The Implications of Language and Power in *Gikuyu* Marriage Negotiation Discursive Domain, for Kenya's Vision 2030

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Abstract

This study was conceived on the premise that there are connections between language use and unequal relations of power and there is widespread underestimation of the significance of language in the production, maintenance and change of social relations of power. There is therefore need to help increase consciousness of how language contribute to the domination of some people by others since consciousness is the first step towards emancipation. Some commonsense assumptions which are implicit in the conventions according to which people interact linguistically are identifiable in conventions which follow a pattern where one party seems more powerful as seen in the way they control the process of talk such as in the *Gikuyu* marriage negotiation discursive domain. This paper focuses on the formal discursive process of negotiating and legalising marriage in the domain of '*Ruracio*' or bride wealth payment amongst the *Agikuyu* of Kenya. Data, consisting of five recorded discourses from sampled negotiation sessions and five focus group discussions from Kiambu County Kenya, was translated, transcribed and analysed with a view of investigating language use for power potentialities. Guided by principles of language and power, the study established that language use in this domain defines power differentials and this has a direct influence on how people think, act and view their society. This paper argues that such potentialities would be instrumental in building a free and fair society as envisioned in the social pillar of Kenya's Vision 2030.This way, Linguistics as an area of study would be contributing to social development. It is hoped that the findings will be useful to all language users, leaders in general and policy makers in our country.

Key words: Language, Power, discursive domain, Vision 2030, Marriage negotiation

1. Introduction

The significance of language in the productions, maintenance and social relations of power has been underestimated yet there is need to increase consciousness of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others (Fairclough, 1989). Fasold (1990) has also observed that when people use language, they do more than just try to get another person to understand the speaker's thoughts and feelings. At the same time, both people use language in subtle ways to define their relationship to each other, to identify themselves as part of a social group, and to establish the kind of speech event that they are in. According to Fairclough (1989), ideologies too are closely linked to language because using language is the commonest form of social behaviour. For him, the exercise of power in modern society is increasingly achieved through ideology and more particularly through the ideological workings of language. He argues that those interested in relationships of power in modern society, cannot afford to ignore language.

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Power is a phenomenon brought into play through discourse which "must be firmly located in the systematic examination of features integral to the discourse itself" (Watson, 1990, p.280). Hutchby (1996) too has argued that power can be addressed as a phenomenon that is both highly specific and also diffusely and pervasively present within an interaction. This is in line with Foucault's (1977) argument that power is not a thing that is possessed by one agent or collectivity and lacked by another, but rather a practice that is exercised within a relational network that includes those who exercise power and those who resist it. The network is viewed as a structure of possibilities and not as a concrete relationship between determinate social entities. He further observes that certain "discourses" or modes of rhetoric and reasoning embody and reproduce power relationships within society in such a way that form and function of manifold discourses enable us to make sense of ourselves, others and the world in which we are situated. Foucault's (1977) arguments are very useful in analysis of power at the interpersonal level for example, the ever-shifting discourses that give shape and meaning to the world and our relationships in it. These arguments are founded on the premise that wherever there is power, there is resistance and power operates in the most mundane contexts of everyday life. For example in the current study, although the bride's spokesman has a 'natural' incumbency (available set of powerful resources) for dealing with the groom's spokesman, there are ways in which such strategies may be resisted. This may be done by recognizing and attempting to forestall the effects of the powerful strategy being used by the host (bride's spokesman) or they may be resisted by attempting to adopt the powerful strategies available to the host, for themselves (Hutchby,1996). Thus, the notion of power in this paper is seen in the construction of turns and the relationships between turns within the data collected. This way, connections between language and other elements of social life such as power and domination as reflected through the discursive domain of *Gikuyu* marriage negotiation are illuminated.

2. Materials and Methods
2.1 Study area

The study was carried out in Kiambu County. This is a predominantly rural county but according to the Institute of Social accountability (Tisa), its urban population is increasing as Nairobi city is rapidly growing. The *Agikuyu* are the dominant tribe. The county is divided into five administrative regions namely; Githunguri, Kiambaa, Kikuyu, Lari and Limuru. One *Gikuyu* marriage negotiation and a focus group discussion were captured from each of these regions so that the study would capture regional variations and dynamics if any.

2.2 Permission and Ethical issues

To gain access to sites and individuals involved in the study, permission was sought from the relevant authorities. The researcher had to conform to standard procedures such as seeking for permission from The National Commission for Research, Technology and Innovation and the Kiambu county administration as well as ensuring that the human subjects were protected.

2.3 Target Population

The target population was the *Gikuyu* community particularly those involved in marriage negotiations. Since this is an unspecified population, the sample was selected through non-probability sampling. This means that the sample items for the study were selected deliberately by the researcher.

2.4 Sampling and Sample size

The study used a purposive sample of five marriage negotiation sessions where each was capturing a different stage of the five key steps of a *Gikuyu* marriage negotiation. Creswell (2007) has observed that a study of this nature intentionally samples a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research problem under study. In this respect, the study identified groups that were undertaking the practice and which were willing to allow the researcher to video or tape record the proceedings. The focus groups were constituted by bringing together at least six people who have been spokes persons during such negotiations. The members of each focus group were drawn from the same administrative region. The discussions were recorded and later translated and transcribed. The sample size therefore was five recorded negotiation sessions and five recorded focus group discussions which were a result of members' responses to some scheduled questions and topical issues.

2.5 Data collection

There were two main sources of data; focus group discussions and recordings from live negotiation sessions that the researcher participated in. The procedure of data collection involved seeking for a research permit from the National Council for Science and Technology. The researcher then presented herself at the County headquarters where she was allowed access to the population of Kiambu County. This paved way for an introduction to the *Gikuyu* council of elders Kiambu branch. These individuals were very instrumental in letting the researcher know where the negotiations were taking place and often times were involved in ensuring that permission for video recording was granted. Some even participated in the focus groups discussions.

2.5.1 Focus Groups

The discussions were centered on scheduled questions which were designed to assess the views of the spokesmen and women who have participated in marriage negotiations. These were done through five focus groups. The input was audio recorded. The scheduled questions had been designed to generate data that would make a discussion on language use and power relations possible. Focus groups allow researchers to study people in a more natural conversation pattern than typically occurs in a one-to-one interview. When combined with participant observation, they provide an opportunity for learning about groups and their pattern of interaction. In such a group, peoples share their views, perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes towards a concept, idea or service. Questions are asked in a group setting where participants are free to talk. This study had groups of at least six members, both men and women (deliberate effort was made to ensure the number was even). They were drawn from the same administrative region (division, sub-county) of Kiambu County in each case. The researcher was the moderator in all these discussions.

2.5.2Negotiation Sessions

The second source of data was video records of the various negotiation sessions. The recording captured the whole event but during transcription, aspects of language use, verbal and non-verbal, were more focused on in line with the objectives of the study. The sessions are five in

total, one from each of the five administrative regions of Kiambu County and each is focused on a different stage of the negotiation process although in some cases, different stages could be conducted within a single session.

3 Results and Discussions

Fairclough (1989) has observed that there is usually underestimation of the significance of language in the production, maintenance and change in the social relations of power and that there is need to increase consciousness of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others since consciousness is the first step towards emancipation. According to Thomas et.al. (2004), language is important in the construction of individual and social identities; a powerful means of social control. In Fairclough's (1989) view, language is important enough to merit the attention of all citizens. On the basis of this premise, this study illuminates language use with a view of arguing that it has potentialities that can be exploited in modern society to contribute to the achievement of not only social development but political and economic as well. The study focuses heavily on the implications of language use embedded within the conventions of marriage negotiation discourse and relates these to the development agenda envisioned in Kenya's vision 2030.

The key objectives of vision 2030 were to assess the potential of the different sectors (social, political and economic) and look at the feasibility of how to unlock the potentials for growth. The team of experts (who came up with the document) noted that social reforms are necessary in realizing and sustaining economic goals. Among the key areas noted towards this end are a focus on gender, youth and culture (among others), with specific aims of increasing participation of women in decision making, empowering them economically, reducing inequality and appreciating cultural practices that are constructive (among others). The structure of this document encourages Kenyans to dare to dream that the economic vision for Kenya can be achieved as envisioned in the blue print but is quick to caution that the foundation is in the moral values embedded in the social pillar (Kariithi, 2013). This study uses the discursive domain of marriage negotiation to demonstrate how the social, political and economic agenda would work together to make this dream a reality.

Language use according to Foucault (1977) gives shape and meaning to the world and our relationships in it. The power thereof enables us to make sense of ourselves and others. One of the social strategies of vision 2030 is increasing participation of women in decision making processes. While there is great potential in this initiative, there is also need to examine whether cultural values may hinder the Kenyan woman from exploiting such an opportunity. The study noted that in an equal opportunity forum with men, the woman tend to take a more passive role expecting the man to take up the cue and seize the opportunity. For instance the contribution of turn takings among the women during the focus group discussions was quite low compared to men as illustrated through the table below:

Table 3.1 Showing turn takings during the focus group discussions

Focus groups	Total turn takings	Males	Females
1	56	22 (39)*	34 (61)
2	24	14 (58)	10 (42)
3	32	26 (81)	6 (19)
4	39	33 (85)	6 (15)
5	25	17 (68)	8 (32)
TOTALS	176	112 (63.64)	64 (36.36)

* The digits in parenthesis represent percentage (%)

The danger could be if the woman gets contented in such complacency and is not keen to change. On the issue of empowering her by increasing the enterprising fund, this study argues that it may not yield results until she is made to feel that her contribution (starting from discussions) counts. Borrowing from Fairclough's (1989) argument, Kenya's development policy implementers cannot afford to ignore language and language use as empowering tools since such have the ability to unlock the potential in women.

The blue print too, envisions the strategy of reducing gender and regional inequality. Of interest to this study is gender inequality. This should start from an appreciation of the fact that due to our history, this is a reality that needs to be dealt with. Some of the linguistic elements used in the discourse under study have connotations that are easily associated with 'buying' and 'owning'. One such element is '*KUGURANA'* which is literally translated to mean buying as illustrated through the discourse excerpt below:

> **M1**:..All these activities marked that the bride is now fully given out and can be married any time. The ceremony being done in the open made the whole clan aware that the bride is fully paid up for; *'nimugure.'* The meat given to her to eat with her friends was a kind of a sign even to her friends.
> **M1:** =After the agreed bride wealth was paid, the groom would come with his friends to visit the bride. They would find she had made porridge which is to be given to his groom referred to as *'mugurani'* ((a term that is used to refer to a buyer of an item)).

FG 3

It is interesting to note that in this context, the woman is 'bought' and the man is a 'buyer' and that the vice versa cannot happen. This kind of interpretation was also observed in the program Monday Special (Hussein, 2013). Some of the panelists, in fact a member of the sitting parliament, argued that by paying bride wealth, the woman becomes "part of his property" and so according to him the constitution of Kenya is unfair in advocating for a 50 - 50 sharing of the

matrimonial property should the marriage be dissolved. A radio program '*Muiguithania*',(Gathoni,2013) also had a similar discussion where a number of women recounted how they had suffered in the hands of their husbands all in the name of 'having been paid bride wealth for'. It can clearly be observed that the practice has the potential to ignite some bitter taste in some men while language use in a sense does not make the situation any better leaving the matter subject to multiple interpretations. This study contends that language use could be at the root of the problem yet the same has the potential to provide solutions by defining individual and social identities; in a sense providing a means of social control (Thomas, et.al.2004). This way, aspects in the custom that are liable to abuse will be clearly interrogated.

Within our cultures as demonstrated through the marriage negotiation discursive domain are abilities that can be exploited for the attainment of vision 2030 development agenda. For example, through language use, people are able to build consensus (the negotiating parties finally agree), ability to consult (the spokesman listens and consults with other members of his team), power dynamics due to age are respected (Spokespersons are senior members with experience) restraint in the face of provocation (as demonstrated by the spokesman in the discourse excerpt below) among others.

> **BSPM**: =Good. Then bring '*ngoima*' too. We must teach our youth our custom.
> **GSPM:** (looking so defeated)) well, as I had said earlier:::
> **BSPM**: Listen::: what I know and there are witnesses here is that bride wealth goats must be escorted. Soon you shall come so that we determine how much each goat will go for and how many you will need to give me. Even then we shall require witnesses who are aware of the common trend. I am just advising you so that you come prepared. That however is discussion for next time. Right now I'm interested in '*ngoima.*'
> **GSPM**: I request that you give me time to go and prepare for that:::
> **BSPM**: We cannot talk without '*ngoima*.' We have two witnesses that this is a requirement. Do you want a third one? I want you to go out and consult members of your delegation.
> **GSPM**: Let me respond to your sentiments::
>
> **BSPM**: I don't want any response without '*ngoim*a':::: When I paid for my wife…

CASE 2

These factors demonstrate the potential for building 'a free and just society' (Government of the Republic of   Kenya, 2007 p.3).This way, language use will be legitimizing such existing social relations that rely on commonsense assumptions. It will also serve to bring out the ideological assumptions embedded and the power relations that underlie these conventions (Fairclough, 1989). While it is good to celebrate positive aspects of our culture that are in line with development and the changing times, Vision 2030 advocates for elimination of retrogressive aspects of culture. This study contends that even within a positive culture like bride wealth can be some aspects that are prone to abuse hence working against the good intentions in the vision. The study therefore proposes that while drawing from these cultures for a basis upon which values can be built, it is important to critically examine what we are 'borrowing' in case it is liable to abuse.

In pursuit of economic, social and political aspirations, Kenya envisions a formulation of values, goals and an ideology that will support the vision as a useful strategy. These will include "… an

affirmation of the religious, cultural and ethnic diversity of all Kenyans" (Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2007, p.22). The current study contends that although Kenya is multicultural, there are some practices that are generally common for instance; many communities observe the custom of bride wealth payment. It is interesting to note that the different communities emphasize on the same positive values such as honesty and hard work while encouraging avoidance of vices such as greed, among others. Such common grounds, this study argues, can form a relevant base upon which positive values and ideologies are founded and enhanced. Such a common ground can be founded also on the fact that Kenyan's are religious. This study observes that inherent in our people is an acknowledgement of the significance of God and that there is also ability in Kenyans to accommodate diversity. The study established that out of the data collected for this study, 20 per cent conducted their prayers according to the traditional faith, 20 per cent had a mixture of traditional and Christian while 60 per cent used the Christian faith as shown through Figure 1below:
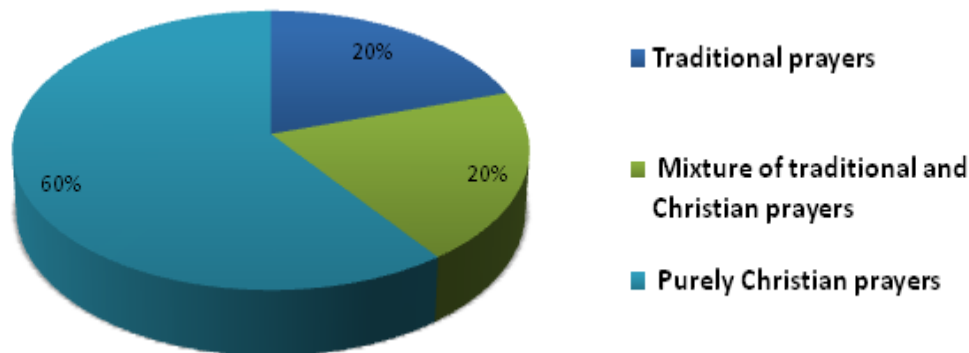

Figure 1: Showing the different types of prayers identified during data collection

The phenomenon of religion serves to demonstrate the *Agikuyu* recognition that there is a power beyond man that influences what happens to him. A noticeable feature was that in all the events (negotiations or focus group discussions), the role of religion cannot be under rated. Traditionally, before embarking on a bride wealth paying mission, the groom's father would gather his household and together facing Kirinyaga (Mount Kenya), they would pray that the animals they had gathered would get them a prudent wife (Leakey, 1977).The data collected for the study has several references to this phenomenon for instance the incident of a father bringing his family together for prayers before embarking on a bride wealth paying mission as shown below.

> ((..On the material day, the delegation gathered at the groom's father's home. The groom's father, the groom and the spokespersons held some talks and prepared themselves. The preparation involves putting the "goats" (in this case, money) together; furnishing the spokesman with any details he needed to know how to negotiate in their favour and prayer to invoke God's presence...))

CASE 2

> ((…Due to the influence of Christianity, all activities start with prayers, even the eating session. The groom's relatives are thus welcomed and given food. There are all sorts of delicacies and in particular '*njahi*' which are almost mandatory in such a Gikuyu ceremony…))

CASE 2

Family preacher: Due to the Christian influence, there is a short session of preaching which emphasizes on the need for family unity which is demonstrated in such a negotiation gathering where members of a family <u>come together</u>. According to the preacher<u>, the values of unity</u> are important for every family and since they are cemented by a negotiation gathering, this should therefore be emphasized and such customs should not be ignored.

CASE 3

F 2: Meanwhile, a herd of goats and sheep is selected to be taken to the bride's father on the appointed day together with beer called *'njohi ya njuurio'* (beer for the proposal). The herd is marked according to the clan. Before they leave for the prospective bride's home, the groom's father gathers his household and facing Kirinyaga (mt. Kenya) they would pray that the animals gathered would get for them a prudent bride. They would sacrifice and feast together as clan.

FG 5

This means that they were ready to part with something variable (goats) in exchange for an equally variable other (bride). They however recognize that they needed a higher power to aid them in achieving this mission. It is clear from the data that the *Agikuyu* do not undertake such serious missions without invoking God's help. In the data collected, all events start with some form of prayers. The only difference is that while some are Christian, others are traditional or a mixture of the two. Underlying all religious teachings are values and ideologies: these provided a useful base for examining the implications of the study in our society particularly regarding development issues. The policy implementers would do better if they tapped on such positive aspects from religion especially since all religions teach positive individual and societal values that would generally contribute to vision 2030. Language has the potentialities to enable such an endeavour to be achieved because as Fairclough (1989) argues significance of language in the production and maintenance of social relations of power is usually underestimated yet, if consciousness of how such contributes to domination of some people by others is increased, it can lead to emancipation of all, leading to attainment of the vision aforementioned.

Marriage negotiation discursive domain demonstrates a lot of potential for peace building, reconciliation and conflict management. Very rarely would the negotiating parties totally fail to agree. Out of the sample for the current study, all parties eventually agreed and the focus groups did not report any incidents known to them when such a thing happened. This is another ability in Kenyans that can be exploited to achieve, "respect and restraint…in resolving communal and personal disputes" (Government of the Republic of Kenya, 2007, p.25).This study argues that this is just one cultural practice that demonstrates a lot of potential for attainment of Vision 2030 which through language use is just within reach yet, and unfortunately so, it is a strategy that is often taken for granted.

Conclusion

The findings of the study provide valuable lessons that can benefit Kenya in its development agenda mapped out to be achieved by year 2030.The discursive domain demonstrates a lot of potential that can be exploited for that purpose. For example, ability to build consensus, ability to consult, respect for power dynamics such as age, restraint in the face of provocation, among others. These factors demonstrate the potential for building a free and just society through language use thus linguistics as an area of study contributing to social development. This way,

language use will be legitimizing existing social relations by relying on commonsense assumptions such as, very rarely would the negotiating parties totally fail to agree. Out of the sample for the current study, all parties eventually agreed. This study argues that this is just one cultural practice that demonstrates a lot of potential for attainment of Vision 2030 through language use. It urges that such strategies should not be taken for granted and that policy implementers would do better if they tapped on these positive abilities as they seek to increase consciousness of the significance of language in defining social relationships.

Acknowledgement

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