Abstract:

This sociolinguistic study investigated the use of Kiswahili as a lived practice among ordinary citizens in the East African Community (EAC), specifically, in Busia and Namanga border towns. The aim of the study was to investigate language-based decisions about Kiswahili in the day-to-day interactions among ordinary citizens, and to analyse how these decisions contribute to social integration in the EAC. The study was motivated by the on-going endeavour to promote Kiswahili as a lingua franca and tool for social integration in the EAC. The study used the Citizen Sociolinguistics model (Rymes and Leone, 2014) to collect and analyse data along four objectives: (i) to establish the patterns of use of Kiswahili, (ii) to explore the extent of use of Kiswahili, (iii) to ascertain the general linguistic features of Kiswahili used, and (iv) to establish ideologies (perceptions and attitudes) which ordinary citizens have about Kiswahili. Observations, Interviews and FGDs were used to collect data from trade, transport, religion and entertainment domains. The study found that language-based decisions of ordinary citizens in Namanga and Busia towns about Kiswahili exhibit varied patterns, extents, linguistic features and ideologies, from space to space. While in some spaces Kiswahili effectively aids social integration, its potential is limited in others. An interesting finding regards contact and conflict in Kiswahili, a situation that is shaped by various sociolinguistic issues such as varieties and labels, status and prestige, perceptions and attitudes, identity construction and linguistic power struggles. Linguistic power struggle between Kiswahili and other lingua francas, notably, English and Luganda, also affects the use of Kiswahili in interactive social contexts. The study recommends that more empirical studies should be carried out in other socially multilingual settings in the EAC in order to add to the knowledge about the use of Kiswahili as a lived practice, and hence, its prospects as a tool for social integration in the EAC.