

LANGUAGES AND DIALECTS

By

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The terms “language” and “dialect” are commonly used. One hears of such expressions as “the languages of Europe and dialects of Africa”, or “the Kikuyu language”, or “the dialects of Kiswahili”. During the burial of the late senator for the County of Siaya, Hon. Otieno Kajwang, one very respectable Kenyan journalist made reference to the “Luo dialect”.

Although people use these terms, sometimes they don't always use them correctly. A “language” is a speech system. Such a system uses a combination of sounds to create words. In turn, words combine to create sentences. People utter sentences to express complete thoughts. Sometimes, individual words or combination of words shorter than a sentence are used to refer to objects, ideas, people or places. The system we call a language is shared by a group of people. For instance, we have the Digo language or, as they refer to it themselves Chididigo. The Digo language or Chidigo is a speech system shared and used by the Digo people, a Mijikenda group that inhabit most of the County of Kwale in the Kenya Coast.

A “dialect” is a sub-system of a language. For instance, whereas Luos speak the Luo language or Dholuo, some researchers have shown that the language has two varieties. These are the Kisumu/South Nyanza variety and the Boro/Ukwala variety. It is these varieties of the same language that are referred to dialects. It is, therefore, correct to say that Dholuo has two dialects. However, Dholuo itself is not a dialect; it is a language. A language, especially a small one in terms of speakers, may not have noticeable varieties; in other words, it may not have dialects. Larger languages may have two or three or several dialects. We have pointed out that Dholuo, according to some accounts, has two dialects. According to some scholars, Kikuyu has four dialects, namely, the Kabete dialect, the Mathira dialect, the Gichugu dialect and the Ndia dialect.

Kiswahili has about fifteen dialects mainly spread along the East African coast from the southern Somalia all the way to the Comoro Islands. The dialects include Kimvita, Kiamu, Kingazija, Kipate, Kiunguja, Kimtangata, Kivumba and Kijomvu and Chichifundi, Chimwini and

Kingwana. The last of these dialects, that is, Kingwana, is spoken in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Unknown to many Kenyans, there are Somalis, Congolese and Comoreans who speak Kiswahili as their mother tongue, that is, as their first language.

As we have noted, some languages do not have dialects. Such languages homogeneous speech systems.

In languages that have dialects, one of the dialects is chosen and designated as the standard dialect. The standard dialect is the one used in the school system and including in books. Deciding on the variety to use as the standard dialect is not necessarily an easy issue. Sometimes debating on the issue can be intense or even acrimonious. In the colonial days in East Africa, there was a debate as to which of the dialects of Kiswahili was to be made the standard dialect. The main contenders were Kimvita (the Swahili dialect of Mombasa) and Kiunguja (the Swahili dialect of Zanzibar or Unguja).

Each of the two dialects had strengths and weaknesses. Kimvita's strength lay, among other issues, in its long tradition of writing and abundance of written documents both literary and otherwise. For instance, it is the dialect in which famous Swahili poets such Muyaka bin Haji wrote. Its main disadvantage was that it didn't have the geographical spread that Kiunguja enjoyed. At the time of the debate, Kiunguja had already penetrated the East African hinterland. Although Kiunguja did not have the long literary tradition that Kimvita had, the former won the day mainly because it had already spread in more areas than the later.

Let's return to the beginning of the article where I pointed out that the terms "language" and "dialect" are sometimes used wrongly. I mentioned that some people talk of "European languages" and "African dialects". Both Africa and Europe have languages and many of the languages in both continents have dialects. Those who refer to the "the languages of Europe and the dialects of Africa" do so under the misconception that "languages" are superior speech systems and "dialects" are their inferior counterparts and that the former are found in Europe (and North America) and that the later are found in Africa and the rest of the so-called Third World. Consequently, the expression, "the languages of Europe and the dialects of Africa" is founded on racism. It is made by those who have either a racist bent or have unwittingly bought

into racist expressions. The otherwise respectable Kenyan journalist who, during the burial of the late Hon. Otieno Kanjwang, referred to “Luo dialect” belongs to the second category.

Let me elaborate on the above issue on the racist use of the terms “language” and “dialect”. Books and newspaper/magazine articles written by Europeans or American sometimes refer to “European languages” and “African dialects” to suggest all-round superiority of the former and all-round inferiority of the later. Contrary to such racist world view, in the linguistics, there is nothing – absolutely nothing - to show that, for example, Spanish is more complex than Maasai. Let me point out that, in specific instances of usage, one language may be superior to another. However, such superiority in specific instances of usage cannot be handled through a European (and American) / the rest of the world divide. In diplomatic discourse, French is superior to Maasai in the sense that it has more expressions for the purpose. However, in pastoralist issues including talking about milk or traditional veterinary medicine, Maasai is much more superior as a mode of expression as compared to French. In such issues, Maasai is much more developed than French.