

## **Second Language Acquisition Barriers: A Functional Alternative Language Hypothesis**

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### **Abstract:**

**Background:** The objective of this investigation was to look at hinderances to second language acquisition within multilingual speech communities. The paper proposes a hypothesis called **functional alternative language hypothesis** as an explanation for some of the hinderances in acquiring some languages within these communities. Many countries have a multilingual language situation. Research has shown that members of these speech communities do not acquire the languages spoken in their environment with a similar emphasis. Some languages receive more prominence than others. Some researchers aver that a reason for this is attitude. This paper presents the need to look at this phenomenon from a different viewpoint. It is possible that the inability to attain fluency in those languages is inhibited by a functional alternative language. The concept of functional alternative is borrowed from the corporate world and refers to a situation where if there is a functional alternative commodity in competition with another commodity, then the value of that commodity reduces due to functional competitiveness.

### **Methods**

The investigation was done within East Africa and specifically some parts of Kenya. An analysis was done on the mastery of Kiswahili language in some parts of western Kenya. Previous studies had shown that these areas have a lower mastery of Kiswahili compared to other parts of the country despite the fact that it is both national and official language in Kenya. A study was carried out to establish which languages are commonly used in the daily activities within those areas. The aim was to find out if the speaking of these other languages had an effect on the speaking of Kiswahili

### **Results:**

The findings were that in these areas, there has been use of functional alternative language to the extent that people do not necessarily need to learn Kiswahili to be able to transact business or communicate their needs. Some of the functional alternative languages are ethnic languages and English which for a long time has been the official language in Kenya.

### **Conclusion:**

This paper suggests that in order to make the use of Kiswahili more prominent in areas where it is not in Kenya like parts of Nyanza province, the use of functional alternative languages should be reduced or discouraged.

**Key Words:** Second language, functional alternative, hypothesis, Kiswahili.

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Many experts in the field of linguistics have for a long time grappled with the phenomenon of second language acquisition. One of the reasons why this has been a concern is that in multilingual speech communities, the levels of competence in the languages spoken show a marked difference from one person to another. The levels also differ in mastery between persons speaking the same language. Many suggestions have been made as the reasons why this happens. Many of these reasons are based on Krashen's hypothesis of second language acquisition and Chomsky's cognitive theory of language acquisition.

Some key points in those works include; relationship between languages, input, linguistic universals, grammatical universals, cultural theory and identity theory (Brown 2000).

An analysis of the above-mentioned works seems to indicate that the following are the major contributors to the level of second language acquisition; age, gender, teaching style, personal character, motivation, the input in teaching and the effects of first language (Gass&Selinkker 2008)

While it is true that the above mentioned issues could contribute to the level of competence in acquiring second language, there is need to delve deeper to be able to explain why some people or even groups

of people fail to achieve desirable levels of second language despite motivators that should help them acquire the language easily.

This paper proposes a hypothesis called **Functional alternative language hypothesis**.

This hypothesis is based on the premise that if there is an alternative language that can meet the needs of someone who is trying to learn a specific target language in a multilingual speech community, then that alternative language if it is functional is likely to act as an impediment to the learning of the target language. The paper further attempts to explain how the hypothesis can be used to explain the difficulties experienced by learners of Kiswahili in certain regions within the republic of Kenya. This hypothesis could be useful especially to those conducting research on second language learning in other regions of the world among multilingual speech communities.

## **II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Second Language Acquisition**

Some experts have suggested that the process of learning a second language is more or less similar to first language acquisition (Dulay & Burt 1974). Other researchers agree with this view that indeed the process does not exhibit a lot of difference from what someone goes through while acquiring the first language (Corder 1975, Ndahi 1982). However, the process according to experts has some inbuilt inhibitions or barriers as is the case with many other processes. This perhaps explains why researchers have put a lot of effort in the issue of barriers to second language acquisition with a mind to address the inhibition. (Chomsky 1965) Explained that children are born with innate ability to acquire language. The assumption is that the language Chomsky was referring to here is the first language. Second language acquisition depends on other factors that may change depending on age, environment, economic activities and the social situation in general. Changes in the factors mentioned above could lead to the ease or difficulty in acquiring a second language.

In his behavioral theory (Skinner1938) asserts that any human behavior can be learnt by the processes of motivation, response to that motivation through negative or positive reward in his classical conditioning experiments. In Skinners experiments which contributed to this theory, the objective was to make the subject develop desirable habits as a result of the rewards each time the habit was elicited. According to Skinner this theory was important in explaining how people learn language. It is easy to understand Skinners argument, by looking at language as a means one uses to obtain one's needs. The needs being the motivator so that the more one learns, the more one gets satisfied by getting what they require as a result of use of language. This view however, differs from that of Chomsky (1965) who puts up an argument for nature; that humans are born with that ability to learn language and that this ability is somehow embedded in the brain.

Our view is that society is dynamic and there are many changes that have occurred in society that need to be taken into account in explaining the entire process of second language acquisition. One example is where there is migration of people from one place to another interacting with people who speak languages which are different from the first language of the immigrants. In the absence of interpreters as is usually the case in diplomatic circles, the only option open to them is to learn the new language to enable him/her engage in activities within the new speech community. The learning of the new language in that scenario is inspired by needs of the learner. Further to that, economic activities have changed to the extent that language has acquired a new role in facilitating people's economic needs. Despite Chomsky's views therefore, it is important to mention that language is a social issue and therefore it is difficult to evade social factors in explaining its use and development. Language acquisition in this discussion leans towards the functionality of language in the society.

### **The Concept of Functional Alternative**

The concept of functional alternative is not new as it has been used in other disciplines including sociology where it is explained in Collins dictionary of sociology 2006 as any institutional arrangements seen as fulfilling the same function in answering the essential needs of a society or a social system. It applies in economics too especially in decision to buy certain goods and not the others. This concept is applied in making decisions on various life activities in human life. It is mainly tied to an attempt to acquire a need as put against the actual ability of the person to acquire that need.

It is generally believed that it is in the nature of human beings to have more than one alternative for whatever endeavor they engage in so that when one fails, they operationalize the other commonly called plan B. In the purchase of commodities for example, goods are obtained depending on the economic ability of the purchaser. This does not however mean that the buyer could not purchase more if they had the financial ability. A purchaser of a quarter kilo of beef could buy more if he/she had the financial ability to do so. Purchasing a quarter kilo therefore is based on the fact that this purchaser is at a financial level that is lower than the ability to buy a kilo. This argument assumes that this purchaser could do with more beef but has limitations.

Another way of looking at it is that if the beef is expensive to the extent that the buyer cannot afford, then he/she would buy some other cheaper type of food even though it may not serve the same purpose as the

beef. What this buyer chooses to purchase then is a functional alternative that is available in the market. The decision of the purchaser to go for the alternative is not based on the attitude he/she has towards the commodity he/she could not purchase but rather the availability of an alternative that requires less effort to obtain.

In language the clarity of this idea can be seen from the theory of language as a communication tool as advanced by Hymes (1972). That theory explained what a speaker of a language needs to know so as to communicate effectively within a speech community.

Another theory that is important in this case is the functional language theory of Halliday (1970). He explained seven functions which children who are learning language for the first time derive from language.

They include;

- i. Instrumental-expressing needs
- ii. Regulatory-influencing the behavior of others,
- iii. Interactional-forming relationships
- iv. Personal-expressing opinions or emotions
- v. Heuristic-seeking information and asking questions
- vi. Imaginative-expressing creative language
- vii. Representational-giving information facts

These aspects of functions of language as expounded by Halliday are important in understanding how people decide which language to use in a multilingual environment.

When a speaker is confronted with more than one language to learn, most of the times the decision on which one to use will depend on the functions of that particular language in the context of the speaker's day to day activities. Among those languages that the speaker needs to learn, there is likely to be one that is higher in the value chain as far as its functionality to the learner is concerned.

Function therefore is a very important motivator in second language acquisition. In most multilingual societies there is often pressure to learn all the languages spoken in those speech communities. Despite that, if a member of the speech community utilizes some of them and satisfies all his/her functional needs, then he/she is most likely to use those and ignore the others. This preferred language then becomes the functional alternative since it enables him/her to meet all the needs he/she has and therefore makes the other languages within the multilingual environment less important.

### **Languages in a Multilingual Community**

This would be clearer by looking at a hypothetical situation where speaker S is expected to learn languages L1, L2 and L3. In daily social interactions S discovers that it is possible to satisfy all his needs by using L1 and L3. L1 here represents the first language. In that scenario, L2 is ignored significantly thereby reducing its value because the functionality of L3 satisfies the needs of S. L3 then becomes the functional alternative language.

It's important to mention here that the reason for ignoring of L2 is not as a result of the attitude the speaker S has towards the language, rather it is as a result of the functionality of L3. A number of researches done in the past have tried to explain the ignoring of L2 by bringing in the concept of attitude and ignoring the crucial concept of function of the languages within the multilingual societies. Oroujlou and Vahedi 2011, Hosseini and Pourmandnia 2013. Wamalwa 2020, Wamalwa, Kevogo and Kevogo 2013. We shall now go on to demonstrate this argument using Kiswahili, a national and official language in Kenya which despite its status has not been mastered to desirable levels in some parts of the country. This hypothesis could offer an explanation on why this is the case.

### **III. METHOD**

The investigation was done within East Africa and specifically selected areas of Nyanza province of Kenya. A survey was done on the mastery of Kiswahili language among youth, middle aged and the elderly in parts of Siaya, Kisumu and Homabay counties. The subjects who participated in the study were required to state which languages they commonly used in their daily activities. The aim was to find out if the speaking of these other languages had an effect on the speaking of Kiswahili.

### **IV. RESULTS**

The table below shows language use among different age groups of people within the area of study. The youth refers to those between the ages of 12-25, middle between the ages of 30-45 and the elderly between the ages of 50-65. It can be seen from this table that Dholuo, and English are the most commonly used languages within this area. Among the youth, *sheng* which is colloquial commonly used by the youth in Kenya is spoken although not as commonly as it is spoken in urban set ups.

**Table no 1**

AGE GROUP	SHENG	DHOLUO	ENGLISH	KISWAHILI
YOUTH	20%	20%	40%	20%
MIDDLE	05%	50%	30%	15%
ELDERLY	-	70%	25%	5%

## V. DISCUSSION

### **Functional alternative languages in Kenya**

Kenya, is a multilingual country with more than forty languages. This has contributed to difficulties in making clear decisions on government language policy especially in education. In many parts of the country people speak a minimum of three languages. Of course, a close analysis shows that the fluency or mastery of the languages differ depending on the function-a matter which is the subject of the discussion in this paper. In many regions in the country, the first language is that of the ethnic community for example Gikuyu, Dholuo, Ekegusii etc. In those areas, the second language is Kiswahili and the third language being English. There are places mostly in urban centers where other people have learnt other foreign languages like French and German but those are few and are mostly found among people who have taken their children to international schools.

### **Effects of functional alternative language on Kiswahili**

In Kenyan schools, Kiswahili is taught as one of the subjects in the curriculum and is compulsory at basic and secondary education. However, being taught as a subject means it is allocated time like any other subject because it is not the medium of instruction. In this case it is allocated between four and five lessons per week which translates to about three and a half hours. This is not even half a day of the total learning time in both levels. All the other subjects are taught in English. The result of this situation is that English is spoken for longer periods and this leads to a reduction in the time that Kiswahili is spoken by the learners. For a language that the constitution of a country declares as national and official, this is definitely a problem that needs attention.

Anytime a language is used less, its mastery reduces as opposed to when it is spoken regularly.

This is even worse in rural set ups where there is already a first language that meets the needs of rural speech communities. In the set up that has just been described above, the use of Kiswahili which is L2 reduces because its use in school is limited same to its use at home. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that in some areas, the first language spoken does not belong to the same language family as Kiswahili which is a bantu language. Our submission is that the reduced use of Kiswahili is not as a result of the attitude but rather because of its reduced function within the speech community. This is because of a functional alternative language that can be used for both transactional and interactional purposes.

In most urban centers in Kenya, there is widespread use of Kiswahili even among people whose areas of origin are not known to be keen speakers of Kiswahili. Could this be because their attitude towards the language has changed or because they have realized that they need the language to be able to interact with the people around them? The latter is likely to be true. The absence of a functional alternative leaves them with no alternative but to speak Kiswahili. It is thus clear that the removal of a functional alternative language makes it possible to learn and speak a language that appeared difficult to learn or was simply ignored.

This is partly the reason why Kiswahili speaking levels in Kenya are low compared to Tanzania. While Tanzania's language policy has always had Kiswahili as both the national and official language since her independence in 1961, Kenya only recently (2010) recognized Kiswahili as an official language although it has been a national language since she got independence from the British in 1963. Tanzania in recognizing Kiswahili as an official and national language did not provide room for a functional alternative language. Kenya on the other hand allowed the use of ethnic languages in schools together with English except in a few urban areas where the medium of instruction in schools was Kiswahili.

This situation is also evident among school leavers. A number of people who learn a language in school and thereafter resort to the use of other languages after school tend to lose quite a large chunk of the mastery they acquired while in school. There are people who learnt Kiswahili in school but several years after school, their ability to speak Kiswahili has slowly eroded because the activities they engage in allow them to use a functional alternative language and therefore removes the motivation to speak Kiswahili. This is especially applicable in areas where the first language L1 is not Kiswahili. This phenomenon does not only apply to Kiswahili but other languages too. In Kenya there are people who learnt English in school but because they do not use the language regularly, they are no longer able to speak the language well due to other functional alternative languages.

Some Kiswahili students in universities in Kenya have admitted that their ability to speak Kiswahili has gone down during their time in the university because they speak Kiswahili for shorter periods as compared to

the formative years of their education. The functional alternative language here being English for official communication and Sheng' for interaction with colleagues.

Some lecturers who are appointed to administrative positions within universities in Kenya who were good Kiswahili speakers before their appointments often have some difficulty with the language after their appointment to those positions because they use a functional alternative language (mostly English) in the offices where they work thereby pushing Kiswahili to the periphery. People from different parts of the world have sometimes gone to other countries for studies which have a policy of allowing students in class who have enough mastery of the language of the language used for instruction. Some of these counties include Germany and Britain. Students who go for studies in those countries learn the language even if it is new to them and successfully use it to complete their studies. This is mainly because they have not been provided with any other choice. If there was, perhaps they may never have learnt the new language.

## VI. CONCLUSION

From the investigation, it is clear that a functional alternative language has an effect on second language acquisition. This has been evident in some regions in Kenya where the use of Kiswahili is minimal despite the fact that it is both national and official language. The reason this minimal use is there is not because of the attitude they have towards the language. It is because in these regions there have been languages that are seen as functional alternatives. The presence of such a language inhibits the acquisition of a second and that even if it is acquired, the mastery of such a language is heavily impaired. This factor is important especially for countries that want a policy that would make its citizens acquire and use a specific language. Apart from just writing the policy there is need to take deliberate steps ensure that the language is given prominence by ensuring that is encouraged in social and official activities by discouraging other languages that could become functional alternatives thereby having a negative impact on development of the desired language. In advancing the use of Kiswahili language for example, the use of English in many activities and reduce the use of Kiswahili can have a negative effect on the development of Kiswahili. Countries within the East African region can make a deliberate effort to develop the language. It is not enough to announce that Kiswahili is a national and official language yet in government offices, education and even the behavior of national leaders give no indication of intent to accord Kiswahili its declared position.

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