

The Dynamics of Language Maintenance among Speakers of Chindali in Mbozi District, TANZANIA

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This paper discusses findings of a research on the vitality of Chindali, a language spoken in south-west Tanzania, among speakers who have migrated to a new area, away from its heartland. Research shows that there is language maintenance. Several factors have contributed to the maintenance of the language – the desire for preservation and survival as a distinct group in the new location and pride in the culture, monolingualism, dominance of Chindali as the language of the family and community, the rural nature of the population, low levels of formal education and continued contacts with Bundali. The paper raises the need to conduct more studies on vernacular languages in contact, in order to understand the phenomenon and its impacts.

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1. Introduction

Chindali is a Bantu language spoken in Bundali division, Ileje district, in south-western Tanzania. Smaller populations of speakers of the language have migrated and settled in other areas within Tanzania and in Malawi (Swilla, 2000) often creating secondary heartlands for the language. In this paper, we focus on speakers of Chindali who have settled in Mbozi district in Tanzania, among the Nyiha-speaking people. Use of both Chindali and Nyiha is primarily confined to the family and

community domains. Both languages are used in the church, but while there is a Bible translation of Nyiha (Walsh and Swilla, 2000), the Summer Institute of Linguistics began preparatory work for translation of the Bible into Chindali in 2003. Out of the 120 local Tanzanian languages, only Swahili, the national language, is used in the public domain. Furthermore, only Swahili and English are official languages. Thus like other local languages, Chindali and Nyiha are not taught in schools or used in the media. Few studies have been conducted on language vitality of vernacular or community languages in

Africa, particularly in cases where there have been translocations of communities of speakers of a language. A study conducted recently (Swilla, 2003) revealed that there was maintenance of Chindali in Mbozi district. This paper discusses several factors that contribute to the maintenance of Chindali in Mbozi district.

Data used in this paper were collected in 2002 using a questionnaire, interviews and observation. Respondents were identified using a snow-balling sampling method. Chairpersons of village governments introduced the researcher to people of Ndali¹⁾ origin who are recognizable from their surnames (Swilla, 2000), since both daughters and sons inherit the same surname transmitted from paternal ancestors. We identified people of Ndali origin – these, with their spouses and children, were the respondents.

The intention was to administer the questionnaire to 300 people but we collected 286 completed questionnaires, giving a completion rate of 95.3 percent. Out of the 286 respondents, 131 were female (45.8 percent) and 150 male (52.4 percent). Respondents belonged to three age groups: 36.7 percent were in the 17–35 year age group, 35.9 percent in the 36–55 year age group and 27.4 percent were 56 years old and above. The age, sex, educational background and occupations of the respondents were some of the factors investigated.

Background

Where two or more languages come into contact and coexist in bilingual or multilingual communities²⁾, language main-

tenance or language shift can occur. The different languages of a bilingual individual often play different roles and functions, related to the social, cultural, economic and political realities of the community. The choices that individuals of a particular community make usually reflect their cultural values and result in either language shift or maintenance in that community. Language shift refers to situations in which a community gives up one language completely in favour of another (Fasold, 1984). It is a process by which speakers of a language gradually replace it with another language. In language maintenance, the community collectively decides to continue using the language or languages it has traditionally used. It is the retention of a language within a community through people continuing to speak it and to pass it on to successive generations (Australian Social Trends, 1999). Language maintenance is most commonly associated with mono-lingualism – the language is virtually certain to be maintained as long as monolingualism persists (Fasold, 1984). This paper discusses language maintenance among the speakers of Chindali in Mbozi district.

The majority of existing studies on language maintenance and shift describe situations in Europe and North America where migrant and native minority language communities exist in states that have one official and national language. With a few exceptions such as multilingual Switzerland and bilingual Belgium, the majority of European states are officially monolingual, despite the existence of linguistic minorities

1) Ndali is an adjective and a noun referring to speakers of Chindali.

2) I use “bilingual” and “multilingual” interchangeably, to refer to cases where individuals know more than one language.

within their boundaries. For example although Great Britain recognizes English only as the official and national language, minority linguistic groups such as Welsh and Gaelic exist. Basque and Catalan are minority languages in France and Spain and Saami is a minority language in Finland. Although there are several native languages in South America, Spanish is the official and national language in all countries, except for Portuguese in Brazil and French in French Guyana. Canada is an exception in the Americas because it is officially bilingual, recognizing both English and French as official national languages of the federal government. Despite the growing population of Spanish-speakers, the United States of America is officially a *de facto* monolingual country in English, despite the absence of a legal provision for a national or official language in the constitution.

In former colonies in Africa and Asia, where former colonial languages coexist with local languages, many studies focus on language contact between the language of the colonial power and a lingua franca that is often the national language. Thus in Tanzania, the majority of studies have been conducted on issues of bilingualism and diglossia involving Swahili and English (Mkilifi, 1978; Polome and Hill, 1980; Mazrui and Mazrui, 1995). Studies involving community languages in contact are rare. Although colonial languages are numerically a minority, they are dominant in many countries, due to their status and prestige. However, the most common type of languages in contact in Sub-Saharan Africa involves community languages; several

states have more than a hundred languages. Speech communities live side by side and often, one speech community relocates to another area where a different language is spoken. The vitality of the language of the migrants, whether there is language maintenance or shift, has received little attention in this region.

To a large extent, language choice, maintenance and shift concern the issue of identity. Bullivant (1984) and Blainey (1984) both underline the importance of language as the symbol of a group's identity, the core value of its culture and the survival of the group in multilingual settings. In Sub-Saharan Africa, language is often closely linked with ethnicity. Thus a speaker of Chindali is almost always an ethnic Mundali³⁾, except for small numbers of people from other ethnic groups who learn the language. In this study we have adopted the definition of ethnicity in Edwards (1985: 10):

“Ethnic identity is allegiance to a group – large or small, socially dominant or subordinate – with which one has ancestral links. There is no necessity for a continuation, over generations, of the same socialization or cultural patterns, but some sense of a group boundary must persist. This can be sustained by shared objective characteristics (language, religion, etc.), or by more subjective contributions to a sense of ‘groupness’, or by some combination of both. Symbolic or subjective attachments must relate, at however distant a remove, to an observably real past.”

3) Mundali is the singular form referring to the person.

Language loyalty persists when economic and social circumstances are conducive to it, but if some other language proves to have greater value, a shift to that other language begins (Dorian, 1982). Neither Chindali nor Nyiha appear to offer better economic benefits that would lead to language shift to any of them. Chindali has been maintained for generations in Mbozi district, despite the numerical superiority of Nyiha speakers. Factors other than economic ones for example age, gender, domains of use, religion and others appear to have contributed to this situation. In the sections below, I discuss some of the factors resulting from my study.

2. Factors in the maintenance of Chindali

The vitality of Chindali in Mbozi appears to be strong. The language has been maintained for generations and created a second heartland for itself. The research conducted investigated the linguistic repertoires of respondents – how many languages they knew and to what extent, when and with whom the speakers used different languages. The age, educational background and occupations of the respondents were crucial factors in the knowledge and use of languages. Several factors have contributed to the maintenance of the language – the desire for preservation and survival as a distinct group in the new location and pride in the culture, monolingualism, dominance of Chindali as the language of the family and community, the rural nature of the population, low levels of formal education and continued contacts with Bundali.

Probably one of the most important factors facilitating the maintenance of Chindali is the desire among Ndalis to preserve their culture and distinctness as an ethnic group in a new land, surrounded by other ethnic groups speaking different languages. There was strong association between ethnicity and language among the respondents. Although many respondents stated that ability to speak Chindali was not proof of being Ndali, the majority of them (96.4%) strongly felt that Chindali was important for the survival of their community and that it defined them as a group, different from the Nyihās, Nyakyusas, Nyamwāngas and others. Furthermore, nearly all respondents (97.8%) rated themselves as having a very good command of the language. The fact that more than three-quarters of the respondents (80.4%) believed that Chindali would continue to exist for generations is testimony to their desire to maintain their language and identity. Furthermore, more than a third of the respondents reported that they recounted traditional oral stories in Chindali to their children and grandchildren, in order to transmit their language and culture. Although respondents admitted that Chindali would change due to the influence of Swahili, they emphasized that Chindali would survive. The community had collectively decided to maintain its language, an important factor in the maintenance of a language (Fasold, 1984).

The pride of Ndalis in their language and culture was further shown in their desire to see the Bible translated in Chindali⁴, as a means of maintaining and preserving not only the language but also the identity,

4) During the fieldwork, the researcher mentioned that the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) was planning to translate the Bible in Chindali.

traditions and values of the Ndalīs. Further evidence of the pride is found in the belief among respondents that writing Chindali would assist them in understanding issues better and learning how to read and write it. They were convinced that writing Chindali would place that language at the same level as Nyakyusa, Nyiha and Safwa in which Bible translations already existed.

Monolingualism was another important factor facilitating the maintenance of Chindali. Children were acquiring Chindali as their first language, a key factor in the maintenance of any language. Several factors ensured the transmission of the language to children. Nearly all respondents in the old age group were monolingual speakers of Chindali. During the fieldwork, we encountered several men and women in the old age group who had been born and raised in Mbozi, had never visited Bundali but could only speak Chindali. Fasold (1984) underscores the importance of monolingualism in language maintenance – transmission of the language to younger generations is ensured since children acquire it as their first language. Apart from the presence of monolingualism, a big proportion of respondents (95.7%) reported that Chindali was their first language. The study also revealed that nearly one third of the respondents (34.2%) had no formal education – these included nearly half of the female respondents (48.2%) and 25.7 percent of respondents in the old age group. Formal education in Tanzania forces everybody to learn Swahili, thus lack of formal education greatly reduces the opportunities for learning another language, particularly in rural areas. Although some respondents may have had a passive knowledge of Nyiha or

Swahili, Chindali was their primary language of communication, in the family and in the community.

The big proportion of women without formal education also meant that they were less likely to know Swahili or use it to communicate with family members. Thus Chindali was their dominant language of communication, within and outside the family. In addition, the majority of female respondents who had completed primary education admitted that although they knew Swahili and could understand Nyiha, Chindali was their main language of communication and they only spoke Swahili when interacting with speakers of other languages. Finally, the fact that few women had occupations outside the home or did not interact frequently with people from other linguistic communities made Chindali their major language of communication. These are important factors since mothers are the major socializing agent in early childhood and play an important role in the acquisition of a child's first language. A study conducted in urban areas in Kenya (Mugambi, 2002) also emphasized the role of women in maintaining indigenous languages and transmitting them to children.

Given these findings, it is not surprising that more than three-quarters of the respondents (88.7 percent) indicated that their children under the age of five years acquired Chindali as their first language. Children were acquiring Chindali, although findings showed that children were increasingly learning Swahili before starting school. Indeed many respondents in the middle and young age groups made efforts to ensure that their children learned Swahili before starting school.

The acquisition of Chindali among children was also facilitated by the dominance of the Chindali as the language of communication within the family. During the study, 93.7 percent of the respondents reported that Chindali was the main language of communication with spouses, 92.1 percent with parents and 80.6 percent with children. All the factors listed above facilitate the transmission of Chindali to children, a major contributing factor in the maintenance of any language. Underlining the importance of transmission, Kishindo (2002) argued that the maintenance of a language is threatened when it is not transmitted as a first language. He partly attributed the loss of Chingoni in Malawi to the fact that its acquisition as a mother tongue ceased.⁵⁾

The maintenance of Chindali has created a second heartland of Chindali in Mbozi. Important concentrations of speakers of Chindali are found in several areas of Mbozi where family members, relatives or people from the same or neighbouring villages in Bundali have settled.⁶⁾ These migrant speakers of Chindali had in several cases named villages in Mbozi after villages in Bundali, an important symbolic link with Bundali but also identifying different groups. Concentration of specific linguistic groups of migrants has been identified as a major contribution of language maintenance and its culture in other parts of the world. Examples include French-speaking Canadians in Quebec province, in Manitoba, in parts of Belgium and Switzerland (Mackey, 1976). Perhaps one of the most significant factors facilitating the

maintenance of Chindali is the constant migration of speakers of Chindali to Mbozi, mainly from two sources. People are constantly migrating from Bundali which has a relatively high population density and where land is scarce. The area is also mountainous and major services such as transport are limited (Swilla, 2000). The second source consists of speakers of Chindali who retire from formal employment in other parts of Tanzania. The latter, often accustomed to relatively easy access to services such as transport, education and health facilities are reluctant to return to Bundali for reasons cited above. Mbozi offers the advantage of not being too far from Bundali and thus contacts with “home” can still be maintained. The constant migration facilitates the survival of Chindali, its culture and traditions. Furthermore, many respondents, particularly in the middle age group, had regular contacts with Bundali, another important factor in the maintenance of Chindali. They had close relatives in Bundali (parents, siblings) whom they visited and relatives in Bundali reciprocated the visits and sometimes decided to settle in Mbozi. A few respondents had also brought ageing parents to live with them in Mbozi and the parents spoke Chindali only, thus contributing to the maintenance of the language.

A further important factor in the maintenance of Chindali is the fact that the migration of Ndalis from Bundali to Mbozi does not appear to have disrupted the way of life characteristic of the community in Bundali. There appears to be no break be-

5) Mother tongue and first language are interchangeable terms in this document.

6) In Migombani village, we were told by the village chairman that about 90 percent of the people were Ndalis and related and the remaining 10 percent were Nyiha-speaking families.

tween Bundali and Mbozi, particularly given the constant migration and reciprocated visits. The migrants in Mbozi have maintained the rural life, linguistic and cultural patterns of Bundali. Farming, the main activity in Bundali is also the major occupation of the speakers of Chindali migrating to Mbozi – the latter cultivate the same crops grown in Bundali (maize, beans, sweet potatoes, coffee and bananas, etc).

At the level of the community, both Chindali (82.1%) and Swahili (81.4%) were used for communication during ritual ceremonies such as weddings and funerals, when the whole community participates. When a Ndali family hosted a ceremony, announcements were often made in both Chindali and Swahili – Chindali was used as a mark of identity with the speakers of the language and Swahili, as a recognition of membership in a community that included speakers of other languages. Worship is another domain that involves the community at large. The majority of respondents were Christians (70.2%) and almost one-third of them reported that Chindali and Swahili were used in churches. Swahili was used in all Christian congregations because members belonged to several linguistic groups. However, the use of Chindali alongside Swahili was an indication of the numerical importance of Chindali speakers in various congregations. All the animists (23.5%) reported using Chindali only for religious activities. Thus religion was an important factor in the maintenance of Chindali among Christians and animists, who constituted the majority of

Chindali speakers.

Nyiha, the host language, did not appear to offer any socio-economic advantages over Chindali and thus there was no compelling reason for speakers of Chindali to learn Nyiha. Furthermore, many Nyiha speakers apparently learn Chindali, particularly in areas where Ndalis constitute an important numerical group. Speakers of Nyiha and Chindali often interact with each person speaking her/his language – the two languages are not mutually intelligible but speakers of Chindali understand Nyiha and vice-versa, through constant interaction. In his discussion of Chingoni in Malawi, Kishindo (2002) reported that Nguni (spoken by breakaway groups of warriors from Zululand in South Africa) at first maintained a prestigious position because no other language was competing with it. However, intermarriage contributed to its demise, as Nguni-speaking men married local women and children learned the languages of their mothers as the first language.

In the case of Chindali speakers, there was strong evidence that their spouses from other linguistic groups (Nyakyusa, Nyiha, Nyamwanga, etc.) were learning Chindali, spoken in the home but also with the extended family of the spouse and the community of Chindali speakers. Many speakers of other languages who did not have Ndali spouses were also learning Chindali. The community of Chindali speakers was very strong, to the extent that Nyiha speakers were adopting some aspects of Chindali culture.⁷⁾ One of the Ndali cultural aspects

7) When the researcher visited the ward offices in Vwawa, a councilor explained that Nyihans were complaining that Ndalis had become members of councils of the elders in some wards because of their numerical strength and were introducing aspects of Ndali culture.

introduced among the Nyiha regards funerals. After burying the dead, Chindali speakers gather at the home of the deceased family, to share a traditional meal of cooked dry maize and beans (*ingati*). The Nyiha have adopted this practice.

Some respondents explained that Chindali was strong because its speakers did not feel intimidated by their hosts and they were proud of their linguistic and cultural heritage. The researcher, a native speaker of Chindali from Bundali also observed that Chindali was entrenched and its speakers followed many traditions typical of Chindali speakers in Bundali. During the study, she encountered Ndalis in different situations and places such as on farms, village paths or roads, including along the highway between Senjele and Mpemba.⁸⁾ They always spoke Chindali, even in Vwawa, a small town which is the headquarters of Mbozi district. The variety of Chindali the people spoke resembled closely the variety spoken in Bundali, in structure and accent. Although many Ndalis knew Swahili, there was little code switching or code mixing.

Swahili is encroaching on other Tanzanian languages and Chindali is no exception. Sommer (1998) observed that all ethnic languages in Tanzania were dying out in all parts of the country. Although this statement is an exaggeration, it underscores the fact that languages cannot escape con-

tact with others, particularly with Swahili and that contacts bring about changes. It is true that Swahili is impacting upon Chindali in Mbozi, particularly in the lexical field. However, Chindali is resilient and has managed to survive. Batibo (1998) concludes that the majority of Tanzanian linguistic communities are characterized by bilingualism with ethnic language predominance. These communities use their ethnic languages in all family, village and intra-ethnic activities but use another language, either Swahili or a regional or a local language for wider or specific communication. Chindali in Mbozi is the main language of the Ndali ethnic group but the influence of Swahili is also very real.

Nyiha, the language into whose heartland Chindali speakers have migrated, does not appear to have much influence on Chindali. This has not happened despite the numerical superiority of the Nyiha speakers. The main reason appears to be that Ndalis, particularly of the younger generations, encourage their children to learn Swahili, the language of prestige because of its status as the national language, official language, language of instruction in primary education and the language of mass media. Not knowing Nyiha does not appear to put Ndalis at a disadvantage.

The maintenance of Chindali in Mbozi contrasts with language shift encountered among speakers of Chindali who have set-

8) One morning, the researcher waited thirty minutes for the village chairman of Migombani village and stood beside the highway to Zambia; there were beginnings of a small trading center where vendors brought fruits, sold French fries and a variety of other goods. During the half hour, the researcher observed at least fifty people, children, youths and adults arrive or pass by. They all greeted each other and conversed in Chindali; yet this village is only a few kilometers from Vwawa township, the headquarters of Mbozi district. A few metres away, VODACOM was constructing a tower and when the researcher visited the site, everybody was speaking Chindali, except for the VODACOM officials who were foreigners or Tanzanians from other part of the country.

tled in Kyela and Rungwe districts, among the Nyakyusa speaking people. Rough estimates of the numbers of Ndalis in the two districts are more or at least equal to those in Mbozi districts. However, the maintenance of Chindali in Kyela and Rungwe districts hardly goes beyond the second generation. During the focus group discussions in Mbozi, some respondents explained that speakers of Chindali in Mbozi were not intimidated by their hosts, were proud of their linguistic and cultural heritage, maintained their language and speakers of other languages often also learned Chindali. They further argued that Chindali speakers who settled in Rungwe and Kyela districts were intimidated by the Nyakyusa, the largest ethnic group in south-west Tanzania and who often did not want to learn languages of other ethnic groups but instead expected others to learn Nyakyusa. Respondents further explained that speakers of Chindali learned Nyakyusa and adapted their surnames to resemble Nyakyusa surnames, in order to avoid discrimination or victimization, particularly in education and in acquiring land. Ndalis adopt Nyakyusa to communicate with their hosts; the need has not been felt in Mbozi, because Nyihias and Ndalis often communicate in Swahili or each speaks her /his language.

3. Conclusion

This paper has shown that there is maintenance of Chindali in Mbozi, facilitated by various factors discussed above. The desire to preserve the language and its culture are major driving forces in the maintenance of Chindali that will continue for

generations to come. The neglect of studies on local languages in contact in Africa needs to be addressed. More studies on the maintenance of translocated local languages in Africa are important in understanding various factors that contribute to their vitality but also to relationships with host and other surrounding communities in the new localities.

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