Chapter 11

Translanguaging and Negotiation of Ethnicity:
Reproduction of Hegemonic Structures in Communication Media

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ABSTRACT

Looking at the way the new communication technology has dominated Kenyan's daily lives, it is hard to imagine how they functioned without it. In spite of these developments, the traditional institutions that mediate social relations of power remain unchanged. Essentially, the new communication technologies have only succeeded in providing a new arena where the traditional discourse is reproduced. Standing at the intersection between these new technologies and communication is language—the medium that facilitates interpersonal interaction both in traditional modes of interaction and in digital interactions.

We shall be examining how the linguistic practices interact with these new communication technologies. By emphasizing on the centrality of language in mediating social interactions, we argue that post-traditional discourse fails to extricate itself from cultural hegemony due to global trends that favor the hegemonic languages as well as the ingrained habitus[1] that predisposes Kenyans to reproduce linguistics structures inspired by the discourse of power of hierarchy of languages in the linguistic marketplace. Our discussion opens with a brief overview of the place of language in a technological world.

INTRODUCTION: LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

In the past decade, communication technology in Kenya has experienced a dramatic growth. The CIA World Factbook data shows that in 2008, there were 252,300 phone lines, 16 million mobile phone subscribers and 3.36 million internet users in Kenya. This unprecedented development in new communication technologies has completely altered the interaction habits and information access among Kenyans. The government control on the flow of information is diminishing as the industry unleashes innovative products that are

redefining the nature and forms of interaction, information gathering and consumption as well as the way people conduct their daily business. Institutions and services that were previously controlled by the powerful elite are slowly being demystified and sometimes dismantled. Kenyans no longer have to resign themselves to censored information, thanks to increasing access to new communication technology. In the economic sector, the poor farmers do not have to put up with middlemen and brokers to come and determine the price of the produce as they can easily monitor the market trends without making a single trip.

The marginalized rural poor who for a long time have been shut out by the banking industry can now send and receive money on their mobile phones. Looking at the way the new communication technology has dominated Kenyan's daily lives, it is hard to imagine how they functioned without it. In spite of these developments, the traditional institutions that mediate social relations of power remain unchanged. Essentially, the new communication technologies have only succeeded in providing new arena where the traditional discourse is reproduced. Standing at the intersection between these new technologies and communication is language—the medium that facilitates interpersonal interaction both in traditional modes of interaction and in digital interactions.

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With respect to communication technology, Walther (2004) offers three rationales for studying language and social psychology. First is to interrogate how technology affects communication, use of language and resultant processes in order to see if it imposes, alters or changes the nature of conversation, relationships, attitudes or outcomes that are shaped by communication transactions. The second reason is that it illuminates the users' triumph in the control of technology during the transformation of one symbolic system to another while the third rationale is that studying language and social psychology enables us to adapt technology to make communication more effective. These rationales scaffold our discussion of the dialectics of ideological hegemony and communication technology. In essence, language users in a multilingual setting exploit linguistic resources to challenge the hegemony of mainstream interactive norms while at the same time using communicative technology to engage in linguistic practices that reconstitute hegemonic structures. This chapter focuses on translanguaging and the consumption of ethnic discourse by Kenyans at home and in the Diaspora. An understanding of the intersection between language and ethnocultural identity allows us to understand the resilience of ethnic languages as they fight for survival in a linguistic environment dominated by transnational languages of wider communication. Do these new technologies adapt themselves to operate in a multilingual environment or do people adapt their everyday communicative norms in order to operate in a technological world?

It is perhaps important to point out that even before the coming of technology, human interaction as far as languages are concerned has been characterized by transformations as speakers modify their languages to reflect their realities. As new phenomena prompt linguistic modification, the symbolic representation of phenomena that do not feature in everyday discourse drift away from the speakers' semiotic system instigating linguistic changes with far reaching ramifica-

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