

The Relationship between Lexical Attrition and Change in the Socio-Cultural, Economic and Political Contexts of the Speakers of the Kipsigis Language in Kenya

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Abstract

This study adopted the Redundancy Reduction Principle (Seliger, 1991) to explain why lexical attrition has been witnessed in the Kipsigis language. The paper relates lexical attrition to change in the socio-cultural, economic and political contexts of the speakers of the Kipsigis language. Data collection was done by use of scheduled interviews and document analysis. The data was then put in a questionnaire and given to 162 respondents to test their knowledge on the words. The sample size of 162 respondents was a representation of those who speak the Kipsigis language in the three Kipsigis districts of Kericho, Bureti and Bomet. The data was then analysed and reported using descriptive statistics. The results showed that the nouns, verbs and adjectives have become obsolete due to lack of socio cultural, economic and political contexts. The study concludes that the Kipsigis language has experienced lexical attrition due to linguistic and cultural contact with English and Swahili cultures which are scientifically and technologically advanced. This study will provide a database for the study of language attrition in other African languages.

Keywords: Lexical attrition, Culture, Political, Economic, Technology, Kipsigis

1. Introduction

The notion of language attrition has been a topic of investigation for more than three decades. It attracted the attention of language researchers in the late 1970's and subsequently the inaugural conference on Attrition of Language Skills at the University of Pennsylvania (Upenn) in 1980 became a turning point for researchers in this field. Before the conference, 'language loss' was used to refer to pathological disorders such as aphasia, or language disorders caused by tumors, strokes, or traumas to the head (Yağmur, 2004). This conference was a starting point for further research and conferences that probed into the process of language loss as a non-pathological disorder from many other perspectives.

Lexical attrition in the Kipsigis language may be a result of culture contact. Culture is dynamic and often cultural changes are brought about as a result of contact with culturally or technologically advanced people. This means, words of different cultures and technologies have been borrowed into the language and as a result, the old forms slowly fade from frequent use because their contexts may no longer be relevant.

Code switching in language contexts is the simultaneous use of, for example, L1 (language one has learned and spoken from birth) and L2 (second language) in discourse, where cultural and social meaning is often attached to the language choice speakers make. The differentiation and combined investigation of multilingualism as a basis for lexical attrition, as predominantly a psycholinguistic issue, is a new and important approach to the analysis of bilingual data. Frequent use of L2 may eventually lead to attrition of L1 since the speakers may fail to get exposed to all structures of the mother tongue.

Language is a carrier of culture and any contact with other cultures would result in the speakers borrowing the culture and with it the words to express aspects and concepts in the new culture. Kipsigis speakers have had to discard some of the words in their language because of their redundancy owing to more relevant ones that have come into their environment. Modern technology and scientific advancement witnessed in the world today has seen many languages, Kipsigis included, borrowing heavily while discarding forms that fail to conform to such times. Consequently, the words that are discarded give the speakers no option but to adopt the second language widely distributed rules as opposed to their narrowly distributed rules for L1. The new ideas and concepts that come into the speakers' environment, require new terms which L1 (Kipsigis) in this case cannot provide forcing the speakers to borrow from either English or Kiswahili in order to communicate effectively about them.

Some trends in lexical attrition have been noted (Tsunoda, 2005, pp. 95-96, Schmidt, 1985), but differences occur depending on the type of culture change accompanying the language loss/shift. Specific terms and less frequent forms (Schmid & de Bot, 2003) may be especially prone to loss, as are special speech styles or register variants, Kinship terms (Tsunoda, 2005). Ethnozoological and ethnobotanical terms and culture-specific inanimate items may be especially affected.

Morris Swadesh (1959) seeking a method of assessing or measuring language attrition reasoned that cultural vocabulary could sometimes be stable or could change rapidly; words for plants or animals for example, could be lost as people migrate from one area to another and technical vocabulary might increase greatly in

response to inventions or cultural contacts. On the other hand, culture-free or basic vocabulary would appear to be fairly immune to such non linguistic influence. He reasoned that the rate of change found in any given case could serve as a sort of index of lapse of time.

In this study, cultural vocabulary has undergone attrition because of cultural contact with technologically advanced cultures. English and Kiswahili terms have invaded the Kipsigis language because of the new concepts that came into the speakers' environment. It is evident that as the speakers borrow a certain culture; they also adopt a term that expresses them leading to the old terms being discarded.

2. Materials and Methods

This study was conducted in three districts of the South Rift; Kericho, Bomet and Bureti districts in Rift Valley Province. The choice of these districts was supported by the fact that they are dominated by the Kipsigis speakers.

This research was conducted through a cross-sectional survey design. Survey designs provide detailed information about attributes which can be used to generalize the findings to other areas.

From the target population, the sample size was determined using Mugenda and Mugenda (1999) formula:

$$n = \frac{z^2(pq)}{d^2}$$

Where n was the desired sample size of the study population. Z was the standard normal deviation, set at (1.96) which corresponds to the 95% confidence level; p was the estimated percentage of people who still understand the Kipsigis language proficiently. This assumption was based on Chesaina's (1991) study on, 'The Oral Literature of the Kalenjins' that set it at 88% (0.88), q was the estimated percentage of the Kipsigis speakers who do not understand the language proficiently set at 12% (0.12) and d was the acceptable range of error set at 0.05.

The desired sample size was determined as: $n = \frac{1.96^2(0.88 * 0.12)}{0.05^2} = 162$

Proportional stratified random sampling was used to identify the sample population. The random sampling was arrived at by a process of balloting. The activity was carried out during a chief's *baraza* (local community meeting chaired by a chief). Having sensitized the people on the study, all were interested in providing the required information. This prompted the author to look for a way of getting the needed sample (Table 1); thus the method of balloting. The males and females were separated during the exercise and each did their balloting separately. Pieces of papers bearing number 1 and number 2 were folded and given to the people to pick. All those who picked number 1 were selected to be the required sample.

The sample size selected from each of the districts in the study area was arrived at by dividing the total population in the three districts with the total population in each district. The proportion was then divided by a hundred and multiplied by the sample size of 162.

Table 1. Number of respondents per district

| Districts | Population | Proportion (%) | Sample size calculation | Sample size |
|-----------|------------|----------------|-------------------------|-------------|
| Kericho | 758,339 | 51.2 | 51.2/100*162 | 83 |
| Bomet | 398,731 | 26.8 | 44/100*162 | 44 |
| Bureti | 325,455 | 21.9 | 36/100*162 | 36 |
| Total | 1,482,525 | 100 | 162 | 162 |

Questionnaires were found to be appropriate for data collection. The questionnaire type used for this study was a wordlist questionnaire where; a list of all the words deemed obsolete was provided, owing to the fact that they were unfamiliar to the author in spite of her being a mature native speaker of Kipsigis.

Scheduled interview was also used to gather data on the socio-cultural, economic and political contexts involved in lexical attrition. It was used as a source of the data on words deemed obsolete. The interview method used was personal interview, which involved asking the respondents questions face-to-face. During the interview, the author took down notes in a notebook. What was gathered during the interview was later put in the wordlist questionnaire. The questionnaire was later given to the 162 respondents to test their knowledge on the words.

The study also utilized document analysis method, which allows one to study an issue that can be examined, analyzed and documented. It targeted secondary data sources of the Kipsigis language such as books about the Kipsigis community, journals, reports, development plans, research papers, maps (e.g. on land uses), statistical abstracts and other periodicals. These were from libraries, government/NGOs/municipal offices, national archives, documentation and resource centres.

Data analysis was done using SPSS computer package and The Redundancy Reduction Principle proposed by Seliger (1991) used to interpret the data.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 House related terms

The evolution theory of natural selection by Charles Darwin (1859) explains these findings. The old forms could not compete with the changes that the new culture of house construction had brought thus they could not fit and as such could not survive.

Generally, all the variables portrayed a percentage of over 80% loss in most of the words. The percentage knowledge for most of the words was below 20% a clear indication that the words are obsolete. Before modern technology set in, houses were circular in shape and had only two main partitions i.e. 'koimauut' and 'injoin'. The first room served as a kitchen, living room as well as a bedroom. 'Injoin' was a kraal. These names have been discarded because as stated by the Redundancy Reduction Principle (Seliger 1991) theory, they were narrow and complex and could not adequately serve the needs of the users well, thus easily giving way to the incorporation of the new terms.

It can also be argued that redundancy of these words came about as a result of the culture change. Initially, there were so many areas in the house to store different items e.g. milk, beer, grains, gourds, drinking straws and other valuables. Each of these areas had different terms of reference. With modernity however, changes in technology, economy and culture; cupboards have replaced them making the storage of items in the house easier, for items can now be stored at one place. The speakers call it 'kapatit' a term nativized from the Kiswahili term 'kabati'.

The fact that these words have been discarded reflects Downes (1998) argument that language is described in terms of the role it plays in the context of some larger system. Linguistic items come into being and take the form they do because of the role they play in the containing system. The new forms play a better role than the old forms due to the changes in the speaker's culture. The system refers to the new culture that the community has embraced and which has led to the adoption of the new forms at the expense of the old forms making the old forms die because they could not compete (Darwin, 1859).

Kipsigis verbs have also undergone attrition though not at the rate at which nouns have. The few that were collected and tested for attrition proved obsolete. The verbs presented for testing in the domain of houses showed a loss index of 94.1% as opposed to 5.9% knowledge. In this domain only three verbs were tested for attrition.

The verbs were: 'kiil kariik' (85.2% loss) meaning oiling the weapons. This was a mourning ritual involving the removal of the extension of the central pole in the house upon the death of the man. This term is lost because today most houses lack the extension at the rooftop due to changes in housing and construction forms. Culture contact has also contributed to the loss. The breaking down of the extension was called 'ngisiiret' (88.2% loss). The storing of the drinking straws was called 'mesengeswet' (85.2% loss).

3.2 Utensils related terms

In total the percentage of knowledge of nouns in this category stand at 15.1% as opposed to 84.9% loss. There were no verbs collected in this domain. The loss index of the adjectives in total is 92.2% and the percentage knowledge is only 7.8%.

The older age bracket was versed with the nouns since they once used them before the modern ones replaced the items. They cited the change in culture which led to the loss of context as the main reason for the loss of the nouns. That is why their loss index is equally high. All the age groups are using the new terms and the items in their everyday lives.

These are new terms that the speakers adopted when they came into contact with technologically advanced cultures who introduced them to these modern sources of fuel.

The loss of the nouns from this domain is associated to change in culture especially the culture of cooking, serving and eating food. More so, the speakers today eat a variety of foods unlike in the past where only *ugali*, wild vegetables and meat were the main meal.

Tobacco containers were in various forms, 'kibiiriongut' (92.1% loss) was a wooden container covered with skin. There was another that was made out of horn called 'kirongisiet' (88.1% loss). It was used as a sniffer by men. Women stored their tobacco in a wooden container called 'kirauut' (86.5%). All these terms are obsolete because tobacco chewing or sniffing is almost a dead practice. The speakers have come into contact with technologically advanced cultures leading to them smoking cigarettes instead. A cigarette is referred to as 'sikaret' a nativized term of the English term 'cigarette'.

3.3 Terms related to Dress and Ornaments

There was only one verb and one adjective collected in this domain. Their loss index stands at 92.1% and 95.6% respectively.

The loss of these words is attributed to the tremendous changes that have been witnessed in this aspect since the mode of dressing has totally changed. This domain is the most dynamic to date. The loss of nouns in

this category is attributed to the contact with English and Swahili cultures. These cultures enabled the community to come into contact with better modes of dressing.

In the past, both men and women were scantily dressed. In the modern world, the Kipsigis speakers have adopted the western way of dressing.

Given this fact, it is clear as to why they have been disfavoured. The type of dress today is totally different in terms of material and design. The influx of technology has changed everything in this domain because skin clothing is completely a dead culture. They could not survive the test of time as stipulated in Darwin's theory (1859) of natural selection where the fittest survives. The Kipsigis speakers have borrowed the mode of dress as well as the names of the clothes.

The use of ornaments has become an individual's choice, all because of culture contact. Men no longer adorn themselves and so many ornaments no longer burden women. The terminologies used in reference to ornaments today are minimal.

3.4 Terms related to Marriage and Birth

The number of nouns presented in this domain was at a total loss index of 87.8%. Kipsigis shows some signs of loss of terms related to traditional ways of life. The Kipsigis speakers have interacted with speakers of different languages and cultural practices. They have also intermarried either with other tribes or races resulting in the loss of nouns from the categories of marriage and birth.

Today a child is given one name that commemorates time of birth e.g 'Kibet' is given to a boy born during the day or 'Chebet' for a girl. After four months of the child's birth, a ceremony was held, 'tumdaap lakwet' (88.2% loss), child's ceremony. This involved the slaughtering of an ox or goat, (male animal for a boy and female for a girl). The child's face was washed with undigested food in the animal's stomach. The elders then offered prayers to Asis (sun god).

This practice is dead due to culture contact.. The advent of Christianity changed this cultural practice and as a result, new terms and concepts came to the speakers' environment. The new terms were then adopted and the old ones became redundant and were thus discarded. The bottom line here is that the terms failed to compete adequately with the new culture thus Darwin's evolution theory of natural selection (1859) where the fittest can survive.

3.5 Terms related to Initiation and Naming

In this domain, nouns presented were 15 and the loss index in total was 87.5%. Initiation into adulthood for both men and women was a very important institution among the Kipsigis. Currently though, certain aspects of this rite of passage are disappearing very fast. The greater part of the initiation period which was spent teaching the initiates about their culture and responsibilities have been discarded. Most of the words that were used in reference to female circumcision have become obsolete. This is because this practice has faced a lot of opposition from the government as well as the human rights activists. The government of Kenya and the human rights activists have strongly opposed female circumcision on the grounds that it has adverse effects on the girls and the women. The consequences are health related i.e. reproductive, physical and psychological health. They also argue that the practice decrease the girls' attendance and performance at school. There is also the risk of the girls' lives at the time of circumcision, at marriage and during childbirth because of the complications brought by the operation. The girls also fail to complete their education due to early arranged marriages. No matter the age, a girl is considered an adult after undergoing the cut. This will lead to poor literacy thus violating a basic right to education. This practice can also lead to the spread of HIV/AIDS owing to the fact that those who perform the operation normally use one razor blade on several girls. These reasons are valid enough for those who advocate for human rights as well as gender equality rights to fight against this practice.

As a result, many laws have been enacted by the Kenyan government to hasten the eradication of this practice. Some of the laws include: the Ministry of Health's national plan of action for elimination of FGM launched in 1999. In 2001, the Children's Act came into force and it made FGM illegal for girls under 18. The penalties were set and those found violating the law faced one year imprisonment or paid fifty thousand Kenyan shillings.

In 2011 the FGM act was enacted. It was to close loopholes in the previous laws, criminalizing all forms of FGM performed on anyone regardless of age, aiding FGM or stigmatizing women who have not undergone the rite.

2012 the UN passed on historical resolution calling on countries to eliminate FGM.

2013 the 57th UN convention on the status of women urged the states to develop policies and programmes to eliminate FGM as well as other forms of violence against women.

Apart from these few stated laws, many local NGOs, faith based organisations, international organizations. Women organizations like the Maendelo ya Wanawake have all come to the fore to campaign against initiation of women.

These supporting facts are some of the reasons for loss of words in this domain.

Cultural contact has made the speakers discard the practice leading to the attrition of the terms presented in this study because they became redundant.

3.6 Terms related to Religious Practices

In this domain, the nouns presented were 11 resulting in a loss index of 91.0%. The attrition in this domain is attributed to the influence of Christianity. When the missionaries brought Christianity to Africa, they condemned the African Traditional Religion as a pagan practice. As a result, people were eventually converted to Christianity leading to adoption of the new religious terms leading to attrition of the old terms.

This was all about culture contact leading to culture change which as a result made the words redundant leading to their loss. The Kipsigis used to worship 'Asis', the sun (84.1% loss), which was considered as their source of all life. This sun was known by so many other terms e.g 'chepongolo', God of creation (98.8% loss), 'chepomircho', girl of halo (89.5% loss), 'chepo kipkooiyo', giver of blessings (93.2% loss). These terms however, have been replaced by terms from either Kiswahili or English due to linguistic as well as cultural contact. Some of the new terms include: 'Jeso', from the English word 'Jesus', 'Cheopa', from the word 'Jehova' and 'Messia' from the word 'Messiah'. With these new terms, the old terminologies have slowly faded from daily usage leading to the loss as found out in this study.

The attrition in this domain as depicted in the interview results show a loss index of over 80% in most of the words. This is attributed to the changes in religion. The speakers of the Kipsigis language have adapted the western religion and this is the reason behind the loss of the words for they have become redundant due to the reduced usage. Christianity has also made the words redundant due to the irrelevancy of the traditional religion. Words that were used in the traditional religion could not compete for survival in the new religion thus their loss (Darwin, 1895).

3.7 Terms related to Political Organization

In this domain, 15 nouns were tested and they resulted in a loss index of 90.7%. The verbs tested for attrition in this domain showed 87.3% loss. The verbs here have no replacing words because of the culture that has changed. The Kipsigis had four 'poriosiek' territorial divisions, thus 'kebeni' (89.3% loss), meaning to tarry was one of them. It was used in reference to the north and northwest part of the Kipsigis territory. 'Kasanet' (90.2 % loss), meaning to hear was another and was an area in the southern part that was mainly occupied by the wealthy members of the society.

The adjectives in this domain yielded 87.8% loss index. The loss is due to obsolete or irrelevant cultural practices that were eroded when the speakers came into contact with other cultures. There was the month long forest based secretive ceremony that elevated the oldest men of the community to a saintly status, it was called 'boret' (84.1% loss). During war, there were soldiers out-of-form or known cowards whose role was to cook for the combatants they were called 'kipeel pany' (88.1% loss), meat roasters. The soldier corps, whose role was to round up the enemies' cattle while the soldiers were engaging the enemy, was called 'pirtiichik' (91.2% loss), meaning inexperienced soldiers. All these adjectives became redundant as a result of new terms that the speakers borrowed from English or Kiswahili as well as the culture that was discarded because it became irrelevant.

3.8 Terms related to Agricultural Practices

The nouns in this domain were 15 and when tested for attrition, they showed a loss index of 89.5%. The verbs resulted in a loss index of 86.9% while Adjectives resulted in 86.7% loss.

The economic practices of the Kipsigis community have undergone a lot of change. These changes have seen the Kipsigis changing from pastoralism to mixed farming.

Use of modern equipment in farming has seen the traditional modes of farming being discarded and with it their terms of reference as shown by the loss index. There was a traditional calendar that is no longer being used because of the new calendar that the speakers had adopted. The traditional calendar was a prediction of the season witnessed in each month. In the traditional calendar, February was 'ngatiato' (loss index of 93.2%), meaning dryness. March was 'kiptaamo' (89.7%), meaning the clouds forming. April was 'iwatkuut' (95.2%) meaning the onset of the rainy season. May was 'maamu' (86.9%) meaning the rivers are flooding as a result of the heavy rains. June was 'paki' (loss index of 79%) meaning hot, which made the castor oil seeds to explode. September was 'puret' (loss index of 83.3%) meaning mist. October was 'epeso' (94.8%) meaning crop maturing, this heralded the harvest season. November was 'kipsunde ne Tai' (70.2% loss) meaning, time of plenty, people grew fat. December was 'kipsunde nebo aeng' (88.4%) meaning the month of ceremonies owing to the rich harvest. This was when circumcision ceremonies took place.

Today the months are referred to as 'arawetab somok', meaning the third month this is the month of March. This term 'arawet' is used in all the months because the speakers have borrowed it from the Kiswahili term 'mwezi'. The only thing that changes is the number i.e 'Angwan', for April, Mutut', for May etc. These

terms have been discarded because they could not survive the change in the cultural practices of the community. Thus they were naturally selected for extinction (Darwin, 1859) that is to say forms that conform to the times survive (survival of the fittest).

The custom of lending out cows to other people has died. The term that was used in reference to this practice was 'kimanagen' (90.6 % loss) where cows were lent out for care to friends, agemates or kinsmen. The loan itself was called 'kimanaktaet' (88.4% loss). Communal grazing has been discarded due to population pressure that has led to land being partitioned into paddocks. The communally owned grazing grounds were called 'kaptich' (loss index of 86%). Individual land tenure has led to provision of title deeds by the government leading to individual land ownership.

The practice of drinking blood is no longer there because of Christianity as well as health reasons. The Kipsigis cherished blood. An arrow was used to extract blood every six weeks or so from oxen. The arrow was called 'kaploiniik' (loss index 85.7%); it was used together with a short venisection bow called 'kirerto' (loss index 96.8%). The blood was trapped using a wide mouthed pot called 'kipkorotiit' (loss index 90.9%). The blood, a good source of protein, was drunk fresh or mixed with sour milk (mursiik) and sometimes vegetables.

The cultures discussed above have all become irrelevant because of culture contact. The change in culture made the words redundant for they were no longer being used. The words were discarded as new terms were adopted they failed to compete for survival (Darwin, 1859). The high loss index and lack of replacing terms explains the redundancy of both the practices and their terms of reference.

4. Conclusion

It is conclusive here that the theory of Redundancy Reduction Principle proposed by Seliger (1991) explains why the nouns have become obsolete in that L2 has brought in rules that are less complex, wider in linguistic distribution and those which serve the same semantic functions as the old terms that have been discarded.

The terms have also gone out of use due to socio cultural and technological changes that the speakers experienced forcing them to borrow terms that enabled them speak effectively of the new items and concepts that came into their environment thus making the old forms fail to compete for survival (Darwin, 1859).

The socio cultural, economic and political change that the speakers have witnessed over the years has played an important role in lexical attrition. The loss of the nouns, verbs and adjectives experienced in all the semantic domains presented in this study was as a result of the respondents not being able to identify them because the contexts in which the words were used has changed. The cultural contact with technologically advanced cultures especially the English and Swahili cultures may be considered as among the factors responsible for attrition. The new cultural practices rendered some of the Kipsigis cultural practices irrelevant leading to the loss of the words that were used to express them.

When the speakers came into contact with these new cultures, introduction of foreign cultural items and practices became inevitable, as a result cultural borrowings and loanwords resulting in the old forms being words disfavoured by the speakers led to the loss witnessed in this study.

5. Recommendations

This study did not take into account the influence of attitude, motivation and other sociolinguistic aspects of language on lexical attrition. It would be useful if further study could be done to examine lexical attrition from a sociolinguistic point of view.

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