

# DEVOLVING THE LANGUAGE RESOURCE IN KENYA: A STUDY OF PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

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## Abstract

*Kenya started operationalizing a devolved system of government after the promulgation of a new constitution in the year 2010. The system provides for a two-tier government system; national and county. The principle is to devolve national resources to the grassroots in order to spur socio-economic development in all parts of the country. The purpose of this study was to establish public perceptions on possible inclusion of local languages as official languages, in addition to Kiswahili and English in the devolved government units. The study was undertaken bearing in mind that in almost all counties in the country, there is predominance (in settlement patterns) of specific language communities. Data were gathered through interviews and administration of questionnaires. Findings indicate that people perceive use of local languages as official languages as; exclusionary; as a source of tribalism; as against official policy of using Kiswahili and English; and it will be a way of closing ourselves from the rest of the world. But in spite of people's perceptions, there is an unavoidable need to use indigenous languages in public fora; this is due to challenges of inadequate fluency in second languages on one hand and the predominance of local languages in most rural settlements on the other. It is recommended that the government encourages the use of local languages in public fora, where possible, to make its service delivery more effective. Insistence on official languages has its benefits but for practically, local languages still hold significance in socio-economic development at the county levels.*

**Keywords:** Ekegusii, County government, Development

## Introduction

The main reason for the establishment of county governments in Kenya was, possibly, the devolution of national resources to all parts of the country. Language has been referred as a natural resource, just like oil, as a tool for socio-economic development (Attyang, 2002; Chumbow, 1987; Djité, 2008; Ruiz, 1984; Simala, 2002). Development discourse studies count language as a core factor especially when it involves rural populations, like in Africa, with little or no knowledge of international languages like English, French and so forth or lingua franca like Kiswahili in Eastern Africa. The language factor is necessary because information on development has to be communicated (Oliveira, 1993). Research indicates that less than 30% of Kenyans have a competent mastery of the English Language (Bunyi, 2005). Still, more than 60% of Kenyans live, earn a living in out of cosmopolitan areas in the country either as small-scale farmers, as herders, as small-scale business people, as itinerant traders, as nomads and so forth. Kiswahili and English are official languages; Kiswahili is, in addition, a national language (RoK, 2010). But the objectives of having a national and official language are not for development per se. That is why the question of what language people know, speak well, understand, becomes prominent in development.

If we insist on the use Kiswahili and English for government transaction because they are official, how will a primary school drop-out adult crop farmer understand and appreciate information on disease-resistant varieties of crops when they do not have mastery of the languages? What is the significance of an official language to a Samburu nomad who needs expert advice on how to keep his livestock free from disease and on how to increase milk/meat/blood production? Of what significance is an official language to herders in West Pokot who need to participate in budget making at the county level? This article sought to

explain why, irrespective of what the public perceives local languages to be, it is urgent to consider having local languages as part of the official means of communication in county governments.

### **The study**

The purpose of this study was to establish public perceptions on the inclusion of local languages as part of the official languages in the devolved governments. It was conducted in the Ekegusii-speaking counties of Kisii and Nyamira of western Kenya. The sample was randomly obtained from students and lecturers from the Kisii University; public workers at the Kisii and Nyamira Counties, and education officers in both counties. Data were obtained through interviews and administration of a structured questionnaire. Data analysis was mainly qualitative which followed the following steps; transcribing interview data, reading through both interview and questionnaire responses; writing down emerging themes; rereading to confirm initial impressions, and reading the themes against literature.

### **Findings**

The question the study sought to answer was, “Can we have Ekegusii as a third official language in Kisii and Nyamira counties alongside Kiswahili and English”. The main themes which merged from the study were as follows: a) exclusion, b) tribalism and nationalism, c) non-fluency in mother tongue, d) it is unofficial, e) investors, f) self-deameaning, g) globalization.

***Exclusion:*** There was a feeling among the respondents that use of Ekegusii in public offices alongside Kiswahili and English would prevent access of services by people from other communities as captured in the following response from a university student; “How will other people from, for example, Ukambani access services if Ekegusii is used? Will it not prevent access to essential services?” This respondent assumed that we must speak in official languages

even when it is practically impossible. Currently, the Kisii Law Court, just like many others in the country, provides translation services to parties in court cases; it would not be difficult to provide the same translation services, for instance, in county assembly business. Some counties across the country have elected members with only primary school education. Could these be assumed to have adequate competence in English as to use it to share their ideas or counter arguments in assembly discussions? Should they not be allowed to express themselves in a language they know well that they may adequately represent the electorate?

***Tribalism and nationalism:*** The use of Ekegusii would encourage tribalism as some respondents argued. There are more than 44 tribes in the country and each speaks their own language. Kiswahili is taught to be a neutral language and therefore non-tribalistic. A county officer responded thus; “We cannot take our country back to tribalism. If we speak the 44 languages in our counties, tribalism will go up. Kiswahili solves our tribalism problems...” Scholars dismiss the association of use of local languages to tribalism (Luoch & Ogutu, 2002). Manifestations of tribalism are not on language use but, according to Ochieng’ (1975), a person is tribalistic if he is devoted to his particular tribe against the wider, and more approved aims of unity, modernization, and justice. Further, Ochieng observes that tribalism is manifested in job appointments, awarding of scholarships, and other opportunities where decision makers favour only members of their own ethnic groups. Further to that, Somalia is, predominantly, a Somali-speaking country yet they had a national conflict leading to a decades-long war.

***Non-fluency in mother tongues:*** Respondents felt that the use of mother tongues could be impractical because most people are not fluent in their mother tongues. There is a perception that

many Kenyans have acquired Kiswahili and English so that it is not possible to speak and use their languages in public affairs. Both Kiswahili and English are mainly learnt in the school system but the former enjoys diverse contexts of acquisition including markets, churches, and mass media. The perception that the Kenyan population is non-fluent in their mother tongues is based on misinformation because whether a language has borrowed heavily from others, it does not disappear. For instance, English has borrowed from French, German, Italian, Greek, Afrikaans, and Kiswahili, and so forth yet it is still English. In the Kenyan case, it would be inexact to say there is any community whose language has been forgotten and therefore not fluent in their language except may be the Suba speakers majority of whom use Dholuo because of long association.

***It is unofficial:*** The constitution allocates Kiswahili and English the role of official languages in the country and Kiswahili doubles as a national language as shared by one respondent “Our official languages are English and Kiswahili. Any other languages can be used elsewhere. People are able to use them. Why again add another one?...” National languages and official ones are underlain by a philosophy and it is not for socio-economic and cultural development per se. They are official languages but the ecosystem in which they are learnt/taught has not provided sufficient exposure for learning and use by majority of the population across the country. There should be no insistence on official languages when actually, people are adequately served by the languages they know well; and these are the local languages.

***Investors:*** Kenyans own property and do business in various places in the country. Some of the investors in the Gusii region, possibly referred to here are non-Ekegusii speakers including

Indians who have lived in the region from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. These operate supermarkets, private hospitals, and lately we have the Somali who deal mainly with the clothing and mobile technology business. What, for instance, the Somalis in Kisii Town have done is to employ Ekegusii-speaking salespeople able to reach potential customers. The Agikuyu who own businesses in Kisii Town never insist that customers speak official languages; they, instead, have learnt Ekegusii and so they are able to negotiate with their customers. This demonstrates that use of local languages cannot impede investment.

***Self-demeaning:*** There is a feeling that the use of Kiswahili and English portrays someone as sophisticated or educated. Local languages seem to be associated with non-sophistication as shared by a respondent who said: “How can we use Ekegusii in offices yet we have English? How can you use Ekegusii in the county assembly and we have internationally known languages?” This response is attitudinal—that an official language must not be a local language; it is a sign of low self-esteem. Ngugi (1986) argues that unless we (as Africans) decolonize our minds, especially culturally, we may not reach our fullest potential. His argument is based on the linguistic principle that any language is able to express any nature of thought from any discipline. This attitude has also been observed in public schools in Kenya where teachers opt to teach in English instead of in mother tongues as provided for in the language in education policy in lower primary education (Mose, 2015).

***Globalization:*** The use of Ekegusii in the Ekegusii-speaking counties is looked at as a way of closing out the speakers from the rest of the world. The possible abandonment of Kiswahili is perceived to possibly close out Gusii from the East African Community, while that of English

will close out Gusii from the rest of the world. The view is also erroneous because it seems that countries that have developed better than Kenya have not done so using foreign languages. These include Malaysia, Singapore, and Korea. Actually, Germany, France, China, and Russia, the major world powers have not developed because of English. They teach English as a foreign language to enable their people sell their technology out there and to also get jobs internationally; but their school systems use German, French, Chinese, and Russian respectively. In the Eastern Cape Province in South Africa, primary school students are being taught in isiXhosa, a mother tongue, for the past seven years. In spite of South Africa's high population of English-speaking whites in the continent, it has not been easy to teach in English. With isiXhosa, black students have reached more than 70% in mathematics which was between 30% and 40% when English was in use (Shale, 2015). The country is aware that globalization is not about language; it is about empowering a people with knowledge irrespective of the medium.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The constitution of Kenya provides for the full participation of the public in both the county and the national level. For instance, the county budgets have to be discussed in public fora before they are implemented. In addition, national issues such as elections, democracy and so forth require public participation and civic education. All need a medium that the population understands well in order to participate. The population must include the herders of the Maasai community, the nomads among the Samburu, and the unfortunate millions of Kenyans who did not get an opportunity to acquire school education. A language of development must be a language people speak and understand.

In Kenya, research indicate that less than 30 % of the population have a command of the English language (Bunyi, 2005). Kiswahili is not a mother tongue to a majority of Kenyans, indicating that for public affairs involving the masses in the rural settlements, an alternative is inevitable. Development is not the Nairobi Stock Exchange reports on television, the president's speech on government achievements, nor the reports on the number of students joining high school the next year. Development is, among other things, an old man who has never stepped into a classroom being able to explain his ailment to a doctor in his own language and getting the right medication; a rural small scale farmer explains her observations on her crop and she is given expert services to enable her crop survive. Development is having a nomad without school education understand how the county government is going to make his animals survive in drought; it is having him explain the risks he suffers as a nomad and what the county government can do to make his life, his family's and his animals' secure. In other words it is not about what language the nation has allocated what functions, but if the people are able to express their deepest feelings in all their spheres of life. If we insist on explaining our ailments in English which we barely understand in a public hospital, the consequences of the subsequent treatment are apparent.

It is high time the country considers having the relevant local languages as the third official languages in majority of the counties. Only about five counties in the whole country may survive with Kiswahili and English. This will call for translation services in various institutions like the county assemblies and even hospitals. This is another way of creating employment by employing translators. The public can be encouraged to use Kiswahili as a national symbol. Kiswahili and English, can continue to be used in official contexts; but the relevant institutions must know that the reality is that there are Kenyans in their hundreds of thousands who cannot

understand or speak the two languages. An alternative local language such as the Ekegusii could be an ideal tool of development at the county level.

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