The Semantics of Multilingual Terminologies in Post-conflict Kenya

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Abstract

The paper examines the place of language immediately after the 2008 Kenyan political crisis. Language-vernaculars-were seen to have assisted in the escalation of the conflict. Surprisingly, Language, a tool which had divided the populace was called upon to initiate a peaceful co-existence through a generation of multilingual terminologies that united Kenyans. The growth and choice of these multilingual terms drew from a desire to forge commonness amongst inter-language speakers. These terms have acquired new circumstantial meanings and have gained widespread use in Kenyan social discourse to date.

Key terms: Post-Conflict discourse, Multilingual Terminologies, Post-conflict Kenya, Semantic field
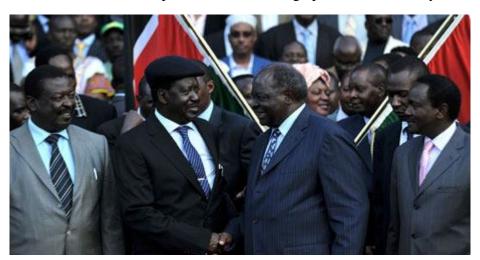
Introduction

Every cloud, they say, has got a silver lining. The case is true when you examine the linguistic after effects of the Kenyan political crisis. In long winding lines, the Kenyan voter had gone to the ballots to decide a hotly-contested presidential election between Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga. The delay in tallying the presidential vote only helped but feed suspicision of ballot stuffing.

First forward 28/12/07 evening when Mr Samuel Kivuitu, the Chairman of the Kenyan Electoral body, announces Mwai Kibaki winner of the hotly disputed presidential poll and Kenya is literary thrown in to untold inter-tribal violence culminating in 1200 deaths, 30000 injuries, 350000 Internally Displaced People (IDP), destruction of property and many incidents of sexual violence. Youths, using local vernacular languages as a mobilizing tool visited attacks on members of other tribes.

Above is a picture of the post-election violence in Kenya (courtesy of Daily Nation library).

Sustained pressure led by Kofi Annan, local and international community realized the signing of a peace/National Accord which paved way for the formation of a coalition government or rather a government of National Unity. This accord provided for negotiated positions of president and the Prime Minister with two deputies. Raila Odinga became a non-executive Prime Minister while Mwai Kibaki retained the Executive Presidency. Their parties-Mr. Odinga's ODM and Kibaki's PNU-parties that were in themselves coalitions formed a grand coalition/Government of National Unity. Soon after the signing of the National Accord, relative peace returned in large parts of the country.

A picture of Kenyan leaders from left: Musalia Mudavadi (DPM), Raila (PM) Kibaki (P) and Kalonzo (DP) (courtesy of Daily Nation library).

During the said post-election clashes, *local languages* were used as tools for propaganda spread, exclusion and at times inclusion. Many people were maimed for failure to speak the language(s) of the assailant(s).

It became obvious that the tool which so hopelessly divided the populace would be called upon to fuel a confidence building framework for a future peaceful co-existence.

From the on-set, I would like to state that language was a tool rather than a factor for post-poll chaos. The causes of the conflict were political dominance (exclusiveness) and Economic decline (joblessness, landless, poverty, etc).

The void created by the politically motivated ethnic violence meant that Kenya needed language to generate terminologies that could unite her. This was significant since politicians, Faith-groups, civil society, media, etc, were partial on or before the 2007 elections. Terms-such as peace, love, unity, togetherness, etc-, were engulfed by bitterness, loss, betrayal, grief, helplessness and call for retribution by a populace so debased and feeling weary of each other.

Language became a tool for personal and communal expression of loss. Various media houses decided to air programs (in local language, Kiswahili and English) with a message of peace. Such was an easy task, given that an average Kenyan is multilingual and can code-switch across local language, Kiswahili, and English (Myers-Sutton, 1995).

The use of three or more languages provided an opportunity for post conflict discourse. The growth and choice of multilingual terms by multilingual speakers arose from a desire to forge commonness amongst speakers from inter-ethnic groups. Such terms have acquired *new* circumstantial meanings and have gained widespread use in post-conflict Kenya.

The Concept of Multilingualism in Kenya

In the *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* (1996), a multilingual person is defined, as 'one able to speak more than two languages with approximately equals facility'. This phenomenon is a *linguistic behavior* of the members of a speech community, which alternately uses two, three or more languages depending on the situation and function. Multilingualism or Linguistic diversity is, according to Whiteley (1974) and Myers-Scotton (1995) 'a phenomenon of present-day Kenya.' In addition to the designation of English and Kiswahili as Kenyan official language and national languages respectively, over 42 local languages are spoken in its territory. In Kenya, local languages, Swahili and English all find use. "Choosing the right language to use on a particular occasion can be quite a delicate matter" (Whiteley, 1984).

Although the Kenyan constitution guarantees the freedom of speech to all its citizens, one has to use either English or Kiswahili with any governmental agency (including schools). This complexity, is more so loud given that local languages have been used for lower primary schools' instruction for along time, and are constantly used by politicians, by government officials (provincial administration officers e.g. chiefs) and the state broadcaster to air some radio programs in local/regional vernaculars. The end result is that an average Kenyan is generally multilingual for they speak at least three (3) languages-the vernacular (first language), the national language (Kiswahili), and official language (English). Many more speak and use more than three languages.

Kenya has over 40 million citizens who speak more than 44 languages (including the two official languages, English and Kiswahili); making her one of the most diverse linguistic and cultural areas on the planet. A good command of the Native/ local/ tribal Language is thus viewed as a necessary requirement for inclusion in to in-group social-cultural activities. Due to inter and intra-tribal interactions, speakers (language users) have to acquire (borrow) many terms/vocabulary from as many local languages (other than their own) as possible in order to effectively transact/ survive socially and economically. Granted, many Kenyans are multilingual where one speaks at least one vernacular language in addition to the official Kiswahili and English languages. Moreover, in the Kenyan multi-lingual society, an individual's 'ability to shift from one language to another language is quite accepted and quite normal' (Wardhaugh, 2004).

Kenyan societal multilingualism is a non-conflicting type, in which different languages are allocated different functions. Local language is the expression of primary identity and of group solidarity. People are identified with certain linguistic, ethnic, religious or cultural groups through ones local language. Local language anchors the child to its *people's culture*. In the Kenyan context, multilingualism has been successful only because there has been relative respect for multiplicity (respect for the different) in the society. One is unlikely to be questioned by strangers if found speaking in a language other than Kiswahili, English or 'their' non-native (regional local language). Although there are so many languages in Kenya, most of the rural populace does not know any other local languages other than their own. Kiswahili is a widely spoken second language, followed by English. Kiswahili is more useful as a "lingua franca"(Myers-Scotton (1995).

The Semantics of Post-conflict Multilingual Terms

Immediately after the coming to birth of the National Unity (coalition) government, suspicion, mistrust and subdued anger held the Kenyan populace hostage. The country was required to move on with practically no reconciliation measures in place in mostly the heterogeneous urban areas and the largely homogenous rural areas. So desperate was the average Kenyan residing in informal settlements (slums) in urban areas-which are demographically and linguistically diverse-that they didn't know how to relate to speakers from the *enemy tribe*-a tribe other than theirs.

Language as tool for premeditated attacks at post-election chaos offered the bedrock for *contact* thus filling the gap. Language contact in Kenyan urban areas was easy because speakers of different languages frequently interact with speakers of other languages or dialects. As a consequence and or for need of linguistic accommodation, extensive lexical borrowing occurred in the informal settlements (slums), thanks to the significant numbers of bilinguals and multilingual who reside therein.

Such terms/names/words became instant icebreakers whenever one would meet a stranger. It became fashionable to make statements such as:

- 'May *Annan* be with you' means 'May *peace* be with you.'
- 'I will take you to *The Hague'* means 'I will *imprison* you.'
- *'O'Ocampo* is around' refers to 'a *no-nonsense administrator, boss, police officer*, and is around.'
- 'I am an *IDP*' -found prominence on lack of *adequate office/leg space, seats in public service vehicles, renegade spouse, defaults on loan/rent/rate repayments, retrenched workers*, etc

Although borrowing affected all components of the grammar, the lexicon was typically the most affected. Peace terms (words/names that were prominently used at that time) were seamlessly infused in to intra and inter-language repertoire with little or no modifications save for pronunciation. Examples include: 'Chinkororo' and 'Mungiki' who are groups of juvenile thugs in Kenyan languages of Kisii and Kikuyu respectively, were generally accepted with all their attendant meanings although as noted by Trautmann (2000) 'it led to stereotyping generalization of meaning.' That is to say, the same names were connotatively associated with members from either community. More disturbing is the case of Tanzania (where I stay and work); Mungiki is the National stereotyping used as a code for a Kenyan.

Deliberate Lexical change involving modifications of the lexicon i.e. the entire word were noted. It occurred in two ways: addition and loss - which often - reflected cultural changes that introduced novel objects and notions, and that eliminated outmoded ones. Examples include existing words acquiring new additional connotative meaning or new words/terms replacing existing ones. Examples include:

- 50-50 - new term for equality
- Political responsibility - replaced resignation
- Coalition - new term for marriage
- Computer error - a term for grand or mega corruption
- Premier - new code for any supervisor, your deputy at work place or a no-nonsense wife/partner (a wife because a wife because Kenya is patriarchal)
- Waki – new code for an investigator who is impartial all knowing and has damaging information on you.

In the picture we have Justice Waki-centre-he chaired the commission on Kenyan post-election violence (courtesy of Daily Nation library).

Post-conflict terms became a vehicle for rapid nationalism. Vocabulary that united rather than divided the populace gained prominence as Kenyans decided to bury the hatchet of petty division and sort to corruptly use terms which enjoyed a wider national (cross-cultural) appeal. In retrospect national issues were brought in to our day-to-day discourse thus language became the pre-eminent cohesive vehicle that expressed a sense of belonging to a national group. The silent message appeared to be 'what affects you affects me too.' A look at terms that gained prominence clearly shows that the *led* (who endured much at post-poll chaos) turned on the *leaders* (who suffered little at post-poll violence). Once cohesion was achieved among the vulnerable ('foot soldiers', 'the easily incited') lasting peace would ensue. Words were used both at denotative and connotative levels clearly taking cognizance of the fact that 'every word has a history, and does not appear suddenly from outer space like a meteorite, even a work as truly exceptional, it was not completely without a precedent, nor was it a perfect realization of its own program. There were words by it that paved the way and after a word that attempted to complete the program' Trautmann (2000). Examples of such terms from the existing National vocabulary included:

- CDF (Constituency Development Funds) - became/stood for staff imprests, soft loans,
- MAU (Kenyan water tower) - stood for any scandal
- President - Husband, Boss
- Majimbo (regional units) – used for any trouble-makers, tribal cohorts
- Form 16A (a controversial form for tallying ballots) - became any piece of hidden/with-held evidence

- Hakuna! (Swahili word often dismissively used the president to mean nothing/no problem) - became synonymous with a crisis.
- Cabinet - became a person's close confidant.
- Donkey - became a loser or any weak yet cunning fellow.
- Horse - became a winner, a front-runner or favorite
- National outlook - became tribal balance

Kenyans queue to cast ballots in an Election (courtesy of Daily Nation library).

Kenyan terms are immortalized and stored in the spoken vocabulary (folklore of its people). They are subject to change based on the experience of the time. These people, as Trudgill (2000) claims, 'have a thousand and one factors that influence the way they speak: environment, age, our class, the part of the country they come from, whom they identify with and or despise.' Probably this could be the case for the gradual elevation of some locations/place names to respected national icons for dialogue. Such places have become synonymous with the role they played in peace restoration. Examples:

- *Naivasha* is a town in central Rift Valley that was home for post-poll revenge attacks. It is heterogeneous. Naivasha has since become a political retreat center for consensus building. It connotes *consensus*.
- *Serena* is a five star hotel in Nairobi-Kenya. It hosted rounds of arbitration talks between PNU an ODM at the height of post poll chaos. It connotes peace or arbitration. It is not uncommon to hear a patron advice his mates engaged in a heated argument to consider solving their problems at *The Serena*.

Lastly, Idioms found space and expression after the post-poll chaos. Normally, an idiom is generally a colloquial metaphor or term requiring some foundational knowledge, information, or experience, to use only within a culture, where conversational parties must possess common cultural references. Therefore, idioms are not considered part of the language, but part of the culture. Examples in this case shall be *nusu mkate, mtu wetu, and bamba Ruto* which are Swahili idioms meaning raw deal, nepotism and diverted maize Aid respectively.

Many more examples shall be provided in the table summary below.

The table below captures the most frequent/popular terms that informed the post-conflict Kenya discourse. Such terms were used as Icebreakers, pointers to discourse and generally as cathartic words for venting out armful emotions. Denotative (literal/surface meaning) or connotative (associative/hidden) meaning f words (names) used after the disputed 2007 elections and the 2008 post-election violence in Kenya are grouped in semantic fields. A semantic field is a set of words in a group specific ways Jackson (2000). A general and intuitive description is that words in a semantic field are not synonymous, but are all used to talk about the same general phenomenon. According to semantic field theory, a meaning of a word is dependent partly on its relation to other words in the same conceptual area The kinds of semantic fields vary from culture to culture and anthropologists use them to study belief systems and reasoning across cultural groups Akmajian (2001).The language of origin refers to language source for the term.

Name	Semantic Field	Language (Linguistic Origin)	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning
O' Campo	Proper/personal name	Argentine	Current ICC prosecutor's name	Savior to majority/traitor to minority, global policeman
Annan	Proper/personal name	African/Ghanaian	Name for former United Nations secretary General	Mediator, peace marker/broker, arbitrator, savior
Coalition	Political names	English	-Government of National Unity/union of two or more factions	-Marriage -Any union-staying in one house
Nusu mkate	Foodstuffs	Kiswahili	-half a loaf	Raw deal, half political power -Too little -Greed
Mungiki	Group/collective names	Kikuyu	Juvenile/youthful gang	Kikuyu, Kenyan*
Mtu wetu	Common names	Kiswahili	Our person/relative/party member	Tribal tag, nepotism
Cabinet	Political names	English	Government headed by president, premier, Vice President, and ministers	Close supporter/confidant, Raw power/political reward Inner circle/kitchen cabinet
Premier	Political names	English	A Prime Minister	Any supervisor/ immediate but not overall boss, a demanding wife
President	Political names	English	President of any country	Husband, CEO
50-50	Political names	English	Power-sharing, half-half -Equal share	Mistrust, Equality -give me what I want
Inspecting Development projects	Political names	English	Touring/making a follow-up development projects	Sex, political campaigns, rumor-mongering, mass mobilization, etc
CDF	Political names	English	Constituency Development Fund	Devolved funds in any institution, -Company imprests, -Staff incentives, - Soft/cheap Loans -Any personal help to relatives/friends and organizations
IDP	Group/collective names	English	Internally Displaced People(due to forceful evictions from their farms/homes)	Homeless, jobless, landless, those evicted by landlords, any stranger or unknown fellow, -renegade wife
MAU	Place names	Maasai/kikuyu	Kenya's largest water tower/forest. Found in Central Rift Valley	Corruption, any scandal, land grabbing
Mafia	Collective names	Italian/Latin origin	Italian gang	Die-hard tribalism, a dangerous bunch of political advisors
Mt. Kenya	Place names	English	Kenya's highest mountain located in central Kenya	Central Kenya elites
Political Responsibility	Political names	English	Accountability and Transparency 33	Resignation/take the blame/step down

Face of the Nation/National outlook	Political names	English	Include all Kenyans taking in to consideration the race, tribe, regions, age and sex	Include my tribesmen/my kin/my party henchmen
Hague	Place name	Dutch	City in Netherlands	Elite or politically correct prison/end of impunity /justice
ICC	Place name	English	Internal court	Justice, policeman/security
Chinkororo	Group/collective name	Ekigusii	A vigilante (youthful) gang	A kissii/Agusii
Hakuna!	Vague	Kiswahili	Nothing/there is nothing/no problem	A crisis
Tinga	Common name	Dholuo nativised	A Tractor	Raila Odinga
Unga	Foodstuffs name	Kiswahili	Maize flour	Political handouts/bribes given to prospective voters by aspirants
Punda	Animals name	Kiswahili	Donkey	Lazy/looser/unfit
Farasi	Animals name	Kiswahili	Horse	Frontrunner/favorite candidate
Pentagon	Place name	English	American military headquarters	Top decision making organ in any company/ home. The party henchmen/stalwarts
Migingo	Place name	Dholuo	Disputed Island in lake Victoria	Any: arguments, disputes, disagreements (divorce, job, etc). -A new well-paying job/business venture/deal
Moi	Personal name	Kalenjin/African	Retired presidents name	'My own interests'
Bamba Ruto	Common name	Kalenjin/Kiswahili	-Bamba-term for safaricom airtime -Ruto-Rift valley politician	-'Maize Aid' diverted and sold corruptly to well-connected businessmen
Form 16A	proper name	English	-A form used by ECK to tally ballots cast at a polling station	-Any piece of hidden evidence
Serena	Place name	Unknown	-A major Kenyan hotel chain	-Any venue for peace talks or arbitration
Majimbo	Common	-Kiswahili	-Devolved Governments	-Tribal Units/meetings/parties/cohorts
Computer error	Common name	English	Computer miscalculations	-Corrupt deeds
Naivasha	Place name	Maasai	A town in central Rift Valley	Political retreat centre

Table: Summary on Semantics of Post-conflict Terms

Notes and Key

* Monika 'name given to Kenyans by Tanzanians

CDF - Constituency Development Fund

IDP - Internally Displaced People

ECK - Electoral Commission of Kenya

PNU - Party of National Unity

ODM - Orange Democratic Movement of Kenya

P - President

DP - Deputy President

PM – Prime Minister

DPM – Deputy Prime Minister

Conclusion

Language was used as a tool for exclusion and or inclusion rather than a factor or an overriding reason for Kenyan election crisis.

The Kenyan Multilingual terms played a significant role in restoration of peace, harmony and forgiveness among the populace soon after the post-poll crisis in Kenya.

Kenyan multilingualism should be used by the Authorities to develop a state with unity in diversity and cross-cultural harmony. This can be achieved by developing quality local language materials- like the bilingual dictionaries. Students should then be encouraged to learn languages other than their native. Shared multilingual vocabularies should then be harnessed and used wildly. The language curriculum should be penciled to accommodate the positive aspects found in different communities or languages.

A Legislation that out-laws hate speech should be developed. In rare cases where Local language is the only means of expression, an interpreter must be used to relay the message in the National or official languages for the benefit of non-native speakers.

In Kenya, there is a significant higher language contact in urbane areas than in rural areas. As a result extensive lexical borrowing occurs especially in areas with significant numbers of bilinguals and multilingual.

The Kenyan idiom has its meanings engraved in the local languages. Such idioms convey stereotypes. Care should be taken to avoid developing a tendency of 'out-groups and 'in-groups.'

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Pictures

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