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Language change and social networks among Somali refugee teenagers

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to look at the linguistic social integration of Somali refugee teenagers in Eastleigh, a Kenyan suburb, within Nairobi, the capital city. The study gives a descriptive account of the social networks along with domain analysis in order to discuss language change by the teenagers having moved from a monolingual Somali to multilingual Kenya. Most studies in Kenya on refugees are centered on the welfare and livelihoods of refugees excluding language. The thesis delineates the social networks of the Somali teenage refugees in Kenya to establish how they are coping linguistically. The Somalis were chosen because they are the majority amongst all the refugees.

The main research question is: Do the social networks the teenagers make affect their linguistic choices in Kenya and result in language change? The research is based on interviews, questionnaires and observations of thirty (30) research respondents who were selected using snow ball sampling. Social Network theory (Milroy, 1980), Domain analysis (Fishman, 1980) and ideas from the Postructuralists (Woolard, 1985; Heller, 1991 and Norton, 2000) are used to understand and analyze data in relation to: language change, social identity, ethnicity, language and gender and power.

The analysis of the data indicates that the teenagers have dense and multiplex social networks in Eastleigh. The social networks are Kenyan and Somalian based. Such networks have enabled them to retain the Somali language to a large extent and have also acquired other languages which are used in Kenya: English, Kiswahili and in few cases Sheng. Having established that Somali community is patriarchal; such a set-up has not hindered the different genders to use their language in a similar way. The teenagers have devised ways of using language in order to 'fit in' the Kenyan linguistic social set. Such strategies include code-switching and multiplicity of identities. The linguistic market, (Bourdieu, 1990) empowers various languages in different domains. It is also clear that the vulnerability of the teenagers as refugees has curtailed their participation in the mainstream teenage subcultures in Kenya.

Based on the findings, the research contributes to the deeper understanding of the refugee linguistic orientations in Kenya. This could inform language policy makers and the government of Kenya on the predicament of the refugees. It could also make known the language problems the teenagers have while in school. Finally, the research is hoped to make an original contribution to the general sociolinguistic theory.