

## Shrewd Calculation of Membership Benefits: Negotiation of Identity in Eastleigh by Somali Refugee Teenagers.

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### Abstract

The effect of mass displacement has been creation of completely new types of human beings: people who root themselves in ideas rather than places and people who have been obliged to define themselves in various ways because of their predicament. This paper reflects the various identities the Somali refugee teenagers portray in Eastleigh a suburb in Kenya's capital city, Nairobi. The study uses interviews to uncover the language usage by the teenagers in various domains. Language is seen as signifying identity one wields at a particular point in time. Data is analysed using thematic content analysis and descriptive statistics. The findings show that the teenagers have multiple identities as survival strategies in Eastleigh.

**Key words:** Domain, Identity, Refugee, Power, Language

### 1.0 Introduction

The issue of identity has increasingly taken a prominent place in research lately. A common strand of such is the relationship between language and identity (Norton, 2000; Pavlenko and Backledge, 2004; Afful, 2006). Language choice is not only an effective way of communicating, but as people use a language, they are reconnecting with other people, situations and power configurations. As a result, the choice of language enables people to maintain and change language boundaries and personal relationships, and construct and define 'self' and 'other' within the broader political economy and historical context (Li, 2008). Although identity has been a subject of sociolinguistic studies, the links between refugees and identity has received little attention. This study explores identities which come to play in the teenagers' lives in Eastleigh. In this paper, we look at identity options the teenagers have in a multilingual set-up (Kenya), having been dislocated by the war from a monolingual Somalia.

Dyers (2000, 2007) argue that there is an assailable link between people's languages and their identities. Therefore, the use of more languages signals two or more identities of the speaker simultaneously (Ncoko et al., 2000). Dyers (2007) further points out that the clearest signals of groups and individual identities is the languages that dominate in the intimate domains of language use such as the home, in conversation with family, neighbours and close friends. The underlying question is to find out whether Somali language continues to remain vital as part of the teenagers' lives and identities despite the presence of other powerful languages or whether even in intimate domains there is a shift in language power differentials, the resultant effect being shift in identity.

Domains in sociolinguistics refer to spheres of life in which verbal and non-verbal interaction occur (Dyers, 2007) and they include the areas of work, family, school, friends and wider communication. The domains of the family and the home are fundamental to the building of identity through socialization (Boxer, 2002). The language(s) through which children are socialised initially within the family therefore play a crucial role, not only in shaping the personal identities, but also in ensuring the continuous vitality of the Somali language. The vitality of a language can also be considered by the number of domains in which it is used, especially those regarded to be intimate, for example the friendship domain. The fact that the Somalis are a close-knit community further enables the language to thrive. Their status as refugees also creates unity as they try to avoid unfavourable encounters, for example, with the Kenyan police. This is also supported by Li (2008), who points out that speakers feel a sense of identity-security in a culturally familiar environment, but insecurity in a culturally unfamiliar environment, thus satisfactory identity negotiation outcomes include the feelings of being understood, valued, and supported and being respected.

How teenagers construct their identity can also be understood as a process of framing in which language choice in different domains play a part. A frame, according to Dyers (2007), is a schema of interpretation that enables individuals to locate and perceive identity and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large. As a result then, the identity options the teenagers make are negotiations based on daily occurrences. Drawing on Dyers (2007), the study argues that the teenagers reflect linguistic identities of their family members, if they are responsive to societal change

## 2.0 Methodology

The study was based in Eastleigh a Kenyan suburb where majority of Somali refugees reside. The population comprised of all the refugee teenagers. A specific sample of thirty (30) respondents was drawn using snowball sampling. In addition, a friend-of-a friend technique of identifying the respondents was used because they live in a lot of secrecy. Data was collected by means of interviews. The teenagers were to give various languages they use in the home, family, school, and the mosque. Identity is seen to be framed based on the language used in the various domains. Data was analyzed using thematic content analysis and descriptive statistics.

## 3.0 Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Cost-benefit Analysis Identity

Li (2008) asserts that low ethnic vitality within a group and low identification with the in-group leads to the acquisition of the majority group language. But does it apply to the case of Somalis? The Somali teenagers are seen to be emulating what Fishman (1989) considers as 'shrewd calculation of membership benefits' earlier alluded to, where the teenagers choose an identity at a particular time based on the cost and benefit analysis. For example, on one occasion one teenager was not willing to participate in the study because he did not want to make his identity known. The teenager thought the researchers were looking for Somali refugees in order to repatriate them or report to the police hence declared he was a Somali from Kenya. Later, the same respondent turns up claiming to be a Somali from Somalia. The respondent was trying to portray an identity he thought would benefit him. This is by participating in the study and making his views known as he had seen it as having no harm. Further, the composition of the teenagers' domains had a strong and greater explanatory value for the language choices. Pavlenko and Backledge (2006) observe identity as fluid and performed and reconstructed in any social interaction (domain) and therefore the language choices the teenagers make is a construction of their social identity. This is contrary to Auer's (2005) assertion that there has been discontent with variationist sociolinguistic models in which linguistic heterogeneity is explained through correlations with pre-established social categories such as socioeconomic status or ethnicity. Heller (1998), Woolard (1985) and Norton (1993) recognise the fluidity of identities as more applicable and thus the result of the multilingualism of the Somali teenagers is a reflection of the multiplicity of identities. Language, especially mother tongue, is an integral part of collective identities such as cultural or ethnic and the maintenance of first language across generations is a key factor to the maintenance of such identities (Lanza and Svendsen, 2007).

The study further agrees with Lanza and Svendsen (2007) that identities are constructed along various alignments such as age, gender, social status, geographic, religious, and political and sexual orientation. This causes individuals to have multiple group identities: multiple ethnic, personal and social identities which fluctuate in different situations. Thus, language choices made are acts of identity (Auer, 2005) and governed by other factors: language situation, domains of language use, social network ties, themes and purposes. The individual identity reconstruction is also not a free play but restricted by various factors such as symbolic value.

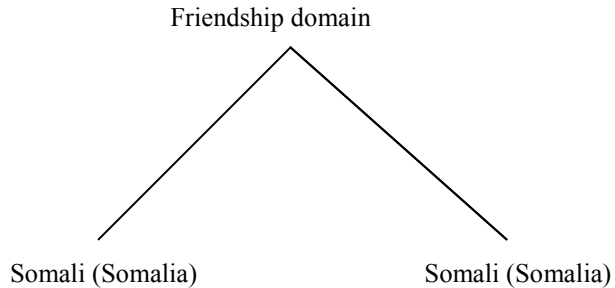
### 3.2 Name based identity

Names are also seen as markers of social identities. Aceto (2002) points out those names are acquired at birth through a culturally accepted arrangement and often remain with the person until they are changed through the act of marriage or other means. Such names acquired later are regarded as secondary names and are normally given by family members' friends, community religious organizations and school acquaintances (Afful, 2006). Names are therefore seen to indicate an identity which the teenager would wish to foreground. The teenagers have used names which are typically from Somalia: Abdul, Zam Zam, Zadiq, Ahmed, Qadhar, and Omar. The fact that the Somali teenagers have not changed their names is an indication that they still identify with their origin. Afful (2006) in Ghana established that teenagers' identities include religion, historical, gender and ethnic based identities.

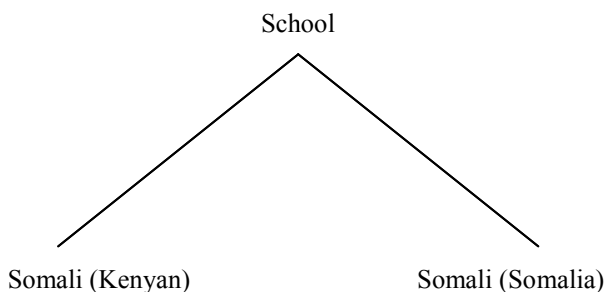
### 3.3 Ethnic Based Identity

A teenager in an immigrant country faces complex matters of adaptation in both culture and origin in a new country. He/she develops an identity as a member of an ethnic group within the larger society which enables him/her to use his or her first language. The teenagers then face a dilemma in choosing language in a multilingual situation. The study argues that the social domains and language choices signalled by the teenagers is an expression of the identity they would wish to adopt. Thus, mother tongue retention can be considered as a sign of identity the teenagers wish to project. Ethnicity is difficult to define (Fishman, 1971 and Lanza and Svendsen, 2007); but we take Lanza and Svendsen's (2007) definition of it, whereby it is seen as self-identification and how others identify you. The teenagers would respond when asked about their identity in Kiswahili, 'Mi ni Msomali kutoka Somalia ..... Pia naongea Kisomali' (I am a Somali from Somalia and I speak Somali). This supports the view that language is also a marker of ethnic identity. However, the language situation in the study is a much more complex one in all the domains. All the teenagers reported a more complex language situation than in the officially monolingual Somali.

The extent to which the teenagers choose their social ties (friends) in the social domains is an expression of who wants to be identified with whom. The teenagers were to choose the most important links in their lives in each social set up and most of the teenagers chose others from their ethnic group. These contacts were people who were very important to them and are consulted on various important issues affecting the respondent. This is reflected in the social networks of an interviewee in two domains which are considered as ‘free’ – where an individual is not limited by social conditions – as shown below:



In the diagram above, the respondent gave two people who are important and intimate to him in the friendship domain. The diagram indicates that the friends are Somalis. Therefore, for this particular teenager at this point in time, he wishes to be identified with Somalis. Another teenager interacts with a Somali from Somali and a Somali from Kenya below:



This teenager indicated above associates with Somalis from Somalia and Kenya to signify the closeness with the people they wished to identify with.

A further interesting aspect of ethnic based identity is derived from the teenagers categorically referring to themselves as Somalis, ‘Mi ni Msomali kutoka Somalia’, which translates to ‘I am a Somali from Somalia’. Doran (2004) refers it to ‘ethnic specificity’. Indeed, given that the status of Somalis as refugees in an urban area which is ‘illegal’ underscores the aspect of ethnicity as a legitimate aspect of identity.

The interviews conducted showed that the 60% of the teenagers identified themselves as Somalis whereas a small number, 20%, would wish to be identified as Kenyans. 20% were not sure about their identity. Those who identified themselves as from Somalia would not even wish to be married to fellow Kenyans. The teenagers strongly feel that they would wish to be regarded as Somalis. This sense of ethnic identification enables them to chart their way forward. They feel their language is very important because it helps them maintain their culture and values. Their culture is different from the Kenyan culture and it is critical during the adolescence period when there is so much peer influence that orients them to Kenyan culture. For example, the Muslim culture in Kenya, as one parent commented, is not ‘strict’ and there are so many kinds; ‘Indian, Kikuyu and many others’. The Somalis feel that the Kenyan Muslim culture is ‘liberal’, and one does not have to strictly adhere to the tradition, unlike in Somalia. Boshner (1997) discovered that the degree to which the immigrant youth are able to maintain their ethnic identity while adapting to the majority culture has often been seen as critical to their self-esteem, psychological well-being, successful adjustment to their new society and academic success.

Ethnicity can also be understood within the social practices in the domains. Drawing on De Fina (2007), the study argues that code switching is a central marker of ethnicity. In this model, De Fina (2007) points out that participants in the social interaction do identity work and align themselves or distance themselves from social categories of belonging depending on the context of interaction and insertion in the outer world. In this regard, ethnicity is attributable to individuals and therefore shaped and negotiated in specific contexts. The teenagers would code switch to their Somali language as seen in order to cut out others in the context. This implies that language and ethnicity transforms in varied domains. Ethnicity is invoked and negotiated by individuals and groups in different circumstances, creating boundaries from food to accent (De Fina, 2007) and hence it indexes affiliation. Blommaert (2005) further says that ethnicity should be studied in social contexts to establish how people portray themselves and wish to be identified. It is with this understanding that ethnicity of the Somali teenagers in the different domains is constructed.

As much as ethnicity is negotiated, it is indexed in subtle ways and often contradicts expectations and stereotypes about received ethnic boundaries (De Fina, 2007). From the data, the study argues that being a Somali may not necessarily be primordial but circumstantial. For example, one respondent claimed to be a Somali from Kenya. Upon interviewing and getting enmeshed into the rights and obligations (accepting as part of the study), the respondent actually agreed he was a refugee. In this case, he thought that admitting to be a refugee could put him in trouble, but when he realised that ethnic identity was not a threat to him, he produced his real identity. Thus, in other subsequent cases identified, it was clear that the teenagers when engaging in different activities are able to enact, project and negotiate identities.

Entertainment, particularly in activities related to one's ethnic group, is a positive orientation towards one's culture. The male teenagers particularly group themselves in the evening in the neighbourhood to chew *Khat* a substance which is tobacco-like and chewed to keep one awake. In such groups the teenagers specifically speak Somali. This is equivalent to what De Fina (2007) referred to in her study as the '*circolo de briscola*', a group of Italian men who used to group themselves together to play a game. The teenagers meet in the places that underlie Somali ethnicity. The girls also like relaxing at home with their teenage Somali counterparts to chat and share ideas. The refugee community thus offer us a privileged position for observation of the relationship between language and identity. Cameron (1995) suggests that change in the language of people is brought about by behavior and attitude of the actual speakers. Observation of the behavior and consideration of these should be incorporated in the quantification to give a fine-grained analysis which reveals linguistic norms by institutions and socializing practices; how the norms are apprehended, accepted, resisted and subverted by individual actors and what their relation is in relation of construction of identity (Cameron, 1997:62). The teenagers have close-knit networks and are expected to maintain vernacular varieties (Milroy, 1980). Could the findings be related to the lifestyles of the community?

The respondents could also at times point out 'others' as not Somalis as opposed to 'themselves'. For example, in the process of snowballing, one could encounter statements such as, 'Mi ni Msomali kutoka Somali na najua Kisomali Kamili' which is said in Kiswahili and translates as 'I am a Somali from Somalia and speak real Somali'. Such an utterance depicts the teenager as trying to construct what he is, as opposed to what he is not and what others think of him. It seems also that 'Somaliness' could be seen as a continuum. There are those who are 'more Somali' like the said respondent and others are 'less Somali'. The Somali teenagers are sentimental about their ethnic group and hence, they use language as a strategy to attribute their ethnicity and therefore strive to retain their language at all costs.

In the process of trying to assert their ethnic group, the teenagers use their culture to exclude and include others as belonging or outsiders. For example, they look at the other teenagers (Somalis from Kenyan) as 'dressing badly' and hence, see themselves as different from them. They say such form of dressing cannot be allowed back in Somalia. They also claim that they don't participate in such activities as taking alcohol, or going to entertainment places like discos, as this is against their ethics. In fact, one teenager claimed that Somalis don't contract HIV! This she claimed is a punishment from Allah for those considered to be immoral and who have abandoned their cultures. Such responses and observations made by the teenagers actually confirm that they hold their ethnicity in high esteem. The teenagers also take their language as one of the requirements for being included in the larger ethnic group. They claim that they can't talk to their parents and other relatives in a language other than Somali, otherwise they risked being disowned by the entire Somali community. For example, one respondent very categorically stated, 'If I don't speak Somali, how can I survive in Eastleigh? It is like being deaf'. The teenagers acquire the other languages because they are obliged to do so by their parents, the school, and other institutions.

As much as the teenagers are affiliated to their ethnic community, they also realise that being in Kenya as refugees is part of them and hence, they have to devise strategies in order to balance their needs. This calls for multilingualism, one language for 'their own' and the rest of the languages 'with them' in reference to those who don't share their ethnic identity. Thus, they are characterised as having monolithic ethnicity and partial multilingualism. This means that they consider themselves as Somalis from Somalia first before other identities come to play in order to project other images. Thus, we conclude by legitimising Skuttnab-Kangas's (2000) assertion that language is a differentiator of identity and culture. Linguistic capital also plays an important role. Languages wield different statuses and values depending on the societal ranking based on the cultural and linguistic capital that is perceived to have.

### 3.4 Religious Based Identity

Somalis are predominantly Muslims. Religious identity can also contribute to a sense of collective identity and language maintenance among the Somali teenagers. Islam functions as a pivot for them all, offering solid support in difficult times and providing cultural and social linkage with other Somalis. Other researchers have found similar results (Lanza and Svenden, 2007; Clyne and Kipp, 2006). It is at religious festivals like Ramadhan and Eid-UI-Fitr, that Muslims arrange social meetings. Islam also gives the Somalis a sense of belonging and through

it they come to know the location of other Somalis in varied places. As result, the teenagers are able to speak their language. Religion thus takes on a central role for many Somalis in Eastleigh and could potentially lead to language maintenance.

The Islamic religion to the teenagers seems to be a form of identity which is not negotiable. Most of the time, the teenagers would make a clear-cut statement to say, 'Mimi ni Muislamu', which translates as 'I am Muslim'. In fact, they view changing one's religion as a form of resistance to the moral values the person upholds, which are dictated by the Quran. It seems like the religious practices strongly make them identify as Somalis, stemming from their way of dressing.

Religion is also another marker of ethnicity. One teenager very categorically stated that 'Sisi wasomali wote ni waislamu', meaning all Somalis are Muslims. The majority of Somalis are Muslims and the teenagers seem to take this to mean that being a Somali means practising Islam. The religion also dictates the dress code, food and lifestyles of the Somali teenagers. One teenager kept on referring to food offered in the school as 'our and their food'. Islam prescribes food which is supposed to be eaten by those who are affiliated to it. In another instance, one of the teenagers was criticising the cultures of other Kenyan teenagers, saying that they dress 'inappropriately' – in tight pants and short skirts, and they spoil their hair. To her, being a Somali, and for that matter a Muslim, is a very 'ideal' culture.

### *3.5 Multiplicity of Identities and Language Change.*

Identities among displaced populations especially if the duration is prolonged are continuously changing – being created, recreated, negotiated, and adapted in response to changing circumstances as earlier alluded to in chapter one. Their continuous identification and links with the sending communities place the migrants in situations where they continue to reconfigure spaces and redefine local and foreign (Coutin, 2005). Integration is a one-way process where the immigrants opt to become part of the hosting country. Thus, in the study, the integration which is taking place is what Wang (2002) portrays as a process of cultural change in ethnic group without losing identity where the group is brought into active and coordinated compliance with the dominant group's ongoing activities and objectives but still retain a larger part of their identity.

The ethnolinguistic identities of the Somali teenagers are constructed at home and strengthened by the contacts at home and the general community networks. However, such an arrangement is challenged through education, friendship, and religious ties. This is supported by Bourdieu's (1990) assertion that the dominant group's language is more prestigious and valued. Hence, the individual is an agent of change of their own identity and use their linguistic resources to resist or accept identities depending on how these position them (Pavlenko and Backledge, 2007) in the different social set-ups. As a result, an individual eventually wields multiple identities in different contexts/domains.

The study argues that identities are not given entities, static properties, or finished projects but are rather practical accomplishments that are constructed and reconstructed in everyday conversations (Georgakopoulou, 2006). Critical to becoming a member of a social domain, one has to develop knowledge and behaviour expected, which includes language. But in the case of the Somalis, the teenagers need to fit into their Somali ethnic group as well as the wider Kenyan society, hence the need to also preserve the knowledge and the behaviour which is similar to their own back in their country. Languages bridge the gap through shared meanings in the process of communication. The teenager's country of origin (Somalia) uses the Somali language exclusively, whereas Kenya is a multilingual country. The teenagers seem to have integrated so well and thus have acquired all the languages which enable them in Eastleigh to have multiple identities, i.e. Somali, Kenyans, Muslim, student, friend, etc. This is a result of role relations that the teenagers adopt at various times. Role relations put one in different subjective positions and thus have different expectations and also language differences. This calls for different languages to be used. A student will use English and Kiswahili in school with his/her friends and use Somali at home with parents and relatives.

The teenagers' places of identity construction have been categorised as those in the public space (school, friendship, and neighbourhood) and the private space, which include home and family (Giampapa, 2004). As languages are used to signal identity, the teenagers use the various languages to negotiate for their identity in order to suit the conditions that pertain to all domains. Some identities are negotiable and others are not. For example, in the school and the mosque domain, the teenagers have no option because the languages to be used are dictated by the dominant powers. When they are in the private domains, the teenagers are basically Somalis and they speak their mother tongue. This is what Giampapa (2004) refers to as claims to identities, positions and spaces within their worlds. For example, a teenager says: "I am a Somali even if I live in Kenya. One day my country will be at peace and when I change how will my people treat me in my homeland?"

The respondent in the above excerpt sees himself as a Somali and whatever he is undergoing is temporary. The hope is that one day they will relocate their native land and reunite with people in Somali and hopes that things will come to normalcy and hence has an imagined identity.

#### 4.0 Conclusion.

The study reflects the Somali teenagers and the various identities. Language choice is seen as an act of identity. By using various languages, the teenagers were seen to portray identities they would wish to take up. The resultant effect is multiplicity of identities discussed under various themes.

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