

## LINGUISTISTS DO NOT HAVE TO SPEAK MANY LANGUAGES

I knew it; I almost always do. I could tell that, once again, my tonsils had become alarmed. They were reacting to something, perhaps a sip of a cold drink or, maybe, some mild dehydration. They were swollen. Once they are, I know better than to wait. So, I had driven to University of Nairobi Senior Staff Clinic to consult a physician.

In the register, I filled the information required of patients, that is, the patient's name, personal number and their Department. The nursing sister peeped at the information, disappeared between the Registry shelves and returned to where I was standing holding my file. No sooner was she next to me, looking at the cover of my file, than she started talking to me in what I believed was the German language. I stared blankly into her eyes. She reciprocated my stare and asked, "Aren't you in the Department of Linguistics?" "Yes, I'm", I replied. "And you don't speak German?" "No, I don't" Then, suddenly, in her eyes, I saw that knowing look that proclaims "The days of a conman are numbered; today, I have you cornered!" She was convinced, I concluded, that she had stumbled on a conman masquerading as a linguist and fraudulently earning money from the university.

The nursing sister's perception of a linguist as a person who speaks many languages is the norm rather than the exception in society. However, nothing can be further from the truth. No! A linguist is not a woman or man who speaks many languages. A person so endowed is known as a polyglot; not linguist. So, one may ask, if a linguist is not the gifted woman or man who speaks many languages fluently, then, what is a linguist?

It hasn't been easy with me answering this question to those with whom I come into contact. Practically every time that, in an introduction, I tell someone that I'm a linguist, the next question is, "How many languages do you speak?" My honest answer is: Three languages. With further probing, I disclose the three languages as being Kitharaka, Kiswahili and English. Sometimes I add that once upon a time I had a fairly good level of fluency in French language but that I have lost much of it due to lack of practice. Then, as if to confirm that I'm fraudster, I'm asked whether I do not speak languages such as Spanish, German, Russian or Chinese.

Let me put the record straight. A linguist is a person who has undergone training and has acquired knowledge and skills necessary to scientifically analyse human language. Linguistics is defined as the scientific study of human language. It is not necessary for the linguist to be able to speak a language to study it scientifically; that is to investigate it using a credible methodology, appropriate theoretical framework and correct analytical procedures. Just think of this: It is not necessary for a crop scientist studying pearl millet to be a millet farmer or a veterinary scientist to be a breeder of horses or a keeper of herds of sebu cattle! What is required of the scientist is sound scientific theory or theories in the field of their research, appropriate methodology and the right analytical procedures. It is possible, therefore, for a linguist who does not speak a single word of Dholuo or who does not know where it is spoken to world to scientifically study an aspect of the language and come up with tenable conclusions. There is only one condition to such study: the linguist must get data from a native speaker of Dholuo either directly from the speaker or from texts or audio recordings.

Let's take a hypothetical example of how a linguist can study a language though he or she cannot speak a single sentence of the language. A linguist based in some university, say in Canada, on reading some article in an international journal in linguistics, finds that the article on a language called Maasai contradicts some well-established notion(s) in human language. She decides to do research in the language. On inquiry, she learns that Maasai is spoken in Africa. As she prepares to get more information on the part of Africa where Maasai is spoken, she remembers that she has an African student by the name of Rosemary Nashipai Leimayian (fictitious name). On asking her from where she comes, she says Kenya. And what is her mother tongue, the linguist asks. She says, "Maasai". At that point, the linguist may consider it unnecessary to travel to Africa because she has a potential source of data on the Maasai language to either confirm or negate what she read in the journal article. But first, she has to use her knowledge on research methodology to either accept or reject Rosemary Nashipai Leimayian as a credible source of data. The linguist may want to find out whether both of Nashipai's parents are Maasai or whether she is a product of a mixed marriage; whether the parents spoke Maasai as she was growing up; whether Maasai was the language of her surrounding as she was growing up and whether she lived out Maasai community during her childhood or youth. If she answers such questions in the affirmative, the linguist will conclude that she is a credible source of linguistic data on Maasai and she may, therefore, embark on the study of the Maasai language using Nashipai as the source of data. Her inability to speak Maasai language will be inconsequential for her scientific study of the language.