

Language shift in Nairobi

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Language shift in African cities is a vigorous process, reflecting a changing language ecology. Based on recent fieldwork, this paper examines some of the facts, factors and motivations concerning intergenerational language shift in Nairobi, in particular away from the 'vernaculars'. While in no way aiming to give a complete picture, we nonetheless examine the effects that factors such as educational level, time of familial residence in Nairobi, parental intention, location, interethnic marriages and ethnic background have upon primary language shift in a complex multilingual environment. An issue raised by this environment is not just who is shifting, but to what; English is used in the home in some middle-class families, sometimes in preference to varieties of KiSwahili.

This is not the first such work on language shift in Nairobi. However, Lieberman, Dil and McCabe's (1981) report on language shifts taking place in the Nairobi in 1964 focused on the Gujarati community, while giving some useful data on shifts from African languages, demonstrating that this process is not new.