

THE PERIMETRIC CONTRIBUTION OF LANGUAGE IN IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION: A CASE OF THE BURJI PEOPLE OF NORTHERN KENYA

Dr. Kenneth Kamuri Ngure,

Kenyatta University, Kenya.

ABSTRACT

Among linguists and anthropologists the question “is it possible to be Xmen without Xish?”¹ is one that triggers lively debates. The terms Xmen and Xish stand for the members of a given community and the language that is supposed to be spoken by the members of the community respectively. A section of the participants in this debate contend that one cannot claim to be a member of a given speech community when he/she does not speak the ancestral language of that community while another section advances the position that one does not need to be a speaker of an ancestral language to be reckoned a member of that speech community. In this paper I interrogate these positions with recourse to the situation in Marsabit County where the Burji community, following prolonged contact with the Borana community, is grappling with the threat of linguistic assimilation. Intergenerational transmission of the Burji language is low as children are increasingly getting socialized into the community’s way of life using Borana. Interestingly, the decreasing use of Burji language in day to day life notwithstanding, members of the community cling to the Burji identity and readily front this identity when circumstances demand for one to reveal their identity. The paper therefore, using illustrations from cases of language use involving members of Burji community, demonstrates that the ability to speak Burji plays a peripheral role in the definition and construction of the Burji identity.

Keywords: Burji, identity, language, culture.

¹Tsunoda (2005:160) quoting Fishman 1991:11.

INTRODUCTION:

Tsunoda (2005:160) poses the question “is it possible to be Xmen without Xish?” (The terms Xmen and Xish are taken from Fishman 1991:11. The former stands for the members of the community while the latter for the name of the language). The question is a subject of a raging debate among not just linguists, but also members of various speech communities. In the debate, one group holds the view that one cannot claim to be a member of a given speech community when he/she does not speak the ancestral language (cf. Miyaoka 2001:8; Thomason 2001:10; Ngure 2016:142) while the other group says that one does not need to be a speaker of an ancestral language to be reckoned a member of that speech community (cf. Duenhauer and Duenhauer 1998:76; Rigsby 1987:370).

Interestingly, even among members of the same community, the view on whether language is an important determiner for ethnic identity is not necessarily unanimous. Dorian (1998), quoted in Tsunoda (2005:164) says,

I found that when I asked speakers of Scottish Gaelic whether Knowledge of Gaelic was necessary to being a ‘true highlander’, they said it was; when I asked people of Highland birth and ancestry who did not speak Gaelic the same question, they said it wasn’t.

Noonan (1999), quoted in Thomason (2001:240), says, “villages in Myagdi used to speak Chantyal until relatively recently or are now losing it, since their language is not seen as a key feature of their Chantyal identity”.

Among linguists, the debate is even more interesting with some, such as Duenhauer and Duenhauer 1998:76) claiming that language is merely one of the many “badges of ethnicity” and not the sole indicator for ethnicity. A similar view is shared by Rigsby (1987:370) who argues that speech is a mere external trait, like dress and appearance, which may not count for much but it is the inner values and principle which guide people’s lives and make up the real substance of their social and personal identity. It is for that reason that he challenges the view that “one cannot be a real Indian unless one can speak an Indian language (Tsunoda 2005:165).

Miyaoka (2001:8) represents the linguists on the other side of the divide, who hold the view that language is at the core of a people’s identity. He says,

Once an ethnic group loses its own language, even if some fragments of its material culture (e.g. ethnic costumes, crafts, or whatever) live on, they may represent little more than a lingering twilight: the culture may possibly have been lost or, at least, may not be functioning as an organic whole any longer. In this sense language may be said to be the last stronghold of culture”.

The debate notwithstanding, it is generally agreed that languages function as important symbols of ethnic identity (Crystal 2000:36; Thomason 2001: 22; Tsunoda 2005:164).

In this study, I sought to investigate the position of the Burji of Northern Kenya regarding this phenomenon.

THE PLACE OF BURJI RELATIVE TO OTHER LANGUAGES IN NORTHERN KENYA:

The Burji language belongs to the Eastern Cushitic sub-family of the broad Afro- Asiatic family of languages (Heine & Mohlig 1980). The latest national census report shows that the Burjis in Kenya are 25,000 (Census 2010).

Members of the Burji community living in Kenya are mostly found in Marsabit County and a sizeable number in Nairobi (Huruma/Kia Maiko estate).

They are mainly involved in farming and trade (they are known for dominating livestock trade in northern Kenya) Mahmoud (2008: 561). Statistically, the Burji constitute a minority in the county. The community is sandwiched between a number of fellow Cushitic groups and some Nilotic groups in the county.

The breakdown of the indigenous ethnic groups in Marsabit County is as shown below:

- Borana - 28.2%
- Rendille - 23,585
- Gabra - 23.37%
- Turkana - 5.6%

- Samburu - 4.55%
- Burji - 4.35%
- Garreh - 3.49% (Census 1989)

From the foregoing breakdown, it is apparent that when we consider each language separately, Borana is the language that enjoys statistical predominance relative to the others.

Just like Burji, Borana is a Cushitic language branching from the Afroasiatic language phylum (Heine & Mohlig 1980).

METHODOLOGY:

I collected data from sixty nine young members of the Burji community. They hailed from nine villages in Marsabit County known to be inhabited by members of the Burji community.

To be considered in the sampling frame, I relied on the potential respondent’s self professed admission of the Burji identity. The perennial conflicts witnessed in northern Kenya have, among other things, enhanced creation of a strong ethnolinguistic awareness among the groups to the extent that rarely would one ascribe to himself/herself an identity of a community to which he/she does not belong.²

Since this study was interested in examining the patterns of language use, the Language Use and Attitude Questionnaire (LUAQ) was heavily relied upon as it was reckoned to have the potential of eliciting information regarding *who* speaks *what* language to *whom* and *when* (Fishman 1965). The tool was designed in such a way that it was possible to obtain data regarding linguistic behavior across grandchild-grandparent generational continuum. The decision to use the younger members of the community was pegged on the premise that this category best provides evidence of intergenerational transmission of a language or lack of it. The ages of the respondents ranged between 12 and 20 years (67 respondents indicated that they were between 12 and 18 years while only two were over 18 years). They were drawn from nine villages which are not, necessarily, exclusively inhabited by members of the Burji community. The villages were Nyayo Road, Shauri Yako, Dakabaricha, Manyatta Ote, Manyatta Makaa, Manyatta Afya, Kiwanja Ndege, Manyatta Chile and Manyatta Burji. While identifying respondents for the study, the researcher was not constrained to strike parity in representation from the nine villages since the population proportion in the villages was not uniform. Some villages had more members of the Burji community than others. Equally, parity in gender among the respondents was not accorded much premium as it was not thought to be a significant variable in the study. It was, nevertheless, nearly achieved as the female comprised 53 percent of the respondents while male were 47 percent.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION:

In this section, the paper examines the incidence of use of the languages that comprise the linguistic repertoire of the respondents. Particular focus is accorded to the language of use in the home domain. In order to assess the use of language across the generational continuum, the section juxtaposes the language used by grandparents when talking to their grandchildren (the respondents in this study) and vice versa. It also provides information about the language used between parents and their children as well as the language used among siblings.

THE LINGUISTIC REPERTOIRE OF THE RESPONDENTS:

Before asking the respondents to indicate their choice of languages when speaking to various persons in the home domain, they were asked to indicate the language(s) they considered to be their mother tongue and also indicate the other languages they spoke. Responses to the first question are as indicated in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Respondents’ First Language

Language	Frequency	Percent
Burji	41	59.4
Borana	25	36.2
Kiswahili	3	4.3
Total	69	100.0

²Communities in Marsabit have been involved in recurrent conflicts over resources which have sometimes occasioned bloody encounters pitting one community against another. Some communities have forged alliances and conveniently used them to wrest resources from opponents. One such alliance brings together the Rendille, Gabra and Burji (REGABU). Borana is excluded in the alliance and is actually treated as the main antagonist (Schlee and Shongolo (2012:119; see also Schlee 2009: 204). In the general election of 2013, contestants backed by REGABU scooped significant positions which resulted to members of the alliance securing themselves places in the County and National assemblies.

Looking at the data in Table 1 above, one might be tempted to deduce that some of the respondents might have been included in the sampling frame erroneously. This is especially so when we consider the 36.2 percent of the respondents indicated that Borana was their first language. However, as pointed out earlier, all the respondents claim a Burji identity and were drawn from a Burji homestead. Also, as we had alluded to earlier, the sensitivities regarding linguistic identities and tribal affiliations in the county do not allow members from one ethnic community to ascribe on themselves an identity associated with a different group regardless of the language(s) spoken by the parties involved.³

It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that the 36.2 and 4.3 percent of the respondents who indicated a language other than Burji as their first language were not from non-Burji homesteads but they came from Burji homesteads where Burji is rarely spoken to them.

In Marsabit County, it is not uncommon to find members of one community discoursing in a language of a community they regard as their ‘enemy’. The ability to speak a given language is therefore not ascribed an emotive interpretation. Polyglottism is the norm rather than the exception in Marsabit County (Ngure 2016:87). Table 2 below attests to the fact that the respondents have a fairly rich linguistic repertoire.

Table 2: the Linguistic Repertoire of the Respondents

Languages		Frequency	Percent
	Three Languages	7	10.1
	Four Languages	32	46.4
	Five Languages	29	42.0
	Total	68	98.6
Missing	System	1	1.4
	Total	69	100.0

Clearly, from the table above, it is apparent that respondents whose linguistic repertoire consists of only three languages constitute a minority; the majority speak more than three languages. When I interrogated this question closely, it emerged that for those who indicated three as the number of languages they spoke, the three were English, Kiswahili and either Burji or Borana. For those who spoke five languages, the languages were English, Kiswahili, Boran, Burji and Amharic. Amharic is a lingua franca in Ethiopia. Marsabit County borders Ethiopia on the north.⁴

Given that the respondents had a relatively rich linguistic repertoire which meant that their language choice options were diverse, I found it useful to interrogate their linguistic behaviour when interacting with their grandparents, parents and siblings. The three categories represent three generations. When examining the use of language between the grandparent and the siblings, it was prudent to take cognisance of the fact that it is possible for the two groups to engage in a meaningful discourse while each group is using a different language.

LANGUAGE CHOICE IN THE HOME DOMAIN:

In multilingual societies where languages exist in a diglossic relation, persons make decisions voluntarily, and sometimes involuntarily, regarding the language to use when speaking to whom, about what and in which situation. The language that is chosen for the home domain is often one that, in addition to sufficing as a code for informal communication, fosters some intimacy that goes with kinship. With this in mind, I requested the respondents to indicate the frequency of use of the four languages in certain situations within the home domain. Choice of the home domain was informed by the general understanding that the home is where much of socialization into a peoples’ culture takes place, including transmission of one’s ancestral language. A

³ Linguistic assimilation is a realistic phenomenon in Marsabit County. The County has over ten ethnic groups who claim to be natives of the county. However, some of the communities do not speak their ancestral language, even in the home domain; they speak the language of their dominant neighbours but retain strong cultural identity with the communities of their descent. The Gabra community is an example of communities with a strong sense of ethnic identity but without a language of their own; the community uses Borana, a language of their once politically and economically powerful neighbor (Schlee 2009: 205). The Elmolo community is yet another example; they speak Samburu having been linguistically assimilated by their economically powerful neighbours, the Samburu (Omondi 2013: 133).

⁴ Following an interview with Mr Woche Guyo, a Burji elder and a renowned chronicler of the Burji cause in Kenya, I learnt that a considerable number of residents of Marsabit County have relatives in Ethiopia and occasionally visit their kinsmen across the border. The social bond between them is so strong that the Burji community in Ethiopia participates in the radio programme aired in Burji by the Kenya Broadcasting Cooperation at 6-8 a.m every day. They make calls and contribute actively to current issues affecting the Burji community.

language’s vitality is bolstered if it is being passed on at home. Languages that are not in use at home but are promoted in other domains, such as in school and religion, usually end up being symbolic and ceremonial (Nettle and Romaine 2000:178). So critical in determining the survival or otherwise of a language is the home domain that Nettle and Romaine (2000:178) issue a word of caution to persons involved in language revitalization efforts when they say that,

Without safeguards for language use at home sufficient to ensure transmission, attempts to prop the language up outside the home will be like blowing air into a punctured tyre (Nettle and Romaine 2000:178).

LANGUAGE CHOICE INVOLVING THE YOUNGEST AND OLDEST:

Table 3 below juxtaposes the language of the respondents when speaking to grandparents against that of the grandparents when speaking to the respondents. From the table, it appears that Burji and Borana are almost at par (at 43.5 and 46.4 percent respectively) when it comes to the incidence of use by the respondents when speaking to their grandparents. However, when the grandparents are speaking to the respondents, Burji is predominant (at 62.3 percent) followed at a distance by Borana (at 30.4 percent). The incidence of use of interchange involving Borana and Burji is low but not negligible (the respondents display a higher incidence, at 7.2 percent compared to the grandparents’ at 4.3). The impact of Kiswahili in the discourse involving the two generations is negligible as we can see in the table.

Table 3: Showing incidence of Language Choice by Respondents/Grandparents

Language(s)	Respondents to Grandparents		Grandparents to Respondents	
	Frequency	percent	Frequency	percent
Burji	30	43.5	43	62.3
Borana	32	46.4	21	30.4
Kiswahili	1	1.4	1	1.4
Burji-Borana	5	7.2	3	4.3
Missing	1	1.4	1	1.4
Total	69	100.0	69	100.0

LANGUAGE CHOICE INVOLVING RESPONDENTS AND PARENTS:

Respondents’ parents, in this study, represent an intermediate generation that is sandwiched between the respondents, representing the youngest living generation, and the grandparent, representing the oldest living generation. The language used by the respondents to the mother should not necessarily be the one used by the respondent when speaking to the father. Given that the community in focus derives its livelihood mainly from trade and farming and their villages are situated near an urban centre, mobility was expected to be relatively rampant among the members of the community. Tables 4 and 5 below display side by side the choice of language made by the respondents when speaking to their mother and father while Table 5 provides information on the language used by each of the parents when speaking to the respondents.

Table 4: Language of respondents to parents

Language(s)	Respondent to mother		Respondent to father	
	Frequency	percent	Frequency	percent
Burji	15	21.7	14	20.3
Borana	50	72.5	35	50.7
Kiswahili	1	1.4	5	7.2
English	0	0	5	7.2
Burji-Borana	2	2.9	3	4.3
Borana-Kiswahili	0	0	4	5.8
Kiswahili-English	1	1.4	1	1.4
Borana-English	0	0	1	1.4
Missing	0	0	1	1.4
Total	69	100.0	69	100.0

The impression depicted by Table 4 points out a noticeable disparity in the use of language by the respondents when discoursing with the female parent, on one hand, and the male parent on the other. It is apparent that while there seems to be no discrepancy in the use of Burji when speaking to either parent, there is a big disparity when it comes to the use of Borana. 72.5 percent of the respondents use Borana when speaking to their mother and only 50 percent use the language when speaking to their father. It is also apparent that the incidence of use of a non-cushitic language when speaking to the father is higher than when speaking to the mother.

Table 5: Language of Mother to respondents /Father to respondents

Language(s)	Mother to Respondent		Father to Respondent	
	Frequency	percent	Frequency	percent
Burji	27	39.1	28	40.6
Borana	33	47.8	24	34.8
Kiswahili	2	2.9	6	8.7
English	0	0	6	8.7
Burji-Borana	4	5.8	1	1.4
Borana-Kiswahili	0	0	2	2.9
Kiswahili-English	0	0	1	1.4
Borana-English	1	1.4	0	0
Missing	2	2.9	1	1.4
Total	69	100.0	69	100.0

The results displayed in Table 5 above is comparable with what was presented in Table 4, the major difference, however, is the increase in the incidence of use of Burji by parents.

LANGUAGE USED WITH SIBLINGS:

In the study, respondents represent one extreme of the generational continuum while grandparents represent the other. Examining the language used by the respondents to speak to their siblings was meant to reveal the language employed for intragenerational discourse by members of the youngest living generation.

The results for the use of language by the respondents when speaking to their siblings are presented in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Language used with Siblings

Language(s)	Frequency	Percent
Burji	4	5.8
Borana	30	43.5
Kiswahili	13	18.8
English	7	10.1
Burji-Borana	1	1.4
Borana-Kiswahili	7	10.1
Kiswahili-English	2	2.9
Borana-Kis-English	3	4.3
Burji-Kisw	1	1.4
Missing	1	1.4
Total	69	100.0

From the table above, it is crystal clear that Burji plays little role in intragenerational communication involving the younger members of the community. The languages preferred by members of this generation when discoursing with each other are Borana, Kiswahili and English in that order of prominence.

THE LANGUAGE FOR CULTURAL IDENTITY:

Interestingly, when the same respondents who registered an overwhelming propensity to use a language other than Burji in the home domain, were asked to indicate the language they deemed important for cultural identity,

84.1 percent vouched for Burji (see Table 7 below).

Table 7: Language(s) deemed important for cultural Identity

Language(s)	Frequency	Percent
Burji	58	84.1
Borana	6	8.7
Kiswahili	2	2.9
Borana-Burji	1	1.4
Missing	2	2.9
Total	69	100.0

That Burji gets an impressive score as the language considered important for cultural identity by a vast proportion of the respondents, even by those who indicated that they do not speak Burji, suggests that cultural identity and the ability to speak a language associated with the culture are not necessarily interconnected. This state of affairs points to the possibility of an ethnic community existing without an ancestral language, the members having shifted linguistically to another language, but retaining a distinct identity which may be constructed on the basis of other aspects of culture, and not language.

CONCLUSION:

The information provided in Tables 3-6 is basically a portrayal of the significance of the languages spoken in the areas occupied by members of the Burji community living in Marsabit County. What emerges from the data is that while all these languages comprise the linguistic heritage of the community, they are not accorded similar weight when it comes to communication in the home domain. The elderly speakers of the language exhibit a preference for use of Burji when speaking to the youngest members of the community. The incidence of use of Burji declines as one moves from the grandparent generation to the respondents’ generation. The language that Burji concedes ground to as a language of use at home is Borana. However, among the members of the youngest generation, the incidence of use of Kiswahili and English demonstrates that the two, which are joint official languages of the country, are also crucial in the home domain. The varying linguistic behaviour of the three generations highlighted in this study is indicative of a compromised intergenerational transmission of Burji. Apparently, what still remains strong about the language is the members’ readiness to identify with it as an ethnic index without necessarily having to speak Burji.

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