

AMBIVALENCE REGARDING LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL CHOICES AMONG MINORITY LANGUAGE SPEAKERS: A CASE STUDY OF THE KHOESAN YOUTH OF BOTSWANA

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ABSTRACT Due to their small numbers and historical domination by others, the Khoesan groups in the southern African region are among the most marginalized and endangered communities in Africa (Batibo, 1998; Chebanne & Nthapelelang, 2000; Smieja, 2003). This situation has also led to their linguistic and cultural domination and an associated dilemma: on the one hand, the speakers of these minority languages wish to use and safeguard their linguistic and cultural heritage and identity; on the other hand, they desire to use other languages to enable wider communication and socioeconomic advancement. This study examined this dilemma among Khoesan youth in three villages in the Central Kalahari and Ghanzi areas of western Botswana. The primary aim of the study was to determine the extent to which ambivalence regarding linguistic and cultural options has affected the use of, attitudes toward, and attachment to languages and identities. The study focused on two Khoesan languages: Naro, a Central Khoesan language spoken in the Ghanzi sub-district, and !Xóǀ, a Southern Khoesan language spoken in south Central Kalahari. This study found that, in general, the youth in these communities preferred to use other languages and even altered their cultural and autonymic identity for socioeconomic reasons.

Key Words: Minority languages; Khoesan youth; Patterns of language use; Language attitudes; Ethnic identity.

INTRODUCTION

Minority language speakers frequently face the following dilemma (c.f. Batibo, 1997; 1998; Chebanne, 2002; Hasselbring, 1999; 2000; Smieja, 1996; 1998): on the one hand, they wish to use and safeguard their traditional language and culture to preserve their group identity and culture; on the other hand, they desire to use other languages to enable wider communication and socioeconomic advancement. This is particularly true among youth, who are often torn between two worlds (Le Roux, 2001). Although it is theoretically possible to embrace both worlds, they are often forced to select where to place their primary allegiance. Such situations are even more pronounced in areas where minority language speakers are marginalized or denied public positions.

THE KHOESAN LANGUAGES OF SOUTHERN AFRICA AND BOTSWANA

Due to their small numbers and history of being dominated, speakers of the Khoesian languages in the southern African region are among the most marginalized groups and their languages are among the most endangered in Africa (Batibo, 1998; Chebanne & Nthapelelang, 2000; Smieja, 2003). The peculiar situation of the Khoesian languages in southern Africa prompted the authors of this study to conduct a socio-linguistic investigation of these languages in Botswana. According to Anderson and Janson (1997), there are 12 Khoesian languages in Botswana, and they are found primarily in the western, northern, and northeastern parts of the country. Apart from Naro, which has nearly 10,000 speakers, most Khoesian languages in Botswana have relatively few speakers, ranging from several hundred to fewer than five thousand. Many of these languages are seriously endangered, as they are usually marginalized and viewed negatively by speakers due to the perception of their lack of public or socioeconomic value. Indeed, most speakers have stopped transmitting these languages to younger generations. As a result, there has been a progressive language shift toward other, more dominant languages, especially those of Bantu origin, such as Setswana, Shekgalagarhi, and Ikalanga (Batibo, 1997; 1998; 2005; 2006a; 2006b; 2008; Chebanne, 2002; Chebanne & Nthapelelang, 2000; Smieja, 1996; 1998; Sommer & Vossen, 2000; Vossen, 1988).

A number of studies have been conducted on the nature and extent of the identity loss caused by the process of language shift (Batibo, 2002; Chebanne, 2004; Hasselbring, 1999; 2000; Mestrie 2007; Nyathi-Ramahobo, 2000; 2004). However, there have been few investigations of the ambivalence regarding linguistic and cultural choices experienced by Khoesian speakers, who have found themselves faced with two identities, the traditional, land-based ethnic identity and the new, modern, economic-based identity that depends on productive activities (e.g., farming, livestock keeping, skills training, and employment).

This paper examines the ambivalence regarding linguistic and cultural choices and practices experienced by Khoesian youth.⁽¹⁾ It was based on a pilot study conducted in two villages in the Central Kalahari area, Kacgae and Bere, which are mainly !Xóǀ-speaking,⁽²⁾ and one village in Ghanzi District, D'Kar, which is mainly Naro-speaking.⁽³⁾ The primary aim of the study was to determine the extent to which this ambivalence has affected patterns of language use, attitudes toward languages, and affiliation with local identities among youth. Among the 12 Khoesian languages spoken in Botswana, the authors chose two languages, Naro and !Xóǀ, as the focus of this research. The former was chosen because of its advanced level of description, codification, literacy development, and speaker empowerment, whereas the latter was selected because of its use in relatively remote areas of the Central Kalahari. It was assumed that the ambivalence experienced by youth about their language use, attitudes toward languages, and ethnic identity would vary according to the degree of domination by other groups or the level of exposure to new ways of life.

The data discussed in this paper were collected in 2013, when the researchers performed field work in the Ghanzi area. Data were collected from 48 residents of the villages of D'Kar, Bere, and Kacgae who were aged between 20 and 49

years. Most informants understood Setswana and English, which facilitated the data collection process, as the researchers could communicate easily with the informants using either language. Data were gathered via a structured questionnaire containing four types of questions. The first set of questions collected information about the informants themselves, including age, gender, name of village chief, profession, and level of education. The 48 youths who were interviewed were divided as follows: D'Kar (23), Bere (15), and Kacgae (10). The second set of questions addressed the patterns of language use: the number of languages in the informant's repertoire, the choice of language in different domains, the languages used between parents and children at home, and the language used most often. The third set of questions centered on prevailing attitudes toward languages, focusing specifically on informants' preferences about the language to use in various domains, such as the village, school, administrative offices, church, public media, and Kgotla (ward) meetings. The fourth set of questions examined the degree to which informants felt allegiance to their ethnic identity. The researchers explored the origin of the names with which informants referred to themselves or their children, the extent to which they preserved their cultural practices, and the ethnic name with which they wanted to be identified.

This research followed a primarily quantitative design, as it involved analyses of numerous responses. As mentioned above, the primary aim of the study was to determine the extent to which young people experienced ambivalence about their linguistic behavior and local identity. Although the sample was somewhat limited, the results were generally very revealing with regard to the situation of Khoesan youth in Botswana.

GENERAL FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Two sets of results were derived from the data. Despite differences related to the genetic origins and levels of documentation and legitimization of the two languages, the first set identified several common features shared by Naro and !Xóõ with regard to patterns of language use, attitudes toward languages, and ethnic identity. The common features are described in the section below.

I. Common Features in the Three Villages

1. Patterns of language use in the three Khoesan villages

As mentioned above, the age of the 48 youth in the study ranged between 20 and 49 years. The age distribution is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Age distribution of study subjects

Age range	No. of respondents	Percentage
20 – 29	15	31.3
30 – 39	24	50.0
40 – 49	9	18.8
Total	48	100

According to the data, 78% of participants left school at the primary school level, whereas 16% left at the junior secondary level. Only 6% finished junior or senior secondary school, but most of this group could not continue their education or training due to poor performance in the final examinations. The reasons for leaving school prior to graduation included the hostile nature of the school environment with regard to both linguistic and cultural issues, a lack of support from parents, and constant abuse from both teachers and other students.

As most of the participants did not secure formal employment after school, they remained at home and have been involved in hunting, gathering, and trapping activities. However, some have also been engaged in farming and animal husbandry. Some of the women have developed culture-specific industries, such as making beads, producing crafts, and weaving, and some have even attempted to visit urban areas to seek paid jobs or more educational opportunities.

Interactions between youths and village residents and between youths and the village community as a whole have resulted in a complex pattern of language use involving the mother tongue (!Xóǒ or Naro), the local language (Shekgalagarhi), the national language (Setswana), and the official language (English). This pattern is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Patterns of language use among !Xóǒ speakers in Kacgae and Bere

Domain of language use	!Xóǒ	Shekgalagarhi	Setswana	English	Other
Speaking with siblings	20	3			5
Speaking with parents	21				2
Speaking with friends in the village	19	5	4	1	5
Communicating with the general public	7	6	14	1	
Speaking at kgotla meetings	5	3	16		1
Engaging in official business (administrative, judicial or public meetings)	2	2	17	2	

Notice that some respondents selected more than one language. According to them, they used two or more languages in the same domain, depending on the situation and to whom they were talking.

If the results presented in Table 2 are representative of the prevailing situation, it is clear that !Xóǒ is still extensively used in family interactions between siblings and between siblings and parents. This indicates that the language is still relevant in the home and even in the village during conversations among friends. In fact, !Xóǒ is one of the less endangered Khoesan languages, mainly because of its history and geographic location. However, most !Xóǒ speakers are trilingual, also speaking Shekgalagarhi and Setswana, which are used in more public settings, such as public meetings or inter-ethnic communications.

In the case of Naro, a similar pattern of language use was observed in D'kar.

This is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Patterns of language use among Naro speakers in D'Kar

Domain of language use	Naro	Shekgalagarhi	Setswana	English	Other
Speaking with siblings	9		1		1
Speak with parents	8		1		1
Speaking with friends in the village	6	3	5	1	2
Communicating with the general public	9	5	5		3
Speaking at kgotla meetings	2		7		
Engaging in official business (administrative, judicial or public meetings)	2	2	8	2	

If the results in Table 3 are representative of the prevailing situation, Naro is still used extensively with family and friends in the village. It thus remains a vibrant language. In fact, following its extensive documentation, codification, and literary legitimization by the Naro Language Project, the language has garnered considerable prestige and esteem. As a result, it has attracted many second-language speakers, especially among /Gwi, //Gana, and !Xóǀ speakers. At a higher level of analysis, Setswana dominates as the officially acknowledged national language.

Although Setswana is the language used at Kgotla (ward) meetings, some villages have allowed other languages to be used when accompanied by Setswana translation. This is the case in Bere, where !Xóǀ is also used to involve all !Xóǀ speakers. It is also clear that the youth in these villages still use their mother tongue to interact with their families and members of their own community, which demonstrates their continued attachment to their linguistic and cultural roots.

2. Attitudes toward the use of languages

Most respondents in this study claimed that they were more proficient in their mother tongue than in the other languages that they spoke. Setswana and Shekgalagarhi were usually the second best-known languages. Respondents preferred their mother tongue for cultural and identity reasons, but they needed Setswana and English to achieve socioeconomic advancement, particularly with regard to access to school, the wider world, and paid employment. Although they wanted their mother tongue to continue being used in the village, they also wanted Setswana and English to be used as well, as these were the languages of the schools and the administration. The majority (68% of !Xóǀ and 82% of Naro) would have preferred that their mother tongue be used in school. The higher figure for Naro is indicative of the esteem in which Naro speakers hold their language. Table 4 shows the extent to which respondents would have preferred to use their mother tongue as the medium of instruction and in the school compound more generally.

Table 4. Attitudes toward use of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction

Domain of language use	!Xóǒ speakers (Bere and Kacgae)	Naro speakers in D'Kar
Prefer the use of mother tongue as medium of instructions	68%	82%
Would have performed better if mother tongue had been used	87%	89%
Using the mother tongue at school would have been more culturally appropriate	93%	98%

The majority of the youth (87% of !Xóǒ and 89% of Naro) believed that they would have performed much better if their mother tongue had been used for school activities. Interestingly, most (93% of !Xóǒ and 98% of Naro) thought that the use of their mother tongue at school would have been more culturally appropriate. This is presumably because, as has been reported elsewhere (Batibo, 1998; Chebanne, 2002; Nyathi-Ramahobo, 2004; Smieja, 1996), Khoesan children generally find the school environment alien not only because of the use of an unfamiliar language (Setswana or English), but also because of its adherence to new cultural and lifestyle-related norms. However, most respondents wanted Setswana and English, rather than their mother tongue, to be used in public settings, such as official meetings, courts of law, the media, and publishing. This was presumably because the youth realized the need to rely on widely used languages in public domains.

3. Ethnic identity

Most respondents wanted their language to be preserved a way that maintains their ethnic identity and for transmission to the younger generation. However, not all wanted their children to be given ethnic names. Their preferences for the linguistic sources of names are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Linguistic preferences for personal names

Source of name	Bere	Kacgae	Naro
Ethnic name (in its original form)	11	8	8
Shekgalagarhi	0	2	0
Setswana	9	8	2
English	2	2	0
Other	0	0	0

Because some informants had more than one name, two or more names sometimes belonged in different categories, leading to multiple selections.

According to these data, those who wanted ethnic names were motivated by ethnic identity, whereas those who wanted Setswana or English names were motivated by the prestige and status of these languages. Very few Naro speakers wanted Setswana and English names, possibly due to the esteem in which they have held their language since it was legitimized by the Naro Language Project, as described below.

Most of these groups wanted to see their customs and traditions, especially songs, dances, rituals, and social practices, preserved and passed on to the younger

generations. However, in terms of ethnic identity, the majority wanted to be known as “Basarwa” (Khoesan). Identity preferences are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Identity preferences of !Xóǀ and Naro speakers in the three villages

Form of identity	Bere	Kaǀgae	D’Kar
By your ethnic name	10	6	1
As a Mosarwa	6	7	10
As a Mokgalagarhi	0	0	0
As a Motswana	0	1	0
Other	0	0	0

The results presented in Table 6 show that most respondents wanted to be identified by their ethnicity and most did not mind being known as “Basarwa.” No one wanted to be identified as a Mokgalagarhi (an identity that many Khoesan people had claimed in the past). It is inspiring that only three wanted to be known as “Batswana” despite the fact that this identity applies to both ethnic Batswanans and all citizens of Botswana.

II. Differences between the Youth in the Two Language Communities

This study also revealed many differences between the youth in the two communities (Naro and !Xóǀ). These differences are discussed below.

1. Naro youth

As mentioned above, Naro is spoken in the Ghanzi sub-district by more than 10,000 people (Batibo, 2006c). It is predominantly spoken in D’kar, a sizeable village along the Ghanzi-Maun Road, which is about 35 kilometers from the town of Ghanzi. Thus, Naro has a number of social, political, and linguistic advantages. Apart from being geographically accessible and inhabited by individuals who can converse easily with speakers of other languages, D’kar contains numerous people who speak its native language; in fact, it has the most native speakers among the Khoesan languages. Because of its numerous speakers and peripheral location in the far west of Botswana, the Naro language has not been dominated by other groups. Although many Naro speakers are conversant with Setswana, Shekgalagarhi, and even Afrikaans and English, they use these languages only for wider communication, interaction with other groups, and in specific domains, such as education and employment.

In 1991, a couple belonging to the Dutch Reformed Church Mission established the Naro Language Project at D’Kar. This Project has been instrumental in the description, codification, and literacy development of the Naro language. Following the development of a practical orthography, a number of documents, including a grammar book, a dictionary, a Naro Bible, and literacy materials, were prepared (Visser, 1994; 1997; 1998), and the community has been actively involved in Naro literacy. Many Naro speakers, both young people and adults,

are able to read and write Naro as a result of the very successful Naro literacy program established by the two missionaries, Mr. and Mrs. Hessel Visser. This program has generated self-esteem and confidence among the Naro people and has increased their attachment to their language. An active language board was formed in D'kar to oversee the development, use, and preservation of the Naro language and culture. Before the arrival of the two missionaries, the Naro language had been the subject of other scholarly works, such as those authored by Barnard (1983; 1988), Bleek (1928), and Guenther (1986).

Hence, many Naro youth not only actively participate in school but also proudly preserve and promote their language and culture. Many informants wanted to use their ethnic names publicly and to use their mother tongue as the medium of instruction in school. They were also eager to have their language and culture transmitted to the next generation.

Although, as in the case of other places, many Naro youth could not continue with their schooling and therefore remained at home, many have also become active in the informal economic sector and culture-related industries, using their traditional knowledge to produce artistic materials, such as crafts, sculptures, paintings, and ornaments. Some seek employment at farms and ranches. In general, Naro youth are very attached to their language, and they are proud to see it follow Setswana and English as a language legitimized by an orthography and reading materials. They also expressed a wish that it be used in higher-level public domains. This is clear evidence of the positive attitudes that the Naro youth have developed toward their language and culture.

2. !Xóǀ youth

As mentioned above, !Xóǀ is spoken by fewer than 5,000 people located primarily in the southern parts of the Central Kalahari, in Bere, Kacgae, Zutshwa, and Kang (Batibo, 2006c). In this study, data were collected from only two relatively small villages, Bere and Kacgae, each of which has only a few score !Xóǀ speakers. These villages are relatively remote, more than 10 kilometers from the main road, with no large urban center nearby.

The !Xóǀ speakers in these villages follow a very traditional lifestyle. Many are still attached to their land as the main source of livelihood. Unlike the Naro, !Xóǀ speakers are a small group that is highly vulnerable to the larger adjacent groups. The main dominant languages are Shekgalagari, the local lingua franca, and Setswana, the national medium of communication. Hence, most !Xóǀ people are trilingual, with varied levels of proficiency in the three languages. Those who have been to school also speak some English.

Most !Xóǀ youth reside at home or in cattle posts, where they are employed as herders. Many did not go beyond the junior community secondary school level and are, therefore, literate in Setswana and English, but not in !Xóǀ. Thus, unlike the Naro, !Xóǀ youth are attached to their language only symbolically, as a feature of their ethnic identity but not as a socioeconomic asset.

Unlike Naro, !Xóǀ has not been extensively documented or developed for public use. Apart from descriptive and anthropological studies conducted by scholars,

such as Traill (1985; 1994a; 1994b) and Heinz (1979), little work has been devoted to promoting literacy and the use of !Xóǀ in modern communities. Hence, most !Xóǀ youth cannot read or write in their mother tongue. Indeed, the language is not associated with socioeconomic advancement or used in more public domains. Thus, many !Xóǀ youth have developed negative attitudes toward their language and prefer more socioeconomically privileged languages, such as Setswana and English. The local lingua franca, Shekgalagari, is also viewed highly. The lack of socioeconomic development in the area has caused many !Xóǀ youth to look elsewhere for advancement, which has rendered them vulnerable to the adoption of other languages and cultural practices. Thus, unlike the Naro youth, the !Xóǀ youth do not place much socioeconomic value in their language and culture and are attached to them only for purposes of identity.

AMBIVALENCE ABOUT AN ETHNIC VERSUS A WIDER NATIONAL IDENTITY

Based on the above, it is clear that Khoesan youth in Kacgae, Bere, and D'Kar are faced with a dilemma about the degree to which they adhere to their narrower traditional ethnic identity versus the wider national identity, as citizens of Botswana. As followers of the former, they are identified with their livelihood, including wild animals, fruits, and roots; practice hunting and gathering; and participate in Khoesan traditions and customs.

However, many practice agriculture and animal husbandry as a result of contact with pastoral and farming cultures facilitated by Bantu groups, such as the Bakgalagarhi and Batswana, as well as by Afrikaner farmers. Additionally, exposure to the school system and the Western way of life has led to the adoption of Western habits. These new forms of identity can be understood as a wider form of identity based on the status of Botswana as a unified nation–state.

Thus, the youth in the study area find themselves between two linguistic and cultural worlds, as they have to choose between preserving and practicing their linguistic, cultural, autonymic, and ethnonymic identities, which are mainly symbolic, versus following the wider nation-based identity, which offers socioeconomic advantages. Although the two may be pursued simultaneously as they are not completely mutually exclusive (Batibo, 2002; Le Roux, 2001), there is a tendency to lean more toward the latter. In such cases, the identity loss model proposed by Lamy (1979) and Pool (1979) would apply. According to this model, loss of identity is progressive, moving from linguistic to cultural, to autonymic, and, finally, to ethnonymic. Thus far, most of these identities have been largely preserved, and the ethnonymic identity is primarily intact.

CONCLUSION

As noted by earlier studies (Batibo, 2002; Chebanne, 2004; Mestrie, 2007), ethnic identity is the last identity feature to disappear. This pattern was also in evi-

dence in this study, which confirmed the ambivalence with which Khoesan youth choose between their languages and cultures and those of other groups with whom they have come into contact and with which they eventually confront the emergence of the nation–state of Botswana, the ultimate wider identity. In this case, youth face a choice between symbolic and socioeconomic interests (Bagwasi, 2010; Nyathi-Ramahobo, 2000).

This study also found that Naro youth are much more motivated than youth of other groups to preserve their language and culture. This may be due to the lower level of vulnerability of Naro, which is a strong language in terms of the demographic characteristics of speakers, as well as because of its linguistic and literary legitimation through codification and literacy and community development. Bere and Kacgae youth are not as attached to their language, as !Xóǝ has not been well codified or widely used by the relevant communities as a written language. It is only in recent years that some Bible translation societies have started to work on !Xóǝ orthography and reading material (Monaka, 2014). As Mr. D. F. Malan, the champion of Afrikaner nationalism, said, “develop the language and you will develop the people” (cited in Mestrie, 2007). The development efforts of the communities in Bere and Kacgae will be significantly enhanced when their language is properly described, codified, and used in literacy and developmental spheres, as has been the case with Naro in D’kar (Visser, 2000). Thus, as generally observed, language endangerment may be substantially checked if a language is legitimized through documentation or the socioeconomic advancement of its speakers (Crystal, 2000; Grenoble & Whaley, 1998; Mufwene, 2005).

As illustrated by Naro, once a language is legitimized graphically (with a practical orthography and effective literacy programs), it can then be used to further a community’s socioeconomic advancement and culture-related industries. Under such conditions, speakers can use the language in its written form for works of art, tourism promotion, sales, and culture-related performances. Indeed, Naro youth have substantially benefited from the legitimacy accorded to their language.

NOTES

- (1) In Botswana, the official age range for “youth” is between 21 and 45 years.
- (2) The researchers were aware of the fact that there were other !Xóǝ-speaking areas, such as Zutshwa and Kang. However, they limited their research to two villages, Bere and Kacgae, for practical reasons. Although the researchers were also aware that there were numerous speakers of /Gwi in Kacgae, they decided to focus on the !Xóǝ speakers, who were the targets of their study.
- (3) The researchers were aware of other Khoe languages in the area, such as /Gwi and //Gana. However, they limited their focus to Naro, because of the particular objectives of the study.

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