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THE ROLE OF INDIGENOUS ECONAMING SYSTEMS IN ECOLOGICAL CONSERVATION: A CASE OF LUBUKUSU AND LUKABARASI LANGUAGES IN WESTERN KENYA

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Abstract

This paper endeavours to bring fresh insight into the role of African indigenous languages in the global campaign against environmental degradation. It examines how linguistic practises impact the natural environment. In this respect, the paper reports on the findings of an investigation that focused on the Econaming system in Kabarasi and Bukusu societies that sought to ascertain the role of Econames in mitigating ecological destruction. The rationale for this position is that such practices have the potential to mitigate the disruption of the ecosystem. Furthermore, the linguistic systems of the Bukusu and Kabarasi indigenous societies cherished different plants and animals by naming new-borns after them. By doing so the ecosystem earned a special place and was therefore venerated. The paper also aimed at comparing the meanings and representations associated with the Econaming systems in both Kabarasi and Bukusu naming systems. A combined method of data elicitation from Lubukusu-Lukabarasi and the native speaker's intuition was used to collect data. Animal and plant Econames that relate to the environment were inferred for analysis. The indigenous Lubukusu and Lukabaras names were correlated with the associated ecosystems among native speakers of these languages. The analysis revealed that the meanings associated with the Econaming system among the Kabarasi and Bukusu is one of the strategies that can be employed to ensure more sustainable and acceptable environmental preservation measures. The collected data revealed that indigenous language practices are found to be more appropriate and applicable in ecological preservation among the rural communities. The paper, therefore, recommends that the government and other policy-stakeholders should pay more attention to the Econaming practises so that local people's conservation practises are recognised to enhance global environmental conservation measures.

Keywords: Lubukusu, Lukabarasi, wildlife species, habitat loss, Econaming

Introduction

The naming system in different societies can reveal people's identity. The paper sought to establish the names related to the environment (Econames) among the Kabarasi and Bukusu, languages. According to Lewis et al (2016), these two languages belong to the Luhya macro-Language of Western Kenya. The paper focuses on Lukabarasi and Lubukusu language practices which are manifested in the naming system related to the ecosystem. The investigation is motivated by the fact that the indigenous naming practises can be significant tools towards contributing to the global environmental conservation measures. The data for this investigation is drawn from Lubukusu and Lukabarasi languages, spoken in Western Kenya. The focus is on how these two communities employ indigenous Econaming practises to co-exist with the flora and fauna around them.

The Kabarasi and Bukusu have a rich tradition with respect to their naming systems where children are named after a well-structured system of kinship relations. In some cases, these names may reflect different plant species, venerated animals, and seasons of the year or even nature. In recent times, however, the meaning of these names is continually becoming vague and others are completely getting lost. Lindo and Bundsgaard, (2000: 10-11) affirm this assertion by stating that as the environment changes, "the language level that changes quickly is the lexicon". As observed by Widayati (2019), such change is occasioned by the following three dimensions: ideological, social, and biological. Therefore, there is a need to investigate and document the significance of indigenous linguistic practices that have a direct implication on the ecosystem. This would establish how the indigenous linguistic practises can be factored in the global ecological conservation goals. The investigation focuses on the structure and meaning of selected Kabarasi and Bukusu Econames as one way of documenting the significance of such language practice in mitigating environmental degradation. Indigenous linguistic practices that reflect the culture of a community can be cheaper with less probability of failure. Furthermore, the idea of revitalizing these linguistic customs resonates well with the concept of reviving indigenous languages that contributes significantly to the global environmental protection agenda. Furthermore, due to failure to recognise and incorporate the local communities in environmental conservation, the majority of the rare plants and animals in Kenya's ecosystem are threatened with extinction, mainly because of human activities such as environmental destruction, pollution, human settlement, and introduction of exotic species.

Thus, this ecolinguistic study focuses on the relationship between the linguistic practices among the Bukusu and Kabarasi communities and changes in the physical environment. As noted by Widiyati (2019), languages existing within certain geographical areas have close relationships with the environment and the speakers of these languages. The author argues further that people and the environment significantly influence each other. However; there has been minimal interest in the role of indigenous languages in environmental conservation measures. This is despite the fact that although the environment remains the foundation for global human survival, there is a huge risk of losing a big chunk of the flora and fauna if the relevant stakeholders don't recognize and utilize the available conservation measures.

Furthermore, Kenya, like most developing countries relies on international donors to source her conservation programmes. However, over-reliance on such sources may not be reliable. Traditional language practices, on the other hand, can be economically affordable and sustainable compared to other strategies. For instance, it may be less costly for stakeholders to the Econaming systems governing resource use and conservation.

The role of Econaming in ecological conservation

Gomez (1998) and Rucker (2005) draws the relationship between words and the objects they refer to by observing that words in any language are a significant reflection of the environment where people who use them live. Traditional naming systems are common in virtually all traditional societies. Among the Kabarasi and Lubukusu communities in Western Kenya for instance, the naming systems are significant markers of a person's part of belonging in a family and entire society. Harder (2008) identifies two different kinds of human names; personal names and first names. This paper focuses on family names that link people with their environment.

The Kabarasi and Bukusu communities attach significance prominence to traditional naming systems. The investigation focuses on Econaming practises with the view of establishing the relationship between the linguistic systems and the environment of the speakers. The question is whether recognising and encouraging these practises can be used to support conservation efforts. This is because, as argued by Murphree (1993), support for such local language practices can be an alternative affordable option in ecological conservation.

Reviving the Econaming practices is part of including the local communities in environmental conservation. Such initiatives are not only cheap but also more likely to be accepted by the local people. Leader-Williams *et al.* (1990) observe that existing conservation strategies in Africa are majorly dominated by law enforcement – which requires huge investments by conservation stakeholders. Furthermore, the conflict between law enforces and the communities may impede the conservation measures in certain settings. Stibbe (2015) challenges ecological stakeholders and people to act responsibly about their relationship with the environment and make meaningful changes to improve the environment. This may involve revitalizing local practises that can conserve biodiversity.

Ecocriticism is based on the interrelatedness between the physical world and the human culture through the language associated with the environment. It can be reflected in the relationship between the people and the environment they live in as represented in language. Ecocritics examine the ways nature is reflected in the language choices and attempt to analyze their applicability with environmental problems. In this view, the study of nature is geared towards understanding the imbalance of the ecosystem. This is informed by the fact that most of the global environmental problems are caused by persistent exploitation of nature as a result of human activities.

Language is comprised of sounds, meanings, and rules for combining them as shared and understood by a speech community. In this sense, language use may influence its users' perceptions of the world. Such perceptions may influence what users of a particular language consider significant, and employ practises that are relevant to the environment. This investigation seeks to evaluate the relevance of

indigenous language systems in ecological conservation options. This is informed by the fact that paying attention to such practices may shed light on the principals of co-management approaches that propose the sharing of power, rights, and responsibilities between the environmental stakeholders and local community resource users (Berkes 2003). Furthermore, since the local people frequently interact with their surrounding environment, they are therefore active participants and have the potential to serve as better game-changers of the ecosystems. Sinar and Haidir (2019) also argue that the destruction of some ecosystems causes the loss of some vocabulary in communication. Such loss may negatively affect the existing flora and fauna.

The investigation of Kabarasi and Bukusu naming systems endeavors to document the significance of language practices in environmental conservation. Agrawal and Gibson (1999) argue that failure to involve the local people in the management of their surrounding ecosystems may lead to destructive use of these resources. Attention was therefore given to the Econaming practises as a key tool to be considered in conserving the environment. Equally significant is the concept of modernity and its implications on the existing natural environment. According to Giddens (1991), modernity in Africa emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century and greatly influenced the social lives of many communities. For, instance, Foucault (1995) observes that industrialization was characterized by the decline of the existing traditional social order, migrations, and destruction of some ecosystems for industrialization and urbanizations. Mühlhäusler (2003) also notes that some companies can use specific language strategies when addressing environmental issues to distract human attention from environmental problems. In this view, significant traditional systems were either ignored or faced extinction.

Bang and Døør (1996) note that language is an inseparable part of the environment, where it derives its meanings. Therefore, the lexis of any language reflects the environment where the language is used. In the same vein, Alexander and Stibbe (2014) argue that language not only reflects the environment but also how different ecological discourses view the relationship between humans and their ecosystems. According to Stibee (2003), ecological discourse plays a significant role in determining how people relate with animals. Sibbe (ibid) for instance argues that the linguistic distancing techniques used in the pork industry degrade the pigs hence legitimizing the inhumane farming conditions that these animals are subjected to. Moreover, the assertion by Crystal (1997) that the world; languages like English are displacing local languages needs serious questioning. This is because; some valuable traditional ecological practices may be lost when indigenous language systems are neglected.

The investigation is based on Stibbe (2015) Evaluation Theory. Stibbe (2015) asserts that evaluation is concerned about stories in people's minds concerning their lives. In this connection, Evaluation Theory can be linked to linguistic systems used by communities in relation to the environment where they live. Furthermore, language evaluation can be used to infer the relationship between peoples' culture and the ecosystem. According to Hunston and Thompson (2005), evaluation relates to the speaker or writer's views or attitudes on certain concepts. Evaluation Theory is therefore relevant in analysing the relationship between Econames and ecological conservation among the Kabarasi and Bukusu communities.

Method

A corpus of both male and female names was selected. A random sample of twenty (12) respondents drawn from Lukabarasi and Lubukusu respondents were selected with each language group providing 6 informants. The main instruments of data collection were structured face to face interviews and native speaker intuition. In particular, data was drawn from a cross-section of ages, the two sexes, and the sub-clans. Selected 50 proper names were analyzed ecocritically according to their forms and meaning.

In respect of the face to face interviews, respondents were asked to provide five most common and varied male names and an equal number of female names and their meanings as well as the circumstances of their use. The responses were recorded in a notebook. A backup tape recorder was used for future reference.

Findings and Discussion

Ecocritical analysis of the names under study involved semantic and pragmatic analysis of each name collected as well as analysis and discussion of the semantic association of individual names to the related ecosystem. In order to carry out the analysis as well as the discussion appropriately, a framework of analysis is provided. The framework features three categories generating Lukabarasi and Lubukusu Econames and these are Econames related to plants, Econames related to wild animals, and Econames related to nature. These are discussed in detail in the following sub-sections;

Econames associated with plants

With respect to plants, Lukabarasi and Lubukusu speakers attach great significance. To some plant species. Consequently, these species have a prominent role in the naming system in these speech communities. In this regard, several households name their male and female kin after these plants as shown in Table 1 below. With respect to Econames associated with plants, the analysis consisted of semantic scrutiny of the collected names under this category as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Econames associated with plants

Econames	Language	Gender	English gloss
Matore/Kutore	Lukabarasi/Lubukusu	male	bananas
Mung'onye	Lukabarasi	male	sugarcane
Nasokho	Lubukusu	male	Herbal drugs used for defence
Shimuli/Simuli	Lukabarasi/Lubukusu	female	flower
Nanderema	Lukabarasi/Lubukusu	female	A type of wild vegetable
Nabalayo	Lubukusu	female	Green grams
Khaemba	Lubukusu	male	Type of sorghum
Mabonga	Lubukusu/Lukabarasi	male	weeds
Makhanu	Lubukusu	male	simsim

Data in Table 1 reveals the naming of both male and female children after plant species that were revered. The Econames reveal the fact that the Kabarasi and Bukusu speakers attach great value to the plants in their ecosystems through the naming patterns. This makes them the best managers of these species, and should therefore be encouraged to supplement the existing conservation goals. Emerton (2001), underscores the need to involve local communities in resource management. This is in line with the assertions of Tarigan *et al* (2016) assertion that the subculture of a community can be inferred from the environmental wealth of its native speakers, which links the relationship between language, culture, and the environment. Therefore, traditional practices which directly involve ecological conservation such as Econaming should be encouraged.

Indeed, there exist both similarities and differences in the giving of Econames in Lukabarasi and Lubukusu and Lubukusu languages. First of all, both Lukabarasi and Lubukusu make use of ecocritical principles in their naming systems. For instance, names of plants provide a significant source domain in how names are given. For instance, the physical appearance of a plant, and the beliefs associated with them are used metonymically to stand for the personal names. For instance, a beautiful baby girl is named *shimuli/simuli* (flower) in both Labras and Bukusu communities. This means that flowers were adored and well-taken care because just as people would. Similarly, the naming of children by Lubukusu speakers as *nabalayo* (green grams) reflects how the crop was adored by the Lubukusu speakers. This would definitely result in efforts to cultivate and care for the crop. Secondly, the following common Econames were shared by the two languages: *Mabonga* (Weeds), *Nanderema* (wild vegetable). These shared Econames may be said to be motivated by the common language group shared by both Lukabarasi and Lubukusu.

However, not all the plants' Econames were similar in both Lukabarasi and Lubukusu. For example, the name *mung'onye* (sugarcane) existed in Lukabarasi while *Nasoko* (herbal drugs), *Navalayo* (Green grams), *Khaemba* (sourghum), and *Makhanu* (Simsim) were found to be associated with Lubukusu. This means that each community had a unique way of giving Econames.

Econames associated with wild animals

Wild animals provide one of the major sources of naming among the Kabarasi and Bukusu Communities. The collected data revealed that, to a certain extent, among the Kabarasi and Bukusu, people are sometimes likened to wild animals. In this light, animal names are often used to connote different characters attributed to the new-borns as shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2. Econames associated with wild animals

Econames	**Language**	**Gender**	**English gloss**
Wamboko/Imboko	Lukabarasi/Lubukusu	male	buffalo
Vutalanyi	Lukabarasi	male	lion
Wangwe	Lubukusu/Lukabarasi	male	leopard
InzofuWanjofu	Lukabarasi/Lubukusu	male	elephant
Masibili	Lubkusu	male	Dung beetle

Yiswa/Naswa	Lubukusu/Lukabarasi	female	termite
Nany'eni	LuKabarasi	female	fish
Kusimba	Lubukusu/Lukabarasi	male	mangoose
Nandemu/Inzukha	Lubukusu/Lukabarasi	male	snake

The data collected established that both Kabarasi and Bukusu communities coexisted with wildlife. For instance, children's Econames were given on assumption that they reflected the character of the animal that the child is named after, with the hope that the traits will be passed on to the new bearer of the name or discouraged for that matter. Therefore, these wildlife animals play a prominent role in the respective speech communities. To underscore the significance of different animals, new-borns are named after the species. In this regard, animal names like *Yimboko/Wamboko* (buffalo), *Kusimba* (mangoose), *Nandemu/Yinzukha* (snake), and so on are often given to the Kabarasi and Bukusu male children who are likened to the wild animals that they are named after. Furthermore, special status is assigned to these animal species. Such cultural practise has a prominent role in the survival of the animals that people are named after as they are less subjected to negative human activities, and are protected through language systems that discourage their destruction.

Among the Kabarasi for example, killing a totemic species a person is named after is believed to cause misfortune. This belief in language practise has encouraged people to protect the sacred species. Colding and Folke (2001), lauds such cultural practises because they can be affordable and reliable. According to Campbell and Hofer (1995), African wildlife-rich areas are threatened. This can be attributed to increased hunting activities and pressure from local people to open protected lands for community use. However, the collected data revealed the potential significance of traditional Econaming systems in thwarting depletion of wildlife species, which serves as a key incentive to the role of indigenous language in ecological conservation.

Ecoames regarding nature

Table 3. Econames associated with nature

Econames	**Language**	**Gender**	**English gloss**
Kuloba	Lukabarasi/Lubukusu	male	soil
Shitoyi/Wetosi	Lukabarasi/Lubukusu	male	mud
Kundu	Lubukusu/Lukabarasi	male	beast
Kutsuru	Lukabarasi	male	forest
Nafungo	Lubkusu	female	rubbish
Shitikho	Lukabarasi	male	Well
Washisino/Nabisino	Lubukusu/Lukabarasi	female	virgin land
Namatsi/Mechi	Lubukusu	male	water
Shalo/Sialo	Lubukusu	male	world

A significant point of interest in the collected data about Lukabarasi and Lubukusu Econames that concerns nature is how the process of naming is related to life and death. For this reason, the traditional naming system after nature among the Kabarasi and Bukusu is highly regarded because failure to adhere to practises among the community members is believes to cause a bad omen. For

instance, a family that encounters the successive death of their children may be advised not to name new burns after prominent people or relatives. Instead, the baby is named after things that have the potential to 'threaten' the 'spirits of death' and this arises after the parent's worry over the possibility of yet another death. This explains the custom of naming children as *Nafungo* (rubbish), *Kuloba* (bad soil), *kundu* (beast), *shitoyi, /wetosi* (mud), etc. In this regard, nature was seen as larger than life for its possibility of defying even the most feared concepts like death. The invincibility of the environment gave it a special status in the ecosystem.

For the Kabarasi and Bukusu, nature is sacred. The earth, rivers, hills, caves, and different other components of the environment held divine powers, and destroying them was akin to playing with death. Children are therefore in some cases named not after personalities but after physical features such as rivers *Kuthuru* (forests), *Namatsi/Mechi* (water) *Washisino/Navisino* (virgin land), *Washisino Nabisino* (virgin land), *Shalo* (world), etc. Such names were believed to hold supernatural powers hence protecting the bearers of such names in their lives. Thus, generally, these naming practises are unambiguously accepted by society members, who believe that such names possess divine or religious power. This reality can serve as an entry point for conservationists in efforts to revive and promote the conservation role of these practises.

Conclusion

The investigation established that the destruction of the ecosystem has contributed significantly to persistent extinctions and vulnerability of plants and animal species in different locations, comprising the rich wildlife species and significant forest cover. In presenting the indigenous linguistic systems in ecological conservation, this paper underscores the need to pay attention to the conservation problems that lead to overexploitation of the environment. The paper foregrounds indigenous Econaming systems as one of the measures. In some parts of Western Kenya, conservation gains significantly from these Econaming practises, despite minimal recognition and utilization in official conservation policies by the relevant stakeholders. Further, there is a need for more research on traditional linguistic practices to establish alternative and community-centred approaches that can supplement the existing conservation policies.

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