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Linguistic variation in a multilingual setting

Evidence from Kenya, Africa

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ABSTRACT

The phonological and grammatical variations in the English spoken by teachers at primary school level in Kenya present an interesting sociolinguistic area of investigation. This study set out to: identify and describe both phonological and grammatical variations in the English spoken by teachers at primary school level in Kenya; determine how these variations depart from the British standard variety; correlate the linguistic variation observed with the social variables of ethnicity, gender, educational level and rural-urban dichotomy; and discuss the implications of the emergent sociolinguistic patterns for pedagogy in Kenya.

To achieve the aims of the study, we collected data from teachers in the rural areas of Bomet, Siaya and Thika districts and from Nairobi area, an urban setting. Judgemental sampling method and the social network approach guided us in choosing the required study sample. Classroom interactions were tape-recorded to obtain the language data and a questionnaire was used to elicit biographical data and information about educational qualifications and schools attended. In data collection, analysis, interpretation and discussion, we were guided by the Labovian Language Variation Theory. For the identification and description of the linguistic variations, description of the British Standard English as outlined in Roach (1998) and Wells (1982) for phonology and in Quirk *et al.* (1985) for grammar, were used as reference points.

The general finding is that the English spoken by teachers at primary school level in Kenya varies from the British standard variety - the model that is supposed to be used at all the education tiers in Kenya. This variation cuts across all the social variables investigated. Of the social variables, ethnicity was found to impact heavily on both the phonological and grammatical systems in the spoken English that the sampled teachers used. Education was also found to influence the variations. In virtually all the linguistic categories observed, the spoken English of graduate teachers had fewer variations. The rural-urban dichotomy showed that urban speakers in the study sample

approximated more to Standard English than their rural counterparts, especially in phonological variation. In the area of gender, although women generally recorded lower mean scores in most of the variants than men, the results of the analysis of variance show that, at 5% level of significance, the difference was not statistically significant.

These findings have implications for the various groups involved in language education in Kenya: policy-makers and syllabus designers; the Kenya National Examinations Council; publishing houses; language researchers; teacher-trainers; teachers and learners. The study argues for the consideration of the sociolinguistic reality of English in Kenya and adoption of a local variety of English, a variety that will be close to other standard varieties, thus making it possible for Kenyan speakers to maintain mutual intelligibility with international speakers of English while maintaining their Kenyan identity. This recommendation calls for an extensive research into English as it is used in Kenya, leading in turn to the description, codification and, ultimately, the use of Kenyan English in schools.