

The Role Language of Choice in Construction and Negotiation of Social Identities among Church Members in Multilingual Churches

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Abstract

Multilingual churches are significant places that not only serve as a medium of communication but also as a tool for building and negotiating social identity. Language diversity in churches has grown and escalated the importance of investigating the role of language use on church members' experiences of belonging, participation and inclusion in worship. This study focused on the role of language choice in the construction and negotiation of social identities of church members in the multilingual churches in Kajiado North Sub-County, Kenya. The study adopted descriptive research design where 377 church members were surveyed using questionnaire and interview. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics for quantitative data and thematic and discourse analysis for qualitative data. The results indicated that language choice had a significant effect on how social identity was formed and expressed, as it affected the sense of belonging, participation and acceptance of the members in the church communities. English, Kiswahili, indigenous Kenyan languages and code-switching were strategically used to help churches respond to the linguistic diversity of congregants, boost common religious identities and reduce social exclusion. This sometimes led to an experience of marginalization for certain members of the congregation; however, as these were seen as dominant languages, often the relationship between language, power and identity was complex in multilingual worship contexts.

Keywords: Language Choice; Social Identity Construction; Multilingual Churches; Social Identity Negotiation

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INTRODUCTION

There are approximately 7,118 spoken languages in the world which aid in the preservation of culture, as means of expression and as a vehicle for comprehension and learning (Despina, 2023). Whenever multilingual come together, they have to decide which language to use. Though the language choice is natural and automatic, it is not random, it is influenced by a community's social organization and the social context of the discourse. According to Ansah (2016), language choice by any multilingual speaker depends mainly on the domain of usage and the speaker's linguistic repertoire. Ruilin and Esli (2021) note that dominance of a language influences the speaker's preference since it has advantage in social expansion, speaker's economic status and better opportunities.

The use of a particular language or language variety gives the speakers identity. According to Jacewicz et al. (2010), social identity is identified by various ways in which people use language, greet differently, make offers and requests or different ways of using intonation. The linguistic variation communicates more than what is said and it does not always originate from different geographical territories. Using a given variety may show group allegiances since it may be a sign of detaching oneself from a group that use a different variety or language. Language plays a key role in shaping one's social identity. According to William (2008), among various markers of identity, language and religion have featured with same prominence; they feed on each other. According to Matilde (2019), identity can be inscribed or ascribed. Inscribe identity (chosen by self) is constrained by the social space available to an individual which is the platform where identities are created, negotiated and finally accomplished. On the other hand, ascribed identity (given by others) is nominative and limits an individual's participation and finally access to material resources which include assets owned, income and type of profession derived from social positioning in a given society (Blommaert, 2005).

Karl Marx theory of social class (1906) has been influential in the study of social class. He defines social class as groups of people with common economic interest, the role they play in economic development. According to Gregory (2012), although social class according to Karl Marx theory is about economic status, it has something to do with non-economic issues such as religion, status, public mores and standards. Social classes bring about social stratification which was first introduced in 1940 by Talcott Parsons. According to Gusky (2019), social stratification refers to as ways in which inequalities are categorized and distributed in a given society. Human beings are social in nature, where language is key in conveying feelings, desires, ideas and experiences. Though their background may be different, they may become socially stratified in terms of education, career and status. The social status formed affect the language use of a particular speaker. Language is a social act that can define or reveal the real person we hear talking. The position one takes when we come into contact with other languages or hear others speak is referred to as language attitude (Melander, 2003).

Statement of the Problem

Language plays key role in shaping social interaction, identity and power structures among interlocutors. In multilingual setting, speakers must choose the language to use in different contexts for effective communication. Churches in Kenya are becoming increasingly multilingual as more people migrate to urban areas in search of employment. This has necessitated multilingual churches to employ various linguistic strategies to cater for all congregants. This include use of English only, Kiswahili only, translation from Kiswahili to English and vice versa and having separate services at a time. The use of inclusive language

promotes effective communication by fostering unity, encouraging participation and accommodating linguistic diversity among speakers.

However, although the linguistic strategies are intended to reduce communication barriers, they may inadvertently contribute to patterns of social stratification when social factors such as age, ethnicity, education level, language proficiency, gender or social status may influence how different language strategies are perceived and used.

Objective

The objective of this study is to examine the role of language choice in construction and negotiation of social identities among church members in Kajiado North Sub-county.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language is fundamental in shaping social ties and individual experiences within multilingual communities. In church settings with multiple languages, language choice goes beyond mere communication; it becomes a social tool through which members build and negotiate identities, foster a sense of belonging and establish their place within the congregation's social hierarchy. The language used during religious events can signify group membership, bolster shared beliefs, promote inclusion, or lead to exclusion and unequal participation among members from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Therefore, understanding language choice involves analyzing how linguistic practices impact social identity, members' sense of belonging, and patterns of social stratification in multilingual churches. This section explores empirical and theoretical research on these interconnected aspects to lay the groundwork for studying the sociolinguistics effects of language choice in Kajiado North Sub-County's multilingual churches.

Language and Identity

Human beings are social in nature, they are not only unique individuals but also members of social groups. This knowledge assigns one a sense of social identity based on age, gender, religion, employment among others. According to David (2008), identity refers to perception of self or a badge that make group members distinct from others. Vertuyken (2019) notes that thoughts and identities can be expressed using language since it is the main mean through which not only culture and society are expressed but also who we are and how we want other people to view us. Speakers of any given language, perform and produce specific identities which mainly depend on the context. Churches are unique social groups which assigns its members a sense of identity where language plays a key role. There are various factors that make a denomination distinct from others ranging from dressing codes, worship structures and language among others. This research focuses on language choice with the above literature laying foundation.

According to Keller (2017), language and identity are intertwined in that a single linguistic feature can be used to associate someone into a given group. For example, in the Bible the Israelites when they were in battle field in Ephraim, the pronunciation of the word Shiboloth was used to identify enemies. Those who pronounced the word with /ʃ/ were friends while those who pronounced it with /s/ were identified as enemies and were killed instantly (Judges 12:6). Many researchers have noted that when speakers interact, language clearly symbolizes specific identity or identities, which can either express acceptance or rejection of social norms and

values (Crawford, 1995). According to Lemke (2008), identities develop across different spatiotemporal scales ranging from micro, local and immediate to the macro, global and long term. Social identity is often expressed through language choice made which can signal membership in a particular social group, such as a nationality, specific ethnicity or socioeconomic class. This study set out to investigate whether the language choice made by church officials is aligned to certain social stratum. Though churches give their members identity since they are distinct in their way of worship, this study investigated whether language shapes members identity.

The above literature demonstrates that language choice is a key sociolinguistic means through which congregants express, construct and negotiate their social identities. While previous studies have established that language reflects ethnic, cultural, religious and social affiliations, many have treated identity as a relatively stable characteristic rather than a dynamic process continuously negotiated through interaction. Limited attention has been given to how routine language choices during different communicative events in multilingual churches contribute to the ongoing construction and negotiation of identities among church members. This study, therefore, argues that language choice is not merely a reflection of pre-existing social identities but an interactional resource through which speakers actively construct, negotiate, affirm and sometimes transform their identities within the multilingual church community. The study further contends that language choices made during sermons, prayers, worship, testimonies, announcements, and fellowship communicate symbolic meanings about who belongs, who is recognized, and how individuals position themselves within the church's social environment. Consequently, language choice is viewed as both a reflection of social identity and a mechanism through which identities are continuously shaped through religious interaction.

Language Attitude

Language attitude is mental view about something or someone, which acts as a bridge between opinion and behavior (Obiols, 2002). It is about individual's feelings, judgments and evaluation towards a particular language or language variety which can be neutral, positive or negative (Dragojevi, 2016). It plays a key role in the shaping of linguistic behaviors, social interaction and communication patterns. It is intertwined with cultural social and personal factors and they can influence how language is perceived, used, and maintained within a community. Language attitude is any index either cognitive or behavioral which can be used to weigh the reactions toward different speakers in terms of language as a whole or language variety (Bugel & Montes, 2020). In churches, officials are charged the role of language policy in their churches, the researcher will explore whether the language choice is based on their attitude, or of members, towards a given language.

Malander (2003) used match guise technique, propounded by Lambert et al.. (1960), to assess language attitude. The main aim was to explore how accent creates language attitude. Personal qualities of a speaker were evaluated by recording one speaker using different accents. The participant took the role three participant in the study where the first participant had two varieties, British English and accented Swedish. The second speaker spoke Australian English and Swedish while speaker three spoke American English and Swedish. The conclusion was, though no language is superior to another, the people develop positive attitude towards a language that is dominant or the one that holds prestigious position (English in this case). By exploring language attitude, the researchers understood the relationship between language, identity and social dynamics. It also provided insights into linguistic prejudices, language policies and the power dynamics between different linguistic communities.

The reviewed studies have largely treated language attitudes as factors influencing language preference and maintenance. This study departs from this perspective by arguing that language attitudes are central to understanding the social consequences of language choice in multilingual churches. It contends that attitudes towards English, Kiswahili, indigenous languages, and code mixing are reflected in speakers' linguistic behavior and influence who is perceived as belonging, who is accorded prestige and who becomes marginalized within the church community. Consequently, language attitudes are not only determinants of language choice but also mechanisms through which social identities are constructed, negotiated, and reproduced in multilingual religious settings.

Social Stratification

Social stratification is segments found within a society which are similar in terms of employment, education, caste social status (Weber, 2016). According to Gilbert (2011), social stratification involves society's division into different strata or layers (upper, middle or lower). Members of the same strata have the same identity, not only in their economic status but also in their linguistic characteristics. One's linguistic behavior easily points out his/her social class. Hence, linguistic feature like choice of vocabularies, syntax, semantics, and phonology are very distinct in a particular class (Sodah, 2019). Sociolinguistics identify social status and power as the key factors that form the bases under which social stratification is formed (Moore, 2001). The above observation helped the researcher to examine whether language choice in churches propagates social stratification.

According to Kanwal (2016), social stratification impacts people individually or as a group since it suffices in various aspects in one's life. It plays a key role in the attainment of status not only through language but also other factors like food choices, dressing code, morals and various common activities. Social stratification further also brings about class consciousness which is the awareness of the beliefs and attitude attached to a particular class and awareness of this in practicing group. Social class as a language variable is complex in interpretation and definition. Gender and age are easily determined since they depend on human biology and are uni-dimensional. Social linguists have borrowed a lot in sociologists in social classification where individual's level of education, income and occupation have been used. Labov (2001) further added type of housing, area of resident and parent's occupation. In his study on New York City English, he observed that different social groups used postvocalic pronunciation of /r/ differently and this could be used as a marker in social stratification. He realized that speakers who were of higher occupational position used sentences with some postvocalic /r/ than a sentence which has no postvocalic /r/. The current study examined how language choice may bring about social stratification in multilingual churches.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employed Communication accommodation theory which was introduced by Havard Giles in 1973. It states that individuals may choose to make linguistic adjustment to decrease or maintain social distance or to shift to new interaction. The theory posits that speakers employ accommodation strategies such as convergence, divergence, maintenance and over-accommodation depending on the social context, characteristics of their interlocutors and desired interactional outcomes. Through convergence, speakers reduce social distance and promote mutual understanding, while divergence and maintenance enable them to preserve group distinctiveness and express social or cultural identities. Over-accommodation, on the other hand, may result in inappropriate language adjustments that negatively affect

communication. CAT further emphasizes that language choice is closely linked to social identity and inter-group relations, making it a useful framework for understanding both the factors influencing language choice and the social implications of those choices (Gurski, 1995). According to Giles et al. (2008) though communication accommodation theory is based on verbal communication, non-verbal communication can also be understood by paying keen interest in style shifts basically focusing on accents and dialects.

The theory is equally relevant to the construction and negotiation of social identity since through convergence, speakers may foster solidarity, inclusion and shared religious identity, whereas divergence and language maintenance may reinforce ethnic identities, establish social boundaries or contribute to unequal participation among linguistic groups. The theory, therefore, provides a useful framework for understanding how language choice functions not only as a means of communication but also as a sociolinguistics resource through which identities are negotiated, relationships are maintained and social hierarchies are created, reinforced or challenged within multilingual church communities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a descriptive research design which aimed at analyzing human way of life (culture) and their behaviors. It defined research questions and sample size to be used in the study. It further collected data and examined the reliability and finally coded and analyzed it. No variables were manipulated; instead the researcher simply recorded and analyzed what was observed. Research instruments like questionnaires and interview schedule were used. This research design was appropriate for this study since the above instruments and data collection procedures were used. The respondents were interviewed and observed and the data was not manipulated in any way.

The study was conducted in Kajiado North Sub County, Kajiado County, one of the forty-seven counties in Kenya found in southern part of the country. According to Kissian (2023), purposive sampling is a non-probability technique where items that have desired characteristics are selected. All churches in Kajiado North Sub-County were purposively sampled since it is the religion that uses different languages to spread the gospel, other religions use a common language. Snowball sampling technique, also known as net-working sampling technique, was used to select church members since it was difficult for the researcher to identify them. In the church context, identifying categories of men, women and youth is hard because the membership is informal and highly fluid. This framework has been highly recommended for studies involving socially networked or hard to get population (Ting et al., 2025).

Since the target population for church members is large, the sample proposed by Krejcie and Morgans (1970) was used to sample 377 members. This study employed a self-constructed closed-ended questionnaire to elicit data on the role of language choice in construction and negotiation of social identity in multilingual churches. A Likert scale of 1-5 (Strongly disagree -1, Disagree-2, Neutral-3, Agree-4 and strongly agree-5) was used since it has structured categories of answers which are easy to obtain and analyze, using frequencies and percentages (Brace, 2018). Semi structured interview guide was used to interview church members on the impact of language choice on church members. This provided in depth perspective that complemented close-ended questionnaire from church members on the same.

Data Presentation and Discussion

Table 4.1 presents responses from church members regarding the role of language choice in construction and negotiation of social identities language choice.

No.	Questionnaire Items	SD	D	N	A	SA
1.	I was involved in language policy decisions in my church.	67%	17%	8%	5%	3%
2.	I am comfortable with the language used in my church.	35%	12%	19%	10%	24%
3.	The language used in my church makes me feel spiritually at home.	41%	9%	17%	6%	27%
4.	Language used in my church favors members of a given community, age, gender and social class.	6%	6%	21%	11%	56%
5.	Only specific people attend my church because of the language used.	23%	15%	9%	6%	47%/%
6	There are instances of code switching to the indigenous language during the church service.	3% %	13%	3%	8%	73%
7	Code-switching to dominant languages marginalizes other speakers.	6%	4%	1%	3%	86%
8	The language used in my church makes me feel part of the congregation.	20%	23%	7%	7%	43%
9	The language used enables me to participate in various church activities.	21%	11%	8%	6%	54%
10	Language used in my church gives me a sense of unity with the congregation.	69%	7%	5%	13%	6%

The findings reveal that congregants' involvement in the church's language policy decisions is limited. A majority of respondents (67%) strongly disagreed with being involved in such decisions, while only 8% remained neutral and less than 10% agreed. This suggests that language selection in church is primarily a top–down process, often determined by clergy or leadership without input from grassroots members. Such exclusion can weaken members' sense of ownership and may reduce inclusivity, as sociolinguistics studies have shown that language planning is often linked to authority and hierarchy. Regarding comfort, responses were mixed, where 34% (10% agree and 24% strongly agree) felt comfortable with the church language, while a significant portion, 47% (35% strongly disagree and 12 % disagree), felt uncomfortable.

Similarly, in questions about feeling spiritually at home, 50% disagreed compared to 33% who agreed. These results suggest that although language functions as a channel for worship, it does not always foster emotional or spiritual belonging. For many members, the chosen language does not fully match their linguistic identity or preferences. Perceptions of favoritism are pronounced; nearly 65% of respondents (59% strongly disagree and 6% disagree) opposed the idea that church language is neutral, showing awareness that language choice favors certain communities, age groups or social classes.

When asked if only specific people attend church because of language, 53% (47% strongly agree and 6% agree) affirmed that language use can limit participation. These findings highlight that language is not just a communication tool but also a boundary-setting mechanism that can reinforce social divisions, aligning with Markedness Theory and Language Ideology Theory. Notably, code-switching emerged as a significant theme. A large majority (81%) agreed that there are instances of switching to indigenous languages during services and 89% acknowledged that switching to dominant languages can marginalize other speakers. This shows that while code-switching helps accommodate different groups, it can also create new exclusions, especially when dominant languages overshadow minority tongues. These insights align with ethnographic research viewing code-switching as both an inclusive resource and a marker of power in multilingual contexts. The role of language in fostering belonging and unity showed mixed responses. Half of the respondents (50%) felt that the church language makes them feel part of the congregation, but only 20% disagreed with this. However, when asked if language fosters a sense of unity, 76% disagreed, and only 19% agreed. This suggests that while language may offer individual comfort, it does not necessarily promote a shared sense of collective unity. In other words, language can serve personal needs but often fails to unify diverse congregations. Overall, the analysis reveals a tension in the role of language in church settings. It provides access, comfort, and participation for some through code-switching and careful use, but it also acts as a gatekeeper, marginalizing others, limiting unity and reflecting social hierarchies. These findings underscore the complex sociolinguistics realities of multilingual churches, where language is both a tool for inclusion and exclusion.

Language choice in multilingual domains plays a pivotal role in either fostering inclusion or reinforcing exclusion. When a dominant or prestige language is selected for institutional communication, those who are less proficient in that language may feel marginalized or disempowered. In religious or educational settings, for instance, the use of English may be seen as modern and professional, yet it can also alienate congregants from rural or less educated backgrounds who are more comfortable in indigenous or national languages. This dynamic is particularly acute in African multilingual contexts, where language often intersects with class, ethnicity and access to power (Woolard, 1998; Blommaert, 2005). As such, language choice is not a neutral act but it determines who participates fully and who remains on the periphery of any communication act.

In multilingual settings, the choice of one language over another carries significant social, cultural and political implications. Language is not only a tool for communication but also a marker of identity, belonging and power. When one language is privileged in public or institutional spaces, it can marginalize speakers of other languages by reinforcing existing social hierarchies and creating barriers to inclusion (Shank, 2020). This dynamic often influences access to resources, participation in community life and the formation of group identities. This often aligns with broader patterns of social stratification, where language preferences mirror divisions in age, education, ethnicity or class. In contexts like Kenya, churches reflect similar challenges seen in schools and public institutions, where language policy affects participation, leadership and spiritual engagement (Barasa, 2023; Mthombeni & Ogunnubi, 2020). Even within families, the language used for religious instruction can shape children's sense of faith identity and inclusion (Tamang, 2020). Therefore, language choice in church is far from neutral; rather it reflects and reinforces broader social structures, power dynamics and ideologies within multilingual religious communities. Understanding language ideologies is important in sociolinguistics since it gives researchers a chance to examine how language not only points to social inequalities but also perpetuates them. This helps to uncover

the hidden beliefs and assumptions that inform language policy, education practices and daily communication.

CONCLUSION

Language is key in shaping one's identity since the way we use it influences our different identities, ranging from cultural, national and personal. For example, churches that use Kiswahili reflect shared national identity, while those that choose to use the mother tongue may reflect cultural identity. Language choice within a speech community may create a sense of belonging for members or alienate them. The exclusion of church members from language policy decision may weaken the connection between language and identity. According to Spolsky (2024), all stake holders of an institution or a community should be actively involved in making decision on language policy of their institution or community. Understanding that language planning involves complex aspects like ideology, management and ecology, calls for involvement of diverse voices. He notes that language policy is not a mere up-down imposition but involves complex web. In multilingual churches this can lead to some members feeling alienated.

Language choice can unconsciously lead to social stratification in religious domain. The same choice becomes exclusionary to individuals who cannot speak a particular language effectively “locking them out” not just linguistically but also socially and spiritually. Those lacking English proficiency which often includes older members, rural migrants or individuals with less formal education, are unable to fully engage or identify with the church’s activities and community. This creates a hierarchical worship environment where language proficiency acts as a filter for participation. In this way, language choice in the church does more than facilitate communication, it becomes a tool that mirrors broader societal inequalities, granting access and belonging to the linguistically and technologically privileged while marginalizing those without. Therefore, English use in this church not only attracts a particular demographic but also deepens social divisions, stratifying congregants by age, education level and socio-economic background.

Language choice in churches can lead to either positive or negative attitudes towards a particular language and the language users. When prestige is accorded a given language, it may lead to either positive or negative attitude towards that language which can eventually lead to linguistic hierarchies. Families and social networks also play a key role in shaping language attitude, where children draw their language attitudes from their parents, educators and peers. Social identity is also key in illuminating language attitude. Individuals derive their identity from their linguistic affiliation, where they tend to favor languages that align with their identity. Through language planning and policy and the decision on the language taught in schools determines language attitude towards various languages that are at learners' disposal (Trudgil, 2000).

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