Reviving Marginalized Languages in Kenya: A Case Study of the Sabaot on Mount Elgon

By
Godfrey C. Kipsisey
Department of Anthropology
SIL Africa Area

Abstract

The threat of death hangs over many minority languages in Kenya. Historically, these languages are officially and functionally insignificant and marginalized. They are dying because they are relegated to low-level functions in the national arena. English, Kiswahili and a few dominant languages enjoy official roles in the public and educational domains. Minority language speakers feel inferior and prefer to hide their identity or adopt dominant languages.

While the Sabaot language loss seems to be reversing following intervention by language agencies and community support, the younger generation is keen and fixed on the benefits obtained from the use of English and Kiswahili. Sabaot revitalization is therefore faced with intergenerational transmission problems exacerbated by a negative attitude towards mother tongue education. The Sabaot writing system is far different from the conventional English and Kiswahili orthography and therefore an excuse for non-commitment.

For a proper understanding of why many Kenyan languages are facing extinction, a proper context and background of their present plight can be deduced from the Sabaot case study. The topics in this paper include: historical problems of marginalization; language policy in Kenya; language shift and transmission status of the Sabaot language; linguistic intervention and literacy programmes; challenge of new phonology and grammar; mother tongue teaching in public school and what the future holds of Sabaot language.
Introduction

The Sabaot are the only Southern Nilotic group which occupy the Mount Elgon area. The majority of the Southern Nilotes are in the Great Rift Valley\(^1\). The Sabaot people have lived in Mount Elgon and the neighbouring districts for many centuries (Goldschmidt, 1976; Huntingford, 1953; Kipkorir, 1973; Kipsisey, 2005). The Sabaot language has seven dialects which can be categorised into three clusters: (1) Northern dialect (2) Central dialect and (3) Southern dialect. The Northern dialect which is on the northern side of Mount Elgon and in Uganda comprises of Kupsapinya, Mbay and Sor. The Central dialect in Kenya consists of Somek and Kony while the Southern dialect comprises of Pok and Bong’om.\(^2\) Since there is considerable inter-marriage and free movement between the clans, the dialects are mixed to a large degree. The Bong’om, Tachoni and the Terik, (Heine, 1992, Roeder, 1986) who were originally Sabaot dialects are now completely or partially absorbed into the neighbouring Luyia and Nandi languages.\(^3\)

Sabaot history helps explain what the situation was like at the time of the Bantu and European settlement in the region. That period, in turn, has had an influence upon the present-day situation. The Sabaot were originally semi-pastoralist and currently practice mixed farming. In 1880s, the Bantu groups (Bagisu and Kitosha) from eastern Uganda began encroaching into Sabaot territories on the north and south-western frontiers of Mount Elgon. They were the first to make war against the Sabaot and this was the beginning of enmity between the two communities. Part of the Sabaot dialects (Tachoni and Bong’om) were absorbed by the in-coming Bantu groups (Kakai, 1992) while some of the Sabaot migrated out of the area. Subsequently, the Bantu migrants multiplied and settled on Sabaot land. The result was an increase of the Bantu element in Sabaot territory. It was not until the first-quarter of 1900 when the British begun establishing their administration in Kenya (Sorrensen, 1968). Their coming marked the end of the political importance of the Sabaot in western Kenya. The Bantu groups embraced colonial economy and took over administrative position in the new administration. The in-coming Bantu and European settlers acquired more and more Sabaot territory subjecting the aboriginal inhabitants into peripheral life (Makila, 1974).

The Sabaot population on Mount Elgon started to decline as some were dispersed into the neighbouring African Reserves, Uganda, and Tanzania to create room for white farmers. Others were gradually forced to settle on the fringes of Mount Elgon forest and the least desirable lands outside the region (Kenya Land Commission 1933; Okoth-Ogendo, 1991). When Kenya attained independence in 1962, a new wave of African settlers moved into the former white-settler farms in the Africanization of the White Highlands. This further alienated the Sabaot into the periphery of their ancestral land and national economy.

Culturally, there is enough evidence to show that Sabaot transmitted many pastoral traits which were considered superior to the Bantu in-comers, but the latter never acknowledged this. Evidence shows that the Sabaot was a major lingua franca even before the establishment of the Bantu groups. The toponymy or names of places, geographical features and present districts have come to the present settlers in Sabaot language. The majority of the names of the municipalities, towns and villages in western Kenya have Sabaot origin. After the Bantu groups moved into the region, their language became more dominant and encroached into Sabaot areas. The Sabaot who were dispersed to the neighbouring ‘British Protectorates’ often lost their language and identity.

The cultural indebtedness of the Bantu to the Sabaot remained a thorn in their [Bantu] necks. From 1960s, Bantu scholars begun re-writing the history of western Kenya and the aboriginal
Sabaot culture was depicted as ‘lowly’, marginal and not important. Earlier colonial records portrayed the Sabaot as ‘backward’. The Sabaot history thus has a bearing on the present-day language situation because one of the reasons why some Sabaot are shifting their language is due to the reputation fabricated by the colonialists and the Bantu immigrants, a reputation perfected by European settlers who declared that the Sabaot was a ‘dying race.’

**Language policy in Kenya**

Kenya has over 40 indigenous languages. It is also a multi-racial as well as multi-ethnic country with languages ranging from the populous Kikuyu to the almost extinct El Molo (Grimes, 2000). Kenya has never had a clear mother-tongue language policy since colonial times. The skewed or lack of it in education and national arena is a clear manifestation of the bad seed planted by colonial administration on the role of African languages in development. Many scholars, Whiteley (1974), Mutahi (1978) and Mbaabu (1996b) have pointed out that the language policy in Kenya has not been clearly defined. Language choice was seemingly determined by the availability of funds, the target audience and what the ‘master’ wanted to achieve. The competition that mother tongues faced from English and Kiswahili affected its development in the educational system.

In the early days of the colonial period, missionaries who were the first to get involved in education of Africans, favoured the use of mother tongues and embarked on developing orthographies and translating the Bible and other Christian liturgy in bigger languages (Gorman, 1974, Mbaabu, 1996a, Appleby, 1961, Itabete, 1974). As the colonial government got involved, various committees and commission were appointed to consider issues of language of school instruction and daily use. The Phleps-Stokes Commission of 1922 recommended that education should be introduced to the African in his or her mother tongue. The Bible Society of Kenya (BSK), spearheaded translations in larger languages such as the Agikuyu, Nandi-Kipsigis, Maragoli and Maasai. It also imported orthographies of these languages into minority dialects in what was seen as ‘standardized’ translation.

After the Second World War, political awakening made the Africans demand for more English at an earlier stage in education because they needed it to use in the Legislative Council (Legco) which was an early form of parliamentary deliberations and to take up clerical jobs (Mutahi, 1978). This demand continued until the time of independence when the Ominde Commission (1964) relegated mother tongue to verbal communication in classes 1-3 in primary schools. It was to be used for story telling sessions which constituted one lesson in a week while English was to be introduced in the first year of school (Musau, 2004). This was a grave mistake as the Gathathi Report (1976) recommended mother tongue or “languages of catchment areas” be used as languages of instruction from class 1-3. The implementation of the policy among small language groups is yet to be realised as there is no government support.

**Promotion of dominant languages**

During the colonial times and soon after independence, Sabaot children in lower primary school were taught Lu-Wanga, Lu-Ganda, Lu-Gishu and Lu-Bukusu languages. The larger tribes thus spread, became more aggressive, educated and influential while the smaller ones continued becoming marginalized, illiterate, ignorant and poorer. Many speakers of minority languages shifted to English and Kiswahili or to dominant languages as a survival technique because their
own people and languages were threatened by poverty and extinction. Minority languages were associated with backwardness not only in the minds of government officials but also in the minds of some of the speakers themselves.

For many years, written materials were availed in English and Kiswahili with some basic instructions given in the dominant mother tongues. As all these languages were not familiar to Sabaot children, the pupils faced extreme difficulty in understanding instructions from teachers who came from those dominant languages. At school or universities, very little emphasis was placed on minority language studies. People from dominant languages were placed to manage minority language programmes. These and many other structural problems made it difficult for the Sabaot and other minority groups to access education that would equip them to reinforce their community’s own development agenda. The official neglect of minority groups is therefore the main source of threat to the existence of their languages. This has in turn triggered language shift in these groups.

Minority languages in Kenya are also officially considered ‘useless’ and unworthy of being used or developed in official context because of their marginal status (Muthwii, 2004). Their perceived unworthiness which started with colonial administration increased year after year even to the present day. The British administration deliberately put a lot of effort in suppressing minority languages as they were considered obstacles to ‘de-tribalization’ policy and the spread of Pax Britannica (Kioko, 2004). Minority languages were compared to the dominant languages and conferred inferior status fit for assimilation. The Sabaot for instance were renamed Elgoni-Masai, while the Suba in Nyanza, were the Luo-Abasuba. All the misnomers are still in use and misrepresent the true identity of minority language groups. Unfortunately some of the misnomers and misrepresentations have been accepted by the individual groups themselves and general citizens of Kenya. The inferiority complex associated with indigenous minority languages has stuck in the minds of Kenyans especially as far as indigenous languages are concerned in official domains.

Big population and therefore major ethnic groups officially and functionally constitute a threat to small population languages because their speakers are the power brokers and policy makers in government. They inherited colonial power and make policies that favour their languages and threaten the very existence of minority language groups. Minorities are thereby made almost irrelevant and functionally impotent at the government, societal and individual level. There is a consequent deliberate pull and push towards major languages. The more powerful and functionally dominant a language is, the more pressing its pull and the greater the shift towards it, given the fact that the pressure for upward mobility, conformity and support from the many is uncontrollable (Fishman, 2001). This is quite obvious when we examine the position of the Kikuyu, Luo, Luyia and Maasai to a smaller extend which have absorbed many speakers. Take the case of the Sabaot, Embu, Tharaka and Suba whose minority status is a hindrance in election of own political and administrative representatives. In order to rise to key political positions, certain clans have assimilated and identified with dominant languages. The Mukogodo or Sakuye and Elmolo have absorbed into the Maasai both for social status and survival. The two languages are almost extinct despite the fact that a group of people still want to identify themselves as ‘Sakuye’ and ‘Elmolo.’
The very presence of English language and the disproportionate prestige associated with it overtly and covertly by virtue of the dynamic role that it has played in Kenya’s national life since colonial time is a real threat to minority languages. Unlike Kiswahili, English came to Kenya as a ‘masters’ or ‘Her Majesty’s’ language of command and graduated into something called ‘official language’ at independence. English has continued to enjoy this attitudinal posture and if anything, the subsequent government policy on language has extolled it to a level where anybody to look important and learned has to master it. The educational domain is still biased towards English. Part of the evidence for this assertion is that many urban children who have been to school have completely shifted away from mother tongue to English and Kiswahili. In Kenya, to be ‘educated’ is virtually synonymous with knowing and being able to use English. To be educated in this sense also provides a ticket for some high paying job and ticket for some membership to elitist groups. Speaking in Swahili and mother tongue is a reserve for the ‘rural folk’ and ‘street hawker’ who is looked down upon as ‘uneducated’ and poor. Given the fact that English assumes many official roles in education, administration, the mass media, judiciary and politics, its emphasis is prominent. The same can be said of other languages such as French in other African countries. To know and being able to use them means access to education, power and well being. Mother tongue represents marginality, impotence, poverty, illiteracy and socio-economic backwardness. English is therefore a ladder of upward vertical economic and social mobility.

In East Africa, many speakers of other languages have been attracted to Kiswahili and English language because of its functional dominance and power. This is because of its salience, functional dynamism and distinct ecological standing and weight in the national language policy of things. In Tanzania and Kenyan coast for years, Kiswahili has been swallowing or assimilating language groups into its fold. The functional dominance in day-to-day scheme of things dictates that language groups who desire meaningful participation must learn to use Kiswahili. The history behind the dominance can also be attributed to early church translations and policy which were taken by Tanzania language programmes in national development. However, the socio-economic and political rivalry between speakers of dominant languages versus minorities sometimes encourages a shift towards official languages rather than submit to or become a subject of an arrogant, intimidating and oppressive ethnolinguistic group. This however does not mean that any kind of bilingual acquisition automatically results in language shift.

Language shift and transmission status of Sabaot

There are several factors responsible for language shift in Sabaot; harsh socio-linguistic environment, marginalization and smallness in number of language speakers. Schooling in English and Kiswahili is probably the major cause. These two languages were used in early church evangelization and mission education before mother tongue was introduced. Language shift has also occurred because of human intervention or rather invasion as in the case of in-migration of dominant groups into Sabaot territory. Members of Sabaot minority were socially disadvantaged, that is less economically and educationally fortunate than the in-coming population. In many cases they had been marginalized even while staying in their traditional areas of residence. Those who migrated out were worse off as they were now in non-Sabaot
speaking environment and their children unable to learn the mother tongue. The other major cause was general poverty compared to dominant groups.

Politically and for administrative convenience, the colonial government grouped the Sabaot with Bantu groups in western Kenya until 1962 when the minority group demanded to be administered from Trans Nzoia and Rift Valley Province where the majority of their Kalenjin cousins reside. The forced administration of the Sabaot under a Bantu dominated region had for generations given an impression that a section of the population was in the process of being assimilated. The increased contact with Bantu immigrants, however, resulted in resentment and out-migration to avoid absorption. At the same time, intermarriage and absorption of some Sabaot dialects on the low-lying areas of Mount Elgon became clear evidence of how dominant language groups can wipe out minorities. On the other hand very few Bantu people ever learn how to use the Sabaot language because they see no need for it.

Although no Swahili community exists in the immediate neighbourhood of Mount Elgon, many Sabaot understand and speak Kiswahili. It is sometimes considered a thing of pride for an older Sabaot person to be able to speak fluent Kiswahili because it is one of Kenya’s major functionally and officially recognized languages. Many non-Sabaot have in fact constantly wondered how old illiterate Sabaot manage to speak Kiswahili. Also Kiswahili is spoken or rather used alongside Sabaot in the church. Pastors within or those posted to Sabaot areas by the mainstream Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, and Anglican Church use Kiswahili in their sermons. Thus the reading of the Bible often occurs in Kiswahili even though simultaneous translation into Sabaot while reading is occasionally done as well. The practice of reading the Bible in Kiswahili constitutes a threat to Sabaot language in the religious domain. Most of the local people who are able to read and need a Bible invariably buy a Sabaot New Testament, Kiswahili or English Bible. Moreover, the frequent utilization of a Kiswahili and English Bible in the church context makes possession of a Kiswahili and English Bible desirable to many. The church is thus another source of transmission of the two languages among the Sabaot people. In addition, the youths and the educated elite in general tend to use English translation as a show of advancement. In most cases, the use of Sabaot translation is for show or prestige rather than demand. Songs in churches are rendered in both Kiswahili and English while sermons are also frequently delivered in Kiswahili or English with Sabaot interpreter.

The use of Kiswahili is also common in most homes though mother tongue is emphasized. Children raised outside the Sabaot community are particularly disadvantaged as far as speaking mother tongue is concerned because many of them return to Sabaot area, not being able to communicate with their kin who are not competent in English language. Such children also have difficulty in interacting with other children in Sabaot language. In the homes of such children, parents either communicate in Kiswahili or English even when they are within the home. Parents can be heard speaking Sabaot and children responding in a mixture of Kiswahili and English Creole language called Sheng. When these children grow up and have families of their own, they speak Kiswahili, English and Sheng learned at school and urban setting to their own children.

The current major threat to the Sabaot language therefore is among the younger generations who have migrated to cosmopolitan areas. In such settings, there is no environmental enrichment for the use of the Sabaot language among children. Functionally, it is also seen to be irrelevant in the daily chores. Immediate neighbours and friends cannot speak it, and even in many homes, many parents would rather speak Kiswahili and English, in order to give their children a headstart in the educational domain than speak Sabaot which does not appear on the school
programme. Speaking mother tongue is highly discouraged by the use of a wooden ‘disc’ and sometimes punishable. Sabaot youths and educated elite take pride in being able to express themselves in ‘well polished’ English. It is the official language of communication and government administration. Many parents take pride in their children’s education and the ability to speak fluent English is a reflection of ‘modern’ upbringing and high status. The high regard for English is heightened by its national and international stature, the prestige it comes with in Kenyan society and the fact that it is required in educational circles and inter-ethnic interaction. English is required for upward social mobility and to achieve and to be considered an achiever, one must be able to speak good English. In official circles, Sabaot people are virtually incapable of using the Sabaot language. Sabaot pupils and students have to speak English in display of their achievement of the ‘educated’ statuses and show the difference with ‘ordinary’ Sabaot. However, English is not commonly heard in the rural homes. Those of secondary level may occasionally speak high sounding English among themselves in interpersonal interactions just to boost their self-image.

The working Sabaot in the local district office use both Kiswahili and English but communicate in Sabaot when dealing with kinsmen seeking for government services. However, their counterparts who have emigrated to urban centres are unable to do so because their clients use official languages. Sabaot youths living in cosmopolitan and urban areas often struggle to keep their language. The situation is grave enough that some of them completely lose their competence in the Sabaot language. When such youths get married to non-Sabaot spouses, the Sabaot language completely dies off in their own generation. Sometimes such people are so ashamed of their language to a level that when they hear people speaking on the street, they hide. They feel guilty for having lost their mother tongue to a level that they do not want other people to know that they are Sabaot by identity.

There has been intermarriage between the Sabaot and the Bukusu Bantu people. These intermarriages have resulted in heavy presence and transmission of Lu-Bukusu language. This constitutes a big threat to the Sabaot language considering the absorption of the Bong’om and Tachoni dialects in the interior of Bantu areas. However the Bukusu threat is not greater than the threat from Kiswahili because Bukusu does not have the national status that Kiswahili has. It is not also relevant in the educational process. The utilitarian value of Bukusu in trade links and interpersonal interactions within certain areas has resulted in the language becoming dominant among certain Sabaot population. Frequent interactions with Bukusu people have also been common over the years, especially since Sabaot areas came under Bungoma District Council.

The frequent intermittent tribal clashes between the Sabaot and Bukusu also tend to disrupt and widen previous harmonious interactions leading to language shift. For instance, in the 1990s, many of the Bukusu settled among the Sabaot were evicted and vice-versa for the Sabaot living amongst the Bukusu. The existing animosity between the two communities makes language use and transfer and use difficult and even dangerous. Those fluent in both languages do not speak for fear of being considered ‘traitors.’ Ethnic tension and war over land between the two communities has therefore created an additional negative effect on language shift.

In Kenya, the harsh socio-linguistic environment, marginalization and smallness in number of speakers of a language as in the case of the Sabaot plays a role in language shift. Official neglect and deliberate denial of developmental attention is prevalent (Onditi and Ogutu 2002). Although the Kenya government introduced free primary school education in 2003, the rate of school drop out is till high among these groups. Hunger, poverty and discrimination aggravates
the problem even further. The populist view of maintaining ‘national unity’ goes against maintenance of unity in multilingualism.

The low emotional, intellectual and functional neglect of one’s language is the major reason for many minorities shifting to other languages. The colonial and African government neglect and the official recognition of English and Kiswahili in the public and social arena are some of the factors that dictate shift towards a given direction. The pressure to survive and conform tends to reduce the emotional, intellectual and functional loyalty thus diverting their attention to major languages. Positive attitude in a language is a major factor in its maintenance both at the individual and societal level. Conversely, negative attitudes and inferiority complex with respect to ones language and identity precipitates language death.

**Linguistic intervention: translation and mother-tongue promotion**

The church clergy among the Sabaot become forerunners of the Sabaot Language Programme which was started in the late 1970s. Before that, an American couple, from the SIL International, Roger and Karen van Otterloo conducted a linguistic survey in 1977 on all the Kalenjin dialects and concluded that some of them had difficulties understanding what was called the ‘Standard Union’ Kalenjin Bible. Those who had difficulties included the Sabaot, Terik, Marakwet and Tugen sub-dialects. Danish linguists, Iver and Alice Larsen, then moved to Mount Elgon in 1979 to start a language translation programme under the auspices of the Bible Translation and Literacy (Kenya). Larsen carried out a second survey in 1981 which again showed that many Sabaot speakers did not understand the Union Kalenjin Bible. In 1982, the Larsens established a Sabaot orthography followed by adult literacy programmes which promoted the language and vernacular materials.

The Sabaot grammar exhibits features of attrition as there is a significant difference among the users of all ages. There is a difference in the active command of the vocabulary and code mixing with Kiswahili between older and younger generations. In the lexicon, Sabaot vocabulary shares a sizeable amount of words with other Kalenjin dialects in the semantic domains of kinship, animal colours and numerals. There is borrowing from Swahili and neighbouring Bantu in new objects and concepts such as farm tools, crop and animal husbandry, cutlery, utensils, clothes, medicine, hospital, electricity etc. There is code switching between Swahili and Sabaot and code mixing of Swahili in Sabaot particularly among the younger generation. The borrowing and mixing at the lexical and structural levels indicate a shift towards language loss. There is an increase in borrowing and mixing along generational lines and the younger generations borrow and mix more. If this trend continues to cover the entire lexicon and grammar and there is no sociolinguistic identification of it in areas bordering Bantu groups and cosmopolitan settlements, then it will be possible to speak of language attrition or weakening. At present, though there is resentment among the older generation about the excessive mixing of Swahili. However, it is accepted as a feature of the younger generation. The socio-linguistic identity of ethnicity through language, though weak among the younger generation, seems to gain ground as this generation grows older and strengthen its ties with the community.

There have been concerted efforts of language promotion, increased levels of mother tongue literacy and prolific production of literature in Sabaot by the Sabaot Translation and Literacy Programme (SBTL). SBTL sponsored forums for the regularisation of Sabaot orthography; it organised courses in reading and writing for adults; it organised workshops to write stories with parents and school children; sponsored art contests; sold cassettes and print vernacular literature.
The use of Sabaot language in lower primary schools and churches has gained momentum. It should however be noted that the multilingual education model used in Kenya is not geared towards maintenance of mother tongue. There is a lot of opportunity now for using literacy skills in Sabaot, even for personal purposes such as reading and writing. For reading, there is mother tongue literature apart from school primers. There are scripture portions, recreational reading materials for, video recording of the New Testament and cassette recordings. These factors promote Sabaot literacy at home and in the community (Taylor 2002).

In 1998, the Project shifted its emphasis from adult education teaching to promotion of mother tongue education (MTE) in conjunction with the Ministry of Education and the Kenya Institute of Education (KIE) by producing supplementary reading materials for children. The Ministry of Education policy recognizes the teaching of mother tongue for classes 1-3 but is not implemented due to shortage of mother tongue materials and lack of trained teachers (Kioko 2004). Consequently, most subjects are still taught in English and Kiswahili or occasionally in dominant languages. MTE is aimed at improving the quality of teaching and learning for the lower primary learners in order to ensure sustainability of the mother tongue promotion and development.

The question raised is why language learning is still faces resistance when Sabaot population growth and material production should be sufficient enough to stem language loss. The institutional reinforcement of language use, which is a feature of most oral societies, is limited and rare. The natural intergenerational oral transmission in Sabaot is weakened in terms of preference and competence among younger generation. The lure and attraction of towns is strong particularly among the young generation. This section of the community tends to emphasize Kiswahili and English which are taught and used in schools and cosmopolitan areas. Other problems rotate around resistance and attitudes towards the new writing system, and bias towards Kiswahili and English writing systems which are our next point of discussion.

The challenge of new phonology and grammar

Kalenjin and by extension the Sabaot phonology is rather complex. Several studies on Kalenjin dialects have been done especially by Tucker and Bryan (1962, 64/65), Montgomery (1966), Toweett (1975, 1979), Creider (1982), Rotland (1980, 81/82) and Larsen (1986, 1990). The earlier studies focused on the Nandi and Kipsigis which are the larger Kalenjin dialects, while Montgomery and Larsen did their studies on the Elgon dialects. The first real work on Sabaot phonology and grammar was done by Larsen (1984, 86/89/90).

According to Larsen, the Sabaot language has a phonemic inventory of 14 consonants and 20 vowels. The twenty underlying distinct vowel sounds fall in a 5x2x2 system where the five basic vowels, a,e,i,o,u, may be long or short, and are either [+ ATR] (Advanced Tongue Root) or [- ATR]. The contrast between long and short vowels is shown by an over-line. The contrast between vowels with advanced tongue root and vowels with retracted tongue root is shown by an overline. The short vowel /a/ which has two variants [+ and –ATR].The [+ATR] variant is actually pronounced very much like a /o/. In order to signal this pronunciation, the orthography writes /ä/ (with an overline) to represent a very much like /o/ pronunciation. For instance karaam ‘good’ its plural is written kāräamech instead of koroomech.

Sabaot language does not make a functional distinction between voiced and voiceless consonants (p/b, t/d, ch/j, k/g). The same sound in the same word can be either voiced or voiceless according to surrounding context. This is a real challenge on readers with a long
background in Kiswahili and English grammar. To try and write b, d and g together with p, t and k linguistically speaking will ‘cause’ confusion on the part of Sabaot readers and is another orthographic nightmare. For literate Sabaot speakers both young and old who are not familiar with the pronunciation of many items of Sabaot grammar, the use of special phonemic orthography transcriptions such as, /+/ and /-/ and /:/ cause a lot of psychological reading problems. Those who have tried to read and apply these symbols say it is difficult or rather abstract and distracting. A common phrase one hears from new readers is that the texts are ‘too busy’. For example, the Kupsabiny, Bong’om and Pok dialects do not have the short [-ATR] vowel e except in word-final position. The use of e in Sabaot orthography and writing system with an assumption that most Kalenjin dialects have it is causes reading and writing difficulties for the majority Pok-Sabiny influenced population. The Pok and Bong’om dialects do not have the phoneme /ll/ in contrast to the other dialects. This problem and other deep tone marks cause a lot of strain and discouragement among the readers in general (van Gingel 2008).

The common orthographic practice of writing the diphthongs /ky, ly, my, py, ry, sy and ty/ with letter i instead of the letter y raises another problem altogether. When the weak consonants w, y and yy occur in the beginning and at the end of a syllable, they are written in the new writing system as w and y even though these letters never occur at the end of a syllable in Kiswahili. In this respect, the Sabaot sound structure takes more of English than Kiswahili posing another challenge to new readers. Sabaot speakers who are accustomed to applying the conventional Kiswahili grammar rules in their daily writing find this cumbersome if not tricky.

Materials based on conventional English and Kiswahili orthography though with many shortcomings, are the preferred practice by a majority of Sabaot speakers, except for phonological forms which can be indicated in dictionaries. It is unfortunate that the conventional non-phonemic orthography used in Kenya has had a much bigger influence on Sabaot attitudes. For those familiar with vowel length contrasts in other languages, the long vowels are only marginally longer than short vowels in Sabaot despite the very great functional load borne by the contrast.

The present Sabaot grammar is technically good for linguists and the language is described from the point of view of modern linguistic theory. However, an effort is needed to make the grammar suitable for non-linguists by eliminating formalism and linguistic jargon that abound in the manuals. Evidence which leads one to make these analytical claims is the difficulty readers and even mother tongue teachers’ face in trying to understand some of the issues. It is of course impossible to write a grammar which is entirely non-theoretical as this is the only way of discovering new facts about the language. However, the readers need simple transition primers and grammar books that are self-teaching and motivating with less explanations.

In summary, the dialectical differences which were originally looked as not important are also contributing to reading, writing and understanding problems. For instance, the Pok-Sabiny influenced speakers find it hard adjusting to books written in the Kony or Masop dialect. The assumption that certain vowels and pronunciations are ‘original’ and ‘found’ in other Kalenjin dialects and therefore ‘standard’ seems to have been an argument used to convince the majority of Sabaot dialects to adopt into what was termed ‘unified’ ‘standard’ writing system. The general negative response and apathy towards written Sabaot seems to emanate from this assumption and other contextual difficulties. Despite the fact that Sabaot writing system was based on modern principles for alphabet making in contrast to the ‘Union’ Kalenjin alphabet, learning and reading is difficult and needs to be addressed. The vast difference in sound structure between Swahili and Sabaot makes it more difficult for learners used to Kiswahili and English. Sabaot has an intricate
grammatical tone system which is completely foreign to both Swahili and English readers. Because Sabaot is so very different from Swahili, it demands more time and effort for new readers who in most cases feel frustrated and drop out of literacy classes. The standardization was only practical in terms of costs for translation, publishing scripture portions and literacy materials. It is now evident that dialectical differences have a significant influence on acceptance, use and transmission of written Sabaot.

Is there a future for the Sabaot language?

Revitalization of a language presupposes endangerment and therefore the first thing to establish is whether there are indicators that a language is on the verge of extinction or not. One way to determine this is to use Fishman’s (1991) continuum of the eight stages of language loss. The assumption in these stages is that the language under consideration had at some point been developed to a point where it is used at higher levels of government and in higher education, but for the majority of the mother tongues in Kenya, none of them has ever reached that stage. The factors of language marginalization analysed above halted a process of development started by missionaries. Therefore Fishman’s stages 1-3 have no direct application to Sabaot mother tongue.

Sabaot with the development of materials for teaching of basic literacy skill could be said to be at Fishman’s stage four. At stage four, the endangered language is still required in elementary schools. However, though the language policy in Kenya requires the teaching and use of mother tongue as medium of instruction in lower primary schools, the implementation of this policy has encountered many problems and therefore in practice mother tongues are barely used for educational purposes and can therefore be said to fall below Fishman’s stage four.

Within the continuum, Sabaot is in stage five and six; that is, it is still very much alive and used mainly for oral communication in the community and there is still intergenerational use of many of them. Since the current development of Sabaot will not move to a point where it will be used in higher education or higher levels of government, mass media, business, its present and future elementary usage is a prerequisite for downward nose-dive to extinction. Therefore care is needed to look at signals of loss and how that can be reversed. The signals to watch are: (1) literacy retrogression, (2) weakening transmission processes, (3) reduction of domains of use and (4) poorer representation in modern technology.

A language attitude evaluation done in 2004, provided crucial information regarding people’s attitudes towards Sabaot language and the success of the mother-tongue programme (Mutinga, 2005). The report indicates that out of 498 pupils sampled, 86% spoke Sabaot as their mother tongue whereas 14% used Kiswahili, Iteso, Lu-Bukusu or Tachoni as their mother tongue. The reasons for use of languages other than Sabaot as mother tongue were given as; (1) intermarriages as in cases where one parent was from a non-Sabaot community and therefore Kiswahili became common language, (2) presence of non-Sabaot speakers within Sabaot territory (3) use of non-Sabaot language in cosmopolitan and urban centres (4) negative attitudes from parents with formal education and employment.

The evaluation noted that a sizeable percentage of Sabaot parents now appreciate mother tongue promotion and support its implementation in schools. It was observed that the use of Sabaot language for instruction in schools did contribute to the re-establishment of a precise sense of cultural awareness and identity. The pupils get more involved in folk songs, sayings, riddles and narratives. This in turn aroused cultural self consciousness, keen interest and
willingness to participate in cultural activities. Initially many were generally negative and this arose from an assumption that everybody was well versed in mother tongue and saw no need of being taught. The parents also assumed that since mother tongue was not one of the examinable subjects, there was no need of spending time and money promoting it in schools.

The team found out that mother tongue implementation despite having created enthusiasm among stakeholders, face problems of poor communication, inadequate personnel, negative attitude among parents and teachers and shortage of teachers and teaching materials. Some young Sabaot teachers looked at mother tongue teaching as ‘uncivilized activity’, backward and are not interested in any in-service training. They are pre-occupied with the idea that only English is the language of upward mobility. The report recommends government approval, adoption and inclusion of Sabaot Mother-tongue learning and teaching materials in the curriculum ‘Orange Book’. The inclusion of these materials into KIE inventory of approved books would enable poor schools to access government funding (KIE, 2001).

Observations indicate that older Sabaot were generally positive towards vernacular despite the fact that they have difficulties mastering the current Sabaot orthography. At the time of its development, the people had become used to the English and Swahili systems and found Sabaot writing system ‘complicated’ and difficult. Many, however, still strongly believe in the preservation of their language and culture for maintenance of Sabaot identity and communication. While they are satisfied with the introduction of mother-tongue education to lower primary schools, they are not happy with government policy of restricting teaching of Sabaot in mixed schools which have historically favoured larger dominant languages in cosmopolitan areas and neighbouring districts. They want the younger generation to improve their Sabaot. The group along with a team from the Sabaot Mother-tongue Education Programme emphasizes the need for teaching Sabaot in Lower Primary schools and for writing books in it to impart culture and heritage to the younger generation. They also believe that the use of Sabaot in schools will improve the status of their language.

An internecine orthographic ‘war’ has been quietly boiling within the Sabaot elite and community without erupting to the surface level. The main areas of concern are use of phonological transcription in translation discourse, vowel harmony or what majority refer to as ‘heavy’ and ‘light’ vowels, the use of ‘long’ and ‘short’ vowels, the retention of obsolete lexicon, generation of new words and ‘over-translation’ and the issue of dialect variation. The younger generation need a blending of the conventional and modern writing system in Sabaot orthography to sustain the use and promotion of mother tongue. This argument is based on the fact that Kenya’s educational system uses English and Kiswahili orthography and grammar which has a major influence on people’s attitudes towards vernacular.

Regarding the attitude towards Kiswahili, men of the older generation believe that learning Kiswahili is inevitable to overcome marginal existence. They however, strongly feel Kiswahili must not be used exclusively in their homes, in public awareness barazas or in cultural practices. This group feels that the dominance of Kiswahili will destroy the Sabaot language and culture. The women of this group in certain remote areas shy of speaking in Kiswahili as mentioned elsewhere; they even refuse to acknowledge their knowledge of this language. The older group and mother-tongue promoters accuse the younger generation of discouraging the youths from learning Sabaot language by speaking frequently in Kiswahili at home and public gatherings.

The attitude of middle group towards Sabaot is ambivalent. It is not strongly positive as the older group, though they feel that there is a need to preserve Sabaot to transmit it to their children and to teach it in school. They also support the view of the older group that for their
survival and identity as Sabaot people, preservation of their language is even in the home domain. For them, Kiswahili is the language of wider communication and English for prestige and power, which gives them opportunities in Civil Service jobs and higher contacts.

The younger group is extremely shy of speaking Sabaot, particularly in the presence of strangers except when they want to talk ‘in camera’. They tend not to acknowledge it. They prefer a mixed code of Kiswahili, English and Sabaot when they speak among themselves. The older are critical to the Kiswahili and English of the younger believing that it is not ‘refined’. As the youths grow older, however, there is an attitudinal change and they increasingly feel that Sabaot is important to give them an identity. This is more or less a Kenya problem that permeates every sector of public life. However, names advertise ones ethnic identity.

The above scenario of use and attitude among three age groups regarding Sabaot and Kiswahili and English shows that the entire community is positive about bilingualism and there is no loss of the mother tongue yet. The gradual decline in the use of and in the empathy for Sabaot down the age groups does not necessarily point towards ultimate loss of the mother tongue. This is because both the utility value of Kiswahili and English and the identity value of Sabaot language are at work and there is increasing realization of the need for identity and preservation as persons grow older. The greatest threat to the language is the biological extinction of the community which is non-existent as for now. The community tries to check that by controlling reproductive rules, by discouraging marriage outside the community and by reinforcing Sabaot identity among such cross-marriages. The children born of such inter-ethnic marriage identify with the father’s clan, even if some desert the community to stay in urban areas. The ‘father’ tongue is psychologically kept though may be extinct. It is not strange to find people who identify with certain ethnic groups even though they cannot utter a single word from those languages. The conscious efforts, though limited, to preserve the language are still there.

**Strategies for promoting survival of small languages**

Before concluding this paper, it would be in order to propose some concrete strategies for ensuring the survival of small languages in Africa and these include:

- **Official institutionalization of multilingualism**: there is need to officially institutionalize the use of small languages to promote growth and boost its prestige. This involves deliberate time allocation for their use in schools, radio and television.

- **Involve indigenous communities in language development efforts**: minority communities need to be involved emotionally, intellectually and mentally in language revival efforts in order to own the burden of carrying on even when there is no external funding or assistance.

- **Promotion of mother-tongue education in primary schools**: there has been mother-tongue policy in Kenya but not much implementation and learning takes place. The Kenya Institute of Education (KIE) and the Ministry of Education should facilitate the training of teachers and the preparation of mother-tongue materials in collaboration with minority language programs.

- **Adopt modern language teaching/learning strategies**: the mother-tongue teaching and learning methods should focus on modern strategies of language reconstruction such as television and radio use, video-cassettes for instructional conversation; language
speech contests, cartoons; representation of cultural production in instructional materials.

- Promotion of language through music and cultural events: this involves the use of vernacular in general music, traditional festivals, art exhibitions and oral literature. All of these have been shown to encourage the revival of endangered languages.
- Promotion of practical research in minority languages: this involves establishment of promotional centres in collaboration with institutions of higher learning through publication of materials, dissemination of information through websites, e-learning, seminars and lectures.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have seen that the Sabaot community is undergoing many changes. For example, youths are graduating from learning institutions and moving to urban areas in search for better life. These changes continue to intensify because life in the village is considered ‘boring.’ The young seem to find no motivation or encouragement to continue practicing and keeping customs which they think restrict their survival. This creates serious intergenerational gaps in the transmission of mother tongue and constitutes a great danger to the development and existence of the Sabaot language. For instance, Sabaot children in cosmopolitan areas are unable to speak Sabaot language due to lack of intervention and involvement. Parents in rural settlements emphasize national languages with a strong believe that this will improve their children’s grades in school. For the Sabaot language to remain alive, its speakers both in rural and urban settings must have deep emotional involvement in consciously ensuring its existence.
References cited:


Endnotes

1 It is a tradition for authors to refer to Sabaot as ‘Elgon Masai’ or Sebei-speakers; these two terms were used to denote the Elgon Kalenjin cluster.

2 UNESCO’s World Atlas of “World Languages in Danger of Disappearing” classifies Bong’om and Terik among 16 Kenyan languages that are either extinct or moribund or endangered; they are also listed among Africa’s 300 languages consigned to extinction. The 16 endangered Kenyan languages include Boni, Kore, Segeju and Dahalo at the coast; Kinare, Sogoo, Yaaku in central parts; Elmolo, Burji, Oropom in the north; Bong’om, Terik and Suba in western Kenya.

3 The Tachoni and Terik are the two dialects from this section that are now fully or partially absorbed into Bantu and Nandi groups; the Bong’om dialect in central Bungoma is partially absorbed into the dominant Lu-Bukusu language.

4 A term used by early European settlers and administrators to justify the displacement of Sabaot from their ancestral lands in Kitale Plateau in western Kenya.

5 Tom Mboya, a Suba who was buried in Mfangano Island on Lake Victoria and the former Vice President. Michael Kijana Wamalwa whose ancestry was partly traced to a Sabaot clan on Mount Elgon. The two remained ‘Luo’ and ‘Luyia’ respectively to sustain their national stature which was derived from tribal politics.

6 A Kenyan primary school system where a wooden disc is handed down to whoever is found speaking mother tongue and which leads to punishment.