

The Effect of Linguistic Barriers to Business Entrepreneurship: The Case of Eldoret Town

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Abstract

Small and medium business enterprises are an important sector of Kenya's economy. Millions of Kenyans depend on small scale businesses for their livelihood. This means that this sector is a source of employment to millions of people across the country. In a multilingual setting as is the case in Kenya, cross community communication can be a challenge. This means that cross community business undertakings can face challenges arising from language if linguistic issues are not addressed. Kenya has two official languages: English and Kiswahili. Although this is the case, not all Kenyans speak these two languages. This does not mean that Kenyans who do not understand these languages can not engage in business. It does not also mean that Kenyans who have little or no understanding of these languages of wider communication cannot seek goods and services in shops. However, for such people to engage in business and the acquisition of goods and services, they have to use alternative languages in their communication. In many cases, such people turn to their mother tongues as preferred languages of communication. However, in regions with high linguistic diversity, they are likely to encounter language barriers in their business interaction. As a result, traders and their customers employ various linguistic strategies to try and eliminate the strategies. This paper unravels linguistic barriers to business communication in Eldoret town and linguistic strategies employed by traders and their customers in the town in their effort to counter the challenges. The paper is based on research carried out in selected businesses within Eldoret town in Kenya.

Key Words: *Language, Strategies, Business and Diversity*

INTRODUCTION

The goal of this paper was to unravel language barriers facing traders and their customers in Eldoret town. Language is central to everything we do. It is difficult to imagine how a business can survive without a common language that can be used by traders and their customers in communication. With a total of over 40 languages (See Webb and Kembo-Sure 2000) spoken by 40 million people, Kenya has a high linguistic diversity. This means that issues of trade can be complicated in areas where different ethnic communities live and interact through trade. The high illiteracy and low English proficiency levels complicate issues of interethnic communication in Kenya. This means that Kenyans with low English proficiency levels and little understanding of Kiswahili, the national language are likely to face linguistic barriers in their effort to interact in business.

In businesses that deal in health matters such as pharmacies, language is even more critical. This is due to the fact that patients and pharmacists need a common language to enhance communication between them, which is key to successful medical service delivery. Lee (2003) argues that in the health sector, doctors rely on information given by patients to give medication. That is the reason Woloshin (1995) argues that the clinician must communicate with the patient to learn about the patients' problems, needs and concerns and to convey information and offer recommendations about health care. Language is, in fact, the means by which the health care provider accesses a patient's beliefs about health and illness, and thus creates an opportunity to address and reconcile different systems. In essence, communication between nurses and patients is the heart of nursing care. Differences in language between health care providers and patients increasingly impose barriers to health care, and as Perkins (1999) and Bowen (2001) observe, language barriers can cause limited access to health care. This argument is also advanced by Schyve (2007). There are many other scholars who have contributed to this topic (See Alexander 2007, Brock-Utne 2009, Chumbow 2009, Harries 2007, 2010). These scholars agree that issues of language are key to development.

This research was directed by the Communication Accommodation theory developed by Giles (1973). It focuses on the processes that go into a person's perception of the environment and the communicative behaviours that arise due to this (Giles, Mulac, Bradac and Johnson 1987). Speech accommodation theory, often called communication accommodation theory, is a special cognitive approach that was first

developed by Giles and associates in 1973 (Giles 1973; Giles, Taylor & Bourhis 1973). It focuses on the processes that go into a person's perception of the environment and the communicative behaviours that result from this (Giles, Mulac, Bradac, & Johnson 1987).

METHODOLOGY

We used purposeful sampling method where ten businesses were sampled within the central business district of Eldoret town. For our case, Eldoret was an ideal town due to the high linguistic diversity in the town. We sampled three pharmacies, three agrovets, two traditional medicine businesses, one grocery and one fish business. The businesses sampled were owned by people who spoke five different mother tongues. The languages included Kalenjin, Maasai, Luyia, Dholuo and Kikuyu. The distribution of the agrovets was as follows: 1 Kikuyu, 1 Kalenjin and 1 Luyia. Pharmacies were distributed in a similar way. The 2 traditional businesses were owned by Maasai speakers. The grocery and the fish business belonged to Luo speakers.

Methods of data collection used included recording of conversations, participant observation and interview. The sellers in various shops assisted us in the recording of conversations between them and their customers. A total of 333 conversations were recorded. We interviewed all the ten business owners and seven sellers. This was because seven of the businesses had sales assistants, three did not have assistants. We observed the behaviours of customers and their skin colour due to the importance of these factors in contributing to language use in the town. We recorded a total of 333 conversations which we analyzed by identifying the ones that indicated communication barriers between the traders and their customers. This data is discussed in the following section.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Language Barriers in Business Communication

Communication barriers in business conversations arise from inappropriate communication strategies adopted by interlocutors. In some cases, these barriers emerge when strategies aimed at enhancing communication fail to achieve their objectives. According to Williams (1999), some of the problems arise from the inability of an interlocutor to completely accommodate his speech to that of his speech partner. In business, it is difficult to think about communication without language. Successful business relies on successful communication between traders and their customers. The reason is, trade is a social endeavour and every business transaction requires language. Interactions during a business transaction are many and most of them depend on language for success. Business undertakings such as price negotiation, enquiry about availability of a commodity, discussion about functions, preparation or safe use of a commodity, all require language. This therefore means that availability of a common language that can be used to bring about successful communication between traders and their customers is a requirement that business cannot do without. As Selmer (2006) argues, language is a factor that traders and their customers cannot do without.

In businesses such as pharmacies and agricultural and veterinary (agrovet) shops, language is even more critical. In pharmacies, customers need language to describe symptoms of diseases affecting them in such a clear way that the pharmacist must understand and advice about the best remedy. Language is also critical for price negotiation. On their part, pharmacists need language to give instructions to patients about the use medicine and other chemicals acquired in their shops. This is the reason Lee (2003) opines that barriers in communication between patients and service providers can affect the relationship between patients and the service providers. In the case of pharmacies, the sellers play the important role of service providers to many people who prefer off counter medical service because it is cost effective compared to hospital visits.

In agrovet businesses, language is a key factor too. Transactions in agrovet shops which include the exchange of animal medicine, farm machinery, fertilizers and agricultural chemicals cannot be performed without the requirement of language. Farmers need language to describe symptoms of animal and crop diseases. They need language to acquire new agricultural technology and seek instructions about safe use of farm machinery, fertilizers and chemicals and learn about modern agricultural practices. This means that agrovet businesses do not just need a language but a common language that can serve traders and

their customers and help them achieve successful communication. Lack of such common language can negatively affect a business transaction and, eventually, the growth of business. In this case, language becomes a barrier to successful communication between traders and their customers. Our research showed that 6.3% (N=21) of conversations had problems of communication. This means that 6.3% of business transactions between traders and their customers were negatively affected due to problems arising from language. These barriers emerged in three types of businesses namely, pharmacies, agrovet and grocery businesses. In the following section, we discuss the various barriers that emerged.

Inability to Speak English and Kiswahili. One of the barriers that emerged was the inability for some customers to speak the two official languages that are used as languages of wider communication in Kenya. Williams (1999) argues that inability for a speaker to speak the interlocutor's language can lead to communication breakdown. The inability of some customers to speak these languages meant that the customers had to seek an alternative language for use to fill the gap. In many cases, the customers turned to their mother tongues as languages of business communication. In such cases, there were problems of communication that emerged between these customers and traders who could not speak or understand the customers' mother tongues. This barrier was caused by lack of a common language that could be used for successful communication between the traders and their customers. Look at the following conversation between a Kalenjin pharmacist and a Somali customer who spoke through proxies.

(1) Translator 1: Mama nasema ni mgonjwa. Ako kitu naanza nadungadunga hivi. (Mother says she is sick. She feels pain.)

Translator 2: (Mama) Nasema kitu natembea kwa mili. Lakini nakuwanga mgonjwa. (She feels pains all over the body. But she has been sick for a while.)

Trader: Ati mama nakuwanga mgonjwa? (Are you saying that mother has been sick?)

Translator 1: Eee, nakuwanga na ugonjwa ya kansa. (She suffers from cancer.)

Translator 2: Na kwa tumbo. (She also has problems in the stomach.)

Trader: Anakohoa ama ...? (Does she have cough?)

In this text, the customer who is the patient is unable to describe symptoms of her ailment directly to the service provider because she could not speak Kiswahili nor English. As a result, she had to depend on two translators who accompanied her to this shop. This customer's inability to speak the two languages of wider communication caused a communication barrier between her and the pharmacist who could not speak the patient's mother tongue. Williams (1999) argues that a speaker's inability to accommodate his/her speech to that of an interlocutors can be a cause language barriers. In this example, the patient's inability to communicate in both English and Kiswahili meant that the patient had to seek alternative ways of enhancing communication between her and the pharmacist. That is the reason she used two translators in this case. However, use of translators is not an effective way of eliminating a language barrier. This is due to the fact that translation can lead to other problems of mistranslation or intentional misinformation. Pharmacies offer medical services to many Kenyans and in the event that a patient and a service provider have a linguistic challenge, inappropriate treatment can result. Patients are also likely to face the challenge of implementing the service provider's instructions about medication.

Use of Unfamiliar Mother Tongue Vocabulary. In some conversations, customers were faced by vocabulary challenges, a fact that forced them to borrow words from their mother tongues which were unfamiliar to the sellers. These borrowed words were in most cases used within Kiswahili conversations. This borrowing which was done with the good intention of filling gaps in the customers' vocabulary, in fact, became barriers to communication. In many cases, the sellers were unable to understand the borrowed words or even realize that they were borrowed words. In many cases, this problem led to communication breakdown and eventually, no exchange of commodities.

(2) Customer: Iko ng''endek, mbegu? (Do you have beans seeds?)

Trader: Gani? (Which type?)

Customer: Ya kienyeji, ng''endek. (The local type called ng''endek.)

Trader: Ng'e..! Hiyo hakuna. (Nge..! I don't have that one.)

In this example, the customer appears not to have an appropriate vocabulary to refer to cow peas seeds in Kiswahili. This vocabulary challenge forced him to borrow the word, *ng''endek* from his Kipsigis mother tongue to fill the gap. Look at the next example which involved a Somali customer and a Luo trader:

(3) **Customer:** Taka *purpur*. (I want purpur)
Trader: *Purpur!* Ni mboga au matunda? (*Is it a type of vegetable or a fruit?*)
Customer: Mboga, naweka ka mboga. (Vegetable, it is used as spices.)
Trader: Inafananaje? (How does it look?)
Customer: Ya...blu. (Blue.)
Trader: Blu! Mboga! Umesema inaitwaje? (Blue! Vegetable? What is the name?)
Trader: Hiyo hakuna. (We don't have that one.)

In this example, the customer wants a commodity which he can not mention in Kiswahili. It is possible that the customer did not know the name of the commodity he wanted. This is evident from the fact that the customer's language shows that he had problems speaking Kiswahili. Look at this evidence:

(4) **Customer:** Taka *purpur*. (I want purpur)
 More evidence:

(5) **Customer:** *Mboga, naweka ka mboga*. (Vegetable, used as spices.)

The customer has problems with names of different colours. He says the vegetable he wants is blue in colour, a statement which surprises the seller:

(6) **Trader:** *Inafananaje?* (How does it look?)
Customer: *Ya... blu*. (Blue.)
Trader: *Blu! Mboga! Umesema inaitwaje?* (Blue! Vegetable? What is the name?)
Customer: *Purpur*. (Purpur)

This resulted in his use of his mother tongue vocabulary which was unfamiliar to the vegetable seller. Due to this, communication between the customer and the seller experienced barriers which made the conversation to stop before achieving the intended objective of exchange of goods. It is evident that this barrier negatively affected the business by denying it revenue which is the purpose of any business.

Problematic Pronunciation of Scientific Names. Some customers had problems pronouncing names of commodities they wanted, especially in the pharmacies and agrovets. This was caused by the fact that the names of many of the chemicals, medicine and machinery sold in agrovets and pharmacies have their origin in foreign languages like English, French, German, etc. This made many customers who were farmers and patients to encounter problems pronouncing them. Some of the mispronunciations caused language barriers because the sellers could not understand their meaning. Look at this text:

(7) **Customer:** Una *kalestin*? (Do you have Kalestin?)
Trader: *Inatibu nini?* (What does it treat?) **Customer:**
Inatibu shida ya kifua. (Chest problems.)
Trader: Ama unasema *Celestamine*? (Do you mean Celestamine?)
Customer: *Eee. Inauzaje?* (Yes. What is the price?)
Trader: Fifteen *kwa tembe*. (*Fifteen shillings per tablet*.)
Customer: *Hapana. Situmiangi hii. Paketi haifanani hivi. Aa aa, wacha tu*. (No. I don't use this one, just leave it.)

In this case, the customer wants medicine with the name, *Kalestin*. But the seller does not know any medicine by that name. Further prompting by the seller made the customer to claim that the medicine could, in fact, be Celestamine which is a drug widely used in the treatment of allergic conditions. See the conversation below.

(8) **Trader:** Ama unasema *Celestamine*? (Do you mean Celestamine?)
Customer: *Eee. Inauzaje?* (Yes. What is the price?)

But when given the Celestamine, the customer says, that is not the medicine she wanted. Communication stops and the customer leaves. In this case, the communication barrier arising from language affected the business because the exchange of goods could not be accomplished. Look at the next example:

(9) Customer: *Una dawa ya kumwaga nayo carrot kabla haijamea, inaitwa Arca?* (Do you have the chemical used in carrot planting called Arca?)

Trader: *Arca!*

Customer: *Wenye wanatumia hiyo wanasema inaitwa Arca.* (The users call it Arca.) **Trader:** *Arca! Ya carrots! Aa aa, sina.* (Arca! For carrots!)

In this example, the customer wants a chemical used in the planting of carrots but appears not to know the right pronunciation of the name. He says:

(10) Customer: *Wenye wanatumia hiyo wanasema inaitwa Arca.* (People who use the chemical call it that way.)

This means that he did not know the right pronunciation of the name. Later investigation established that there is no chemical with this name used in the planting of carrots. Instead, the chemical used is called, *Actara*. It is therefore possible that the customer wanted *Actara*, whose name he could not properly pronounce. This mispronunciation caused the language barrier in this conversation. The result was breakdown in communication which negatively affected the business because the exchange of goods could not be accomplished. The customer was also negatively affected because he could not purchase the required chemical for his agriculture.

Refusal to Use Lingua franca. Some customers deliberately refused to speak English and Kiswahili. We noted that these customers did not want to identify with the use of these two languages of wider communication in Kenya. Our observation revealed that most of these customers were aged above fifty years. The refusal by these customers to speak English and Kiswahili was a strategy of identifying businesses whose owners spoke the customer's mother tongue. Look at this conversation between a Kalenjin seller and a Kalenjin customer:

(11) Customer:(Nandi) *I amunee o?* (How are you?)

Trader:(Kiswahili) *Mzuri.* (Fine.)

Customer:(Nandi) *Itinye nyanyek cho ko itu o?* (Do you have modern tomato seeds?)

Trader:(Kiswahili) *Eee iko, ni gani hiyo?* (Yes. Which type?)

Customer: *(Kimya, Anakwenda.)* (The customer walks away.)

Giles (1973) refers to this strategy as divergent accommodation. In this strategy, speakers deliberately refuse to accommodate to interlocutors as a way of showing the interlocutor that he does not belong to the speaker's linguistic group. In this text, the customer uses Nandi language to enquire from the trader if there were tomato seeds. When the trader answers him in Kiswahili, the customer walks away. Traders confirmed that this divergent strategy is frequently used by some customers causing breakdown in communication. As a way of countering this breakdown, the businesses have been forced to employ sellers from various Kenyan communities which live in Eldoret. This helps the businesses to eliminate this barrier.

Use of Description Instead of Names of Commodities. Some customers lacked the right names to refer to the goods they wanted, a situation that made them to use the strategy of description of goods rather than the use of the commodities names. This strategy did not work in many cases. In many cases, the traders found it difficult to identify the goods required. Look at this conversation between a Luo seller and a Somali customer:

(12) Trader: *Kuja. Inakaa namna gani?* (Follow me. How does it look like?)

Customer: *Inafanana hiyo.* (It looks like that.)

Trader: *Hapa inafurafura hivi? Halafu ikogreen?* (Is it green in colour?)

Customer: *Eee.* (Yes.)

Trader: *Unakula kama iko mbichi? Kachar? (Matango?)* (Is it eaten raw? Do you mean cucumber)

Customer: *Bahali gani hiyo? Kanza onyesha.* (Show me the cucumber first.) *Aa aa, si hiyo.* (Not that one.)

In this example, the customer wants a commodity which she cannot refer to by name because she does not know the right name. Due to this linguistic shortcoming, the customer decided to describe the commodity she wanted. See this conversation.

Semantic Problems. Some customers could not express themselves with clarity so as to be understood by the traders. The source problem was lack of fluency in Kiswahili by some customers. Although some customers made efforts to accommodate their speech to that of the traders, they lacked fluency, a fact that resulted in breakdown in communication. In some cases, this problem resulted in the use of wrong names and vocabulary, thus causing breakdown in communication. See the following text:

- (13) **Customer:** *Mimi nataka kitanguu ile yaa...yaa..ndimu.* (I want onions that look like lemon.) **Customer:** (The seller gives him lemon..) *Kitanguu!* (I want onions!)
- Trader:** *Kitunguu? Naletewa wewe. Nini ingine?* (Onions! I will give you.)
- Customer:** *Nataka kitanguu na ilee...ilee...ilee... Ile yaaa...Pea ...kilo tano. Leta hiyoo... hiyoo...* (Give me that...that...five kilograms.)
- Trader:** Water melon?
- Customer:** *Aa aa, hiyoo...*(No, that... points at Irish potatoes...)
- Trader:** *Gunia?* (Sack?)
- Customer:** *Haki ya Mungu si hii bei. Kama iko hiyo bagi kubwa* (points at the pail for measuring potatoes) *haki ya Mungu iko na mia mocha. Kama ya bagi kubwa kama hiyo, haki ya Mungu sisi na mia mocha.* (That pail full of potatoes is supposed to cost one hundred shillings.)
- Customer:** *Nabima kwa ilee... kama bagi kubwa.* (That thing that looks like a big bag.)
- Trader:** *Inaitwa ndoo.* (It is called a pail.)

In this text, there is evidence that the customer had problems expressing himself in Kiswahili. It appears that the customer wants some commodity but lacks the language with which to express the idea. For example, he says that he wants onions, which he calls —*vitanguu!* instead of —*vitunguu!* But he confuses the seller by saying that the onion he wants looks like lemon. This is the beginning of communication challenges in this conversation.

Effects of Language Barriers

In a business situation, language barriers can have a devastating effect on transactions. The reason is that business transactions depend on language and communication for success, and whenever this communication does not occur, business transactions are negatively affected. In this research, language barriers had an effect on both the business and the customers.

Effect on Business. Language barriers affected businesses in several ways. First some to the conversations took too long due to communication problems by the customers. This made the transactions to take too much time that would have been spent on serving other customers. The time taken in this conversation attracted the attention of the business owner who complained to the seller about the too much time spent on one transaction:

- (15)**Owner:** *Unauzia nini Wariah?* (What does the Somali want?)
- Trader:** *Anataka viazi sijui na nini.*(He wants potatoes with something else I can't tell.)
- Owner:** *Biashara moja inachukua miaka ngapi?* (How many years are you going to spend on one transaction?)

This intervention from the business owner shows how concerned he was about the time factor and its effect on his business. Secondly, many of the conversations that experienced barriers resulted in total breakdown in communication. This led to inability of the participants to exchange the goods required. This means that the businesses did not realize the profits that would have resulted from this exchange. Third, some of the customers who did not purchase the goods they wanted because of language barrier may have developed lack of faith in the businesses affected. It is possible that these customers will not seek goods and services in these businesses in future due to their past experience. This means that these barriers have a long term effect on the business concerned.

Effect on Customers. Besides affecting the businesses, these language barriers also affected the customers in various ways. First, the customers were unable to acquire the goods they wanted from the businesses affected. Look at texts (1), (2), (3), (11), and (12). Secondly, some of the customers affected by the barriers were farmers. This means that their farming may have been affected due to their inability to purchase the goods required from these businesses. Look at text (7). Thirdly, it is possible that the health of patients who could not purchase medicine from the pharmacies due to language barrier was negatively affected. Look at texts (1) and (7). Additionally, language barriers can inhibit full implementation of instructions given by pharmacists to patients. This means that the customers who had problems of communication with the pharmacists may have encountered problems following instructions given by the pharmacists about the use of medicine.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to unearth linguistic barriers facing traders and their customers in Eldoret town. It is evident from this paper that traders and their customers in Eldoret town are faced with communication barriers arising from the high linguistic diversity in the town. It emerged through this investigation that many customers in the town use their mother tongues in communication with traders who do not speak their mother tongues. This led to breakdown in communication between the customers and the traders, as seen earlier in this paper. It also emerged that some customers face the challenge of vocabulary during their conversations with the traders; a fact that forces them to borrow vocabulary from their mother tongues, thus leading to communication breakdown. Other challenges in communication arose from some customers' inability to communicate in English and Kiswahili, the two languages of wider communication in Kenya. In this case, some customers experienced problems of word pronunciation and ambiguity in speech thus leading to communication breakdown with the traders.

In this regard, we propose further research about language use in Eldoret town with the view of studying languages used in business communication and their role in business and how, through these languages, language barriers can be eliminated. We also propose research about barriers in other businesses apart from the pharmacies, agrovets, traditional medicine business, groceries and fish businesses which were under study during this research. Further, we propose research about language barriers in other towns apart from Eldoret which we focused on in this study.

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BIO –DATA

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