Language and Politics in Kenya: Restricted and Elaborated Codes

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Abstract

The following article discusses the relationship between language and politics in Kenya. Usage is categorised according to codes and Kenyan politics are defined linguistically.

Introduction

This paper attempts a socio-political analysis of language use in Kenya's politics. The political terminologies and the interpretations given in defining Kenya's politics. The interpretations help in categorizing the usage as either restricted or elaborated codes. This categorization arises out of the need to understand language as a tool that can be used to describe a community's social, economic and political order. It strives to define Kenya's politics from a linguistic point of view.

Restricted and Elaborated Codes

Language is a defining characteristic of man. It's communicative value in different context almost fully describes the users intentions and actions. The use of elaborated and restricted codes in communication raises a few questions of which the answers might not be themselves elaborate in this paper. Thus:

i)   What kind of societal relationship lead to the choice of a certain code?

ii) The code adopted is based and guided by which language planning processes?

iii) What type of relationships are created by these codes in the context in which they are used?

The social relations established influence the speakers use and choice of language and therefore the code to be used. Language used can be explained by considering the ability of the speaker to make choices among the linguistic options and his aim and purpose. Restricted codes do not allow for a detailed account or explanation of what one intends and thus deny the listener the right to an appropriate understanding of the pragmatic meanings. Its restricted nature allows one to pre-determine the speaker's intentions. Elaborated codes allow for a detailed and reasoned explanation which gives the listener a chance to full participation and choice making among the many options. It is not easy to predetermine the speakers intention until he completes saying what he intends. Both

codes have different influences in different contexts either socially, politically, attitudinal etc.

Certain general characteristics are evident in the use of restricted codes:

(i) (Personal) status i.e. leadership position - the speaker always strives to confirm his position in society. He would want to be as philosophical and abstract as possible.

(ii) Employing the services of a second party or an unfamiliar method to pass over certain information. The main player avoids a personal contact. The aims is to redirect the thinking and action of people to something else. Its mainly used in handling issues that sound sensitive.

(iii) This code strives to maintain the type of social relationship that exist and blocks any utterances aimed at creating change.

From a sociological point, the code used is a result of the form of relation and interaction established in the society - a measure of the social order.

The Kenyan Society characterised by among other things low education levels, illiteracy, poverty, political leaders have confined themselves to the use of restricted codes for purposes of maintaining the status quo. They exploit the inability of the people to interact fully and their incompetence in many political issues to justify and hold onto their positions. Lack of a directed language policy and planning has created a restricted linguistic society in Kenya. Much as English and Kiswahili are recognized, the level of code-switching between English and Kiswahili among our political leaders is not a measure of competence in both but a sign of incompetence in one of the languages - Kiswahili (the national language) being the victim. Elaborated code takes care of the listeners individual need to understanding concepts fully. For example, the late Tanzanian President, Nyerere J.K.(1969) expounds and relates the words AMANI (PEACE) and MAPINDUZI (CHANGE) so elaborately as follows:

A. ".....Change destroys what is in place, and therefore destroys PEACE: however, meaningful CHANGE is not possible without peace. And Peace is not possible in Africa without change; therefore Africa needs to seek for a solution which is difficult to come by because of the intricate relation and needs between PEACE and CHANGE.

Compare with the statement below which characterize Kenya's political talk:

B. "I told you that when we shall have many political parties (read multiparty democracy) tribalism will be on the fore".

Of interest in A and B is the relationship between PEACE and CHANGE and MULTI-PARTY AND TRIBALISM.

A gives a challenge to the listener and the choice to fully appreciate the delicate relationship between the two terms with regard to African politics. An elaborated relationship which is given a more pragmatic interpretation.

B is a very restricted relationship between the two terms because of the one sided interpretation of multi-partism. A gives more room for the listeners participation and choice than B in political activities nationally and internationally. The intention in B is to discourage the concept of multi-partism a term what was forced onto some of Kenya's political leaders. Characteristic (I) and (iii) fully fits into B. In situations where one party plays passive, restricted code can be fully employed since no one asks for details, while where both parties are active, then the elaborate code cannot be avoided. This is so because both parties strive to want to understand the other - his aims, intentions, purposes and the like.

Political Terminologies in Kenya

Language and more specifically the lexical choices are a powerful weapon that can be manipulated by

a certain group to show its satisfaction with or advance certain leadership styles with the intent of amassing popular support. The word choices made can be effectively used to change a people way of thinking and acting and hence their attitude. In so doing, this vocabulary items can be used to oppress or improve the society's social, economic and political status.

Political leaders have a lot of influence on the society and many of their followers and supporters believe in what they say. This believe is a result of certain actions arising from certain terminologies associated with them and which form the basis of their political believe that hardly changes. For example, the Late President Nyerere J.K. believed that Tanzania needed a society where Equality (Usawa) would be the guiding principle of the nation. He amplified this in his Ujamaa (Socialism) philosophy based on what he referred to as African Socialism. At the political level, his influence was so great that it created an identity of its own type among the Tanzanians different from the Kenyans especially in the use of language - Kiswahili. Words like Ndugu (Brother), Naomba(I beg) acquired an elaborated meaning and usage. 'Ndugu' was not restricted to mean brother in the sense of parental relations, but was used to refer to any other person - to create some form of equality. "Naomba" a polite way of requesting for something gained so much usage in daily interactions that the Kenyans Satirize the Tanzanians usage of it in statements like:

> "Naomba nikupeleke kortini - 'I beg to take you to court."

The usage of 'Ndugu' greatly reduced the tribal identification unlike Kenya where its use is restricted to parental relations.

The meanings attached to a particular terminology as used in society has a lot of bearing in determining the way a society is ordered. In Kenya, the noun MZEE (OLD MAN) has acquired a different political meaning. A President as young as 35 years old would be referred to as Mzee just like an old man of 80 years. The traditional respect accorded to the old has been transferred to political leaders that a speaker who uses 'Mzee' in his address is unlikely to be critical of the addressee (leader). Its usage in reference to a person in leadership position is restrictive. A community can be classified and understood on the basis of the vocabulary used in its relations - internally, nationally or internationally. The Elaborated or restricted nature of the vocabulary items used and the interpretations given to them determine the freedom and right given to the language user in using language to improve his status.

In Kenya, language as a basic right leaves a lot of questions unanswered - especially in political gatherings. Many politicians in an effort to justify their positions leave their messages hanging and the listener directionless or with little choice to make. Political terms are used in a restricted manner denying the people the right to understand themselves and their surrounding. In an area where choice should be the Key word, majority of the listeners - illiterate and semi-illiterate are left with no choice to make but take what is said in its literal sense. For instance, after the repel of Section 2(A) of the constitution of Kenya which allowed for multi-party democracy, the following political terms came into use by Key political leaders. (Put in Kiswahili and English equivalent in brackets).

i)	Vyama vingi (Multi-party)	Ukabila (Tribalism)
ii)	Siasa mbaya (Bad politics)	Maisha mabaya (Bad life)
iii)	Siasa nzuri (Good politics)	Maisha mazuri (Good life)
iv)	Maadamano (Demostrations)	Umwagikaji damu/vita (Blood shed//war)
v)	Demokrasia (Democracy)	(i) Ni ya bunge (Is for parliament) (ii) Nyigine ni ya Military(the other is for military meaning military rule)

The type of interpretations and meanings attached to this political terms does not allow for a person whose understanding of politics and political systems is poor to make any choice and therefore take a different direction from the one stated. Interpreting multi-party to mean tribalism is so restricted in meaning and used in such a way as to keep those who do not understand this operation away from embracing or making a choice between multi-partyism and any other system. Tribalism could only be a consequence of multi-partyism depending on how it is practiced. Two, Demostrations has very little to do with bloodshed or war. It would simply be explained as a people's way of expressing their sentiment either in support or against certain positions.

The pragmatic meaning of this terms have been deliberately restricted and misinterpreted with the intention of upholding certain political positions by the leaders. Political semantics in Kenya have for sometime been used to deny the people the right to language as a tool of understanding himself and his environment and therefore poor political socialization. This maybe explains why Kenya's political transition is dodged in tribalism. As Earl Stevick (1976) put it, that by speech we design great bridges and fight wars, we express our deep feelings and our spiritual aspirations and even set forth our most subtle linguistic themes. Indeed, we normally expect to influence ones thinking and the greatest light upon it is thrown by the study of language and more specifically the lexical choices made. Proper definition and interpretation of what is said is important in socializing a person linguistically and individually to be able to participate effectively in development activities and other changes around him for his own benefit and the community as a whole.

The use and choice of code as elaborated or restricted explains a community's action, believe, and order. Tribe and party have been synonymous in Kenyan politics in that different tribes are associated with particular parties because of their political ambitions. Maybe, an elaborated approach at explaining multi-party democracy would have helped change the tribal party affiliation. A question then arises, "Can one, at least initially go about a job without reference to the ways in which words are used?" Strawson (in Snook 1972:163) answers when he says, "the reliance upon a close examination of actual use of words is the best, and indeed the only sure way in philosophy" and language (own addition).

Examining the words calls for a selective choice and proper interpretation. Geach (in Snook 1972) emphasizes this well enough when he asserts that the central and typical application of the term "having a concept" are those in which a man is a master of a bit of linguistic usage. This reflect on the intentions of the speaker although certain choices could be deliberate. A majority of Kenya's political leaders have failed to treat language as an adjustable tool that can be refashioned to render it a better instrument in giving a healthy direction to political growth. The linguistic usage is categorically prescriptive as reflected in the restricted code which gives little room to make a choice. To realize political maturity in Kenya's political transition, a more descriptive linguistic usage has to be adopted hence elaborated code. This allows for a wider understanding and a chance to make choices from among the options.

Much as the speaker's intention determine his choice of elaborated or restricted codes, it is important to note that from a social and psychological understanding, language can be oppressive or a tool for better interaction and change. This depends on one, how it is used and two, the audience or listeners. However, Restricted code could in itself be a sign of the speakers incompetence at self expression with limited choice to make.

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