming) reports on one other context in the same project, that of the Kisii community in Homa Bay, Kenya.

Keywords: East Africa, choices, ecology, EGIDS, maintenance, Nairobi, shift, Swahili, urban/urbanisation

0. Introduction

African cities are often relatively recent foundations (e.g. Nairobi dates from 1899), and as such are sites of recently developed and dynamic language ecologies; the question of what commonalities these ecologies share is part of the rationale behind this paper. And yet we also ask the question, which is yet to be answered in a coherent way, of what influence the recently emerged urban language ecologies have on the rural contexts that surround them. It is certain that different dynamics are at work in the city and the village, and yet these dynamics do not exist in isolation from each other – people, and with them their language practices, move from one to the other daily.

These are by no means the first studies of language shift in East Africa. The contributions in Brenzinger (1992) cover various cases, both in terms of general trends, for example in Tanzania, and specific, mainly advanced cases of language

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shift, such as among the Suba and Dahalo of Kenya. While urban shift is mentioned by Legère (1992:100) for Mbeya, the majority of cases concern shift in rural populations. Most of these cases of shift (see Batibo 1992:92 for a list) are from one ethnically-marked language to another, alongside other (including urban) cases where the shift is to the lingua franca Swahili, which away from the coast does not correspond to an ethnic shift.

The contexts we look at are (1) urban Nairobi (Gibson 2012), in particular in the informal settlement of Kibera, (2) the Bhadha-speaking Northern Hema in the town of Bunia, Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), from unpublished research undertaken by both authors, and (3) the rural homeland of the Bhele community, also in the Eastern DRC, from Bagamba's own unpublished research. In each of these cases, the target of the shift is a local variety of Swahili, which is not a language that carries an ethnic identity in any of these contexts. We do not claim that any of these studies represents the final word on what is happening in these communities.

With Fishman's claim (1971:315) that "urban dwellers are more inclined to shift; rural dwellers are less inclined to shift", we might assume that African cities are sites of widespread language shift. However, Mufwene (2010:915) questions whether this applies in all African contexts, suggesting that at least parts of cities may be seen as "mega-villages", with a mix of rural and urban dynamics. Here, as people from one ethnic community may well choose to live in the same part of a city as each other, we can envisage certain parts of a city being environments which favour ethnic language maintenance, along with the practice of an urban language of wider communication (LWC). To use metaphors developed by Gary Simons, such a city with mega-villages would be framed as a salad bowl, where each ingredient maintains its distinctiveness, as opposed to the more commonly used metaphor of the melting pot, where different ingredients come together to form something new and relatively uniform – this would represent a case where different communities all shift to an LWC. The first study addresses the case of Nairobi, asking the question whether it may be best seen as a melting pot (where all shift is to Swahili[1] and/or English, while losing competence in the communal languages), or as a salad bowl, where there is practice of LWC(s) but also of communal languages being maintained in different neighbourhoods. The new metaphor developed for this paper, that of the chilli pot, where the locally-dominant communal language becomes the LWC of the city, does not apply here, but seems to apply in the Homa Bay study (Bagamba & Gibson forthcoming).

1. In this case a non-standard variety of Swahili, subsuming ways of talking that might also be identified by the term *Sheng*.

The study of language shift and maintenance has often been of contexts where the end result is communal monolingualism (e.g. in Europe or North America). In none of the three case studies examined here is monolingualism the pattern adopted by those who have shifted away from a communal language. Instead, new patterns of multilingualism are adopted. We are not able to claim that this is a universal pattern for African cities or villages, but the results of these three case studies did not come as a surprise to the authors – it may well be that societal multilingualism is a norm in many parts of Africa (see Lüpke & Storch 2013: 275–278, for example). We therefore need to be careful to clarify what is inferred by a statement of language shift, avoiding the assumption of monolingualism which may well be the pervasive model elsewhere. Therefore any study of language maintenance and shift in Africa needs not just to ask what is lost, but also investigate what is maintained or gained. We now turn to look at the first case study, that of Nairobi, in more detail.

1. Language shift in Nairobi

The Nairobi study (Gibson 2012) looked at self-reported language behaviour in two contexts: from the congregation of a primarily middle-class Pentecostal church in the suburb of Buru Buru, and in the informal settlement of Kibera, which we would expect to be a place more favourable towards community language maintenance. Table 1 looks at claimed dominant language usage in the Buru Buru sample. Note that "mother tongue" in Kenyan usage refers to communal languages (i.e. neither Swahili nor English) rather than to one's dominant language.

The sample is not especially large, and we do not claim that these figures accurately represent the percentages of language use in middle-class Nairobi. Nevertheless, a strong trend of a move away from communal vernaculars as the dominant language at home is evident. This does not necessarily indicate that the individuals (most of whom had moved into Nairobi from elsewhere) have lost all competence in their communal languages, but represents a very different

Table 1. Dominant language at home, Buru Buru (N = 46) (Gibson 2012: 570)

Language	Number	Percentage
"Mother Tongue"	3	7%
Swahili	37	80%
Swahili and English	2	4%
English	4	9%

Table 2. Dominant language at home, Kibera (N = 156) (Gibson 2012: 570)

Language	Number	Percentage
Mother Tongue (MT)	109	70%
MT and Swahili	18	12%
Swahili	28	18%

ecology from most rural contexts, where ethnic-based vernaculars still dominate in the home domain. Nor, especially, should we understand stated English dominance to imply an inability to speak (non-standard) Swahili competently. All of this sample will be at the very least bilingual.

The findings in Kibera contrast starkly with Buru Buru. In Kibera the population under investigation does not inhabit carefully-planned suburbs, working in the formal economy, but an informal settlement with a much higher population density, with a mix of formal and informal employment. More details are available in Gibson (2012), but here we present the most basic trend.

The headline figure of 70% maintenance of the dominance of the communal language is strikingly different from the Buru Buru sample, and looks like it might represent the kind of figure where we might speak of the mega-village, where urban norms have not overwhelmed rural ones, but live alongside them. However most interviewees listed "mother tongue" usage only for the home domain, claiming that street interaction was primarily in Swahili. On the other hand, the interviewers did notice a lot of use of Luo, the communal language of around two-thirds of the interviewees, on the streets, and in at least one bar. Unsurprisingly, Luos showed a higher level of maintenance, and two women from other communities who had Luo husbands claimed to have added Luo to their repertoires in the home. Furthermore, a majority of other communities also claimed to have maintained their communal language in the home, so the high density of Luos in Kibera cannot be the sole factor in vernacular retention.

When interviewees were asked which was the main language they used with their children, the 70% figure declined to 31% claiming to use their mother tongue, with an additional 17% claiming to use a mix of Swahili and the communal language. And when asked to report what language their children spoke to each other, the figures declined further to 18% using mother tongue, and 12% using a mixture of mother tongue and Swahili. The remainder of 70% reported that their children used Swahili with each other; interestingly none mentioned English here, despite three interviewees saying they spoke to their children in this language. Without wider communal use, attempts to use English, the educational language, in the home domain were not adopted by the children.

Table 3. Ethnic language use at home by age of arrival in Kibera (Gibson 2012: 574)

	0–9	10–19	20 and over
Luos	83% (N = 12)	67% (N = 12)	89% (N = 18)
Other groups	29% (N = 7)	77% (N = 13)	71% (N = 14)

The factor which showed the greatest difference between Luos and others was the impact of the age of arrival in Kibera upon the home language, as can be seen in Table 3.

For those non-Luos who arrived in their first decade, the trend is towards Swahili dominance, while those who arrived later mainly use their vernacular at home. However this difference of age at arrival is not apparent for the Luo community, which is consistent with some level of maintenance of Luo occurring within Kibera itself. This is perhaps unsurprising given the assumption that the majority of Kibera's population comes from this community. With a large population shift into the cities, and the fact that informal settlements such as Kibera are the point of first arrival for many of these migrants, it seems that we have a situation which fits Mufwene's notion of the mega-village, especially as there is ethnic language transmission continuing in the city itself. Without such continued migration, we might predict shift away from (especially non-Luo) ethnic vernaculars in Kibera – to be certain much more slowly than in the suburban sample. But the continued contact with and movement from the Luo homeland will presumably mean continued use of the Luo language in Kibera for the decades to come.

2. Language shift amongst the Northern Hema in Bunia

From urban Kenya, we now turn to examine two Congolese contexts, the first of which is the repertoire of children of Northern Hema migrants into the city of Bunia in the North-East of the DRC, and parts of the Bhele community in their rural homeland around two hundred kilometres south-west of Bunia. Neither of these studies have yet been published.

Bunia is a city of around 300,000 people (Obedi 2009), which has seen rapid population growth, not just due to the rural-to-urban migration which often has economic causes, but also due to decreased security due to civil conflict, especially between 1999 and 2005. The Northern Hema shifted their vernacular from (Bantu) Oruhema (ISO 693-3 code: NIX) to (Central Sudanic) Bhadha (ISO code 693-3: LED, a language also associated with another ethnic group, the Lendu) during the twentieth century, accompanying a change in lifestyle. Further details and analysis of this shift, which is not the subject of investigation here, can be

Table 4. Competence of Northern Hema children in Bunia in Bhadha

	Sample size	Does not understand Bhadha	Understands but does not speak Bhadha	Speaks Bhadha competently
5–9 year olds	59	63%	27%	10%
10–13 year olds	51	27%	55%	18%
14–18 year olds	37	19%	38%	43%

found in Bagamba (2007). We know from Kaputo (1982: 47) that Hema, whose homeland almost borders Bunia, had started moving to Bunia as early as 1929. They, along with the Alur, form one of the larger communities in Bunia, but do not constitute a majority.

The Bunia study is different from that in Nairobi, in that is focused on only one ethnic community. But the more fundamental difference is the methodology, which is focused on children's knowledge of the communal language Bhadha, and is based not on self reporting, but on the interviewer's assessment of the child's language level: whether the child can speak it well, understand it well, or does not understand the language at all. This was accompanied by an interview with the parents, asking them about their language practices and the reasons behind them. Note that the LWC of Bunia, as already mentioned, is Swahili, with French being used in education, and Lingala finding some uses in parts of the town.

The first thing to notice in Table 4 is that many children are learning Bhadha in this urban context, but many are not. We see both greater understanding and capacity to speak the language competently with the children who are older. We are unable to conclude whether this is due to the language often being learnt in the home after first learning Swahili, or whether the older children reflect a more robust use of Bhadha in homes a few years ago. Interestingly there is also a broadly similar trend among Kisii children in Homa Bay, Kenya (Bagamba & Gibson, forthcoming). As in Nairobi, we assume that this pattern of incomplete learning within the community would eventually lead to loss of the language in this urban environment, were it not for continued migration which might be able to sustain the language.

We were interested in whether language choice reflected different self-perceptions of identity. This is complicated, as often ethnic identity labels refer to one's origin, and an urban identity operates at a different level, in that belonging to a town is not seen as such a basic identity as a communal one, and nor is it seen as incompatible with a communal identity. Table 5 represents the children's answers to this question.

Here we see similar to patterns to those of language use – the Northern Hema identity is claimed more by the older children, and whether this is due to this

Table 5. Identity perception by the Northern Hema children living in Bunia

	Sample size	Inhabitant of Bunia	Hema living in Bunia	Northern Hema
5–9 year olds	61	74%	7%	20%
10–13 year olds	51	61%	8%	31%
14–18 year olds	38	45%	11%	45%

Table 6. Parents' language use patterns, Bunia

	Bhadha	Swahili and Bhadha	Swahili	Other combinations
Between parents	44%	27%	18%	11%
Father to child	20%	17%	59%	4%
Mother to child	21%	18%	59%	2%

identity emerging with age, or that it was more prominent a few years ago, or whether it is seen to correlate with language use, remains an open question.

While we see little difference in self-reported behaviours of either parent, we do see that Bhadha is used much less with children than with spouses. The main reason that was given for not speaking to children in Bhadha was a perceived lack of responsiveness from children when speaking the language, associated with the parents seeing little utility in teaching their children Bhadha for urban life. In addition, much child-rearing is done by older children, so children's linguistic choices will have speedy repercussions on children just a few years younger than them. There was also not a feeling among most parents that speaking Bhadha was an essential part of a Northern Hema identity. Furthermore, 16% of the mothers were not Bhadha speakers, and in general the children from exogamous marriages did not learn Bhadha.

Interestingly, another study undertaken in Bunia, Ucuon's (2012) work on the Alur, shows a very similar pattern. Again, part of the community's children has learnt the language, with older children knowing more than younger ones.

3. Language shift in the rural Bhele community

Our final case study concerns the rural Bhele (ISO 693-3 code: BHY) community, taken from Bagamba (2012). It is a small community (around 15,000) with a neighbouring community that is dominant demographically, economically and politically, the Nande. The interethnic marriage rate is around 40%, and over half of that is with the Nande. Members of the Bhele community often present themselves as Nande when outside their homeland.

Table 7. Bhele children's competence in Bhele

	Doesn't understand	Passive understanding	Speaks, but not well	Speaks fluently
6–13 year-olds	25%	35%	27%	13%
14–20 year-olds	9%	15%	17%	58%

The sample under study here was taken in the community's rural homeland, rather than in a mixed urban context. The sample was from the four more accessible Bhele clans (of a total of six). The two other clans are in remote forest villages and can be reached only by a two-day journey on foot, so no conclusions about these other two clans can be made, especially as we may hypothesise that the less accessible clans may be less prone to language shift. It seems that, where found, the direction of shift is towards Nande-Swahili bilingualism. Consistent with this, qualitative interviews with parents showed that neither Bhele identity nor language were perceived as useful. Table 7 shows language competence of children aged between 6–20 years from Bhele community, in their community's language.

What is immediately striking in this data set is that many children from within the community itself, in its homeland, are not learning even to understand the language, and fewer are learning to speak it. There is a broad parallel with the urban cases we have examined. Furthermore, we note a difference in the rate of loss of children of different ages, and again we cannot, from this data alone, ascertain whether this is due to later acquisition of the communal language, or to reduced rates of transmission over the years. It may well be a combination of these two phenomena. In terms of the EGIDS (Lewis & Simons 2010), the language in these communities would be at Level 6b, *Threatened*, as there are many children who are not learning it.

In our other case studies, in Nairobi and Bunia, we are looking at languages 'imported' into the urban context, and do not conclude that these languages in their home communities are under the same level of threat that Bhele appears to be from this data. We also note that the LWC Swahili has found a place in rural homes, not only in urban ones. We must suppose that this rural shift to Swahili (a language which is not perceived as belonging to one particular ethnic group, and therefore not automatically signifying an identity shift) is facilitated by its widespread use in urban contexts; we have been dealing with urban and rural contexts as different, and they are, and yet they do not exist in isolation from each other, nor is the dichotomy a categorical one (we may need to speak of urban and rural settlements on some sort of a continuum, or a sliding scale).

4. Final questions

We have noted commonalities between the situations in Nairobi and Bunia – in both cases all children are learning the LWC Swahili, while many, but not all, also maintain competence in the "imported" vernaculars. There is little evidence for a deliberate turning away from the vernaculars, just that they are generally perceived as not having the same value as Swahili, French or English (not that the latter two appear to be used much as home languages). There is little family management to protect the vernaculars, and if there is, then it is not community-wide. What is so interesting is that we have found very similar trends and attitudes in one rural context (Bhele) as well. However, the reason that we report on this context is not its typicality, but its comparative exceptionalism; we do not observe this shift for the majority of languages in their rural "homelands" in Eastern Congo. But the fact that Swahili is so widely spoken in towns makes it an available target for acquisition in the countryside as well. And in this case this move towards Swahili is accompanied by the acquisition of another vernacular, Nande, unlike the urban cases. Is this more evidence that many African contexts are fundamentally multilingual?

There is no doubt that Swahili is gaining many speakers, many of whom will use it as a first language alongside at least one other. We may add that its prevalence in so many urban centres in East Africa raises its perceived benefits (Karan 2011) for speakers across the whole region; a virtuous circle where being useful further increases perceived utility, especially where urbanisation proceeds apace.

The move of Swahili into the home domain in the countryside raises a larger question about language shift and maintenance in Eastern (and perhaps other parts of) Africa. Are we seeing a change from a pattern where language shift in this part of the world is from one communal language to another (e.g. Bagamba 2007, which looks at the shift from Oruhema to Bhadha) to a phase where the shift is primarily in the direction of LWCs such as Swahili or Lingala, which do not have such a strongly associated ethnic identity? This would seem to be a broader trend in other parts of Africa, not just the East. As part of this issue, found in a background of widespread urbanisation, we must ask the broader question of how the dynamics of urban language ecologies in Africa impact those in the countryside. We do not yet know the answer to this question, but this paper is written in the hope that it might stimulate thought and further research which will inform a possible answer in the future.

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