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## Mother tongue, identity and culture

Joseph Kiama Muthumbi \*

Lecturer Kiriri Women's University of Science and Technology, School of Education, Department of Languages.

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### Abstract

Language plays a huge role in promoting relations between people. Mother tongue, in particular, is regarded as a key element in communicating culture, familiarity, social status and cultural identity. As Nelson Mandela once said, *'If you talk to a man in...his language, that goes to his heart.'* Mother tongue, therefore, brings about a sense of belonging and identity since when people communicate in their mother tongue, they are able to acknowledge their roots and appreciate the history of their existence. Mother tongue brings about the unique and distinct identity of an individual through the names and naming systems, artistic skills, knowledge systems and cultural practices that the individual adopts. Despite the numerous benefits of using mother tongue in promoting culture and identity, the evolution of culture in the contemporary world has acted as a hindrance to the use and growth of mother tongue. In many places in the world, popular languages have been held more highly compared to the mother languages and people have resulted to restricting the use of their mother languages to ritualistic functions. Language genocide is becoming more popular when people forego their own mother tongues and adopt other languages fully. The result of language genocide is the complete disappearance of languages. Efforts have been put in place to redeem the glory of mother tongue language. For instance, the International Mother Language Day (IMLD) adopted in 2000 to be celebrated every 21<sup>st</sup> day of February. People from all over the world have been able to use this day to explore the significance of mother tongue languages as well as to come up with ways through which mother tongue language can be sustained despite the current trends of language in the world.

**Keywords:** Mother tongue; Identity; Culture; Language; Naming systems; Language genocide

### 1. Introduction

In the growth and development of an individual, language is significant since one is able to communicate their thoughts, feelings, needs and emotions. As one grows older, language not only communicates what an individual is thinking or feeling but it also becomes an expression of their identity and culture. Mother tongue, in particular, has the ability to identify a person with a particular way of life (Albury, 2017).

*'If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.'*

Nelson Mandela

Nelson Mandela is a significant icon in the history of Africa due to the role he played as a leader in South Africa. Mandela understood the importance of mother tongue in communicating; he believed that it was the best way to reach an individual (Farhat, 2018). The concept of mother tongue is wide and there are many definitions to the term. Skutnabb-Kangas (2008) gives four definitions of mother tongue which are worth noting in this paper.

\* Corresponding author: Kiama Muthumbi

**Table 1** Definitions of Mother Tongue (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008)

Criterion	Definition
ORIGIN	The language one learns first
IDENTIFICATION a.) Internal b.) External	a.) The language one identifies with b.) The language one is identified with by others
COMPETENCE	The language one knows best
FUNCTION	The language one uses most

The first criterion used by Skutnabb-Kangas is origin; mother tongue can be the language that one learned to speak first. The second criterion is identification, which can be internal or external. Mother tongue as internal identification refers to the language that one identifies with while external identification states that mother tongue is the language that one is identified with by other people. The third criterion of defining mother tongue, as provided by Skutnabb-Kangas, is competence, which shows that mother tongue is the language that one knows best. Last but not least, mother tongue can be defined by function which refers to mother tongue as the language one uses most. The definitions provided can be applied depending on the context.

Identity refers to the individuality of a person; the sense of belonging of a person towards a certain group. Culture, on the other hand refers to the shared customs, norms and values of a person that influences the thoughts, behavior and opinions of the person (Satyan, 2010). Mother tongue is a strong tool that is used to promote one's identity and culture since it not only gives one a sense of belonging to their native group, but it also helps one identify with the customs associated with that particular group (Satyan, 2010). Understanding and promoting the use of mother tongue is significant in passing down the traditions of a certain community from one generation to the next.

The purpose of writing this paper is to illuminate the importance of mother tongue, more particularly, through its relation to identity and culture. The information provided in the paper will also stress on the importance of using mother tongue as a tool of national unity rather than separation due to the differences found in individuals.

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## 2. Mother tongue and identity

The identity of an individual is the label that one attaches to themselves as belonging to a particular group (Owen, 2011). One such label could be gender identity, which identifies a person as male or female or a national identity where one can associate themselves with a country, like being Kenyan. The focus of this paper, however, is on linguistic identity and how one can identify themselves to their native language.

Many people, especially those in the developing nations have been experiencing significant changes in their traditional settings. Urbanization has taken root, not only in the industries and infrastructure but also at the grassroots level, the family setting. Growth and development are positive but on the other hand, they have their negative consequences. People have taken to ways of identifying themselves that have not been there in past. In Kenya, English is the major foreign language that has been adopted and rapidly gained precedence over the use of mother tongue for many communities in the country. Swahili is a native language for some communities in Kenya, but it has also been spread over the country and taught in schools.

English and Swahili are the national languages in the country and their importance cannot be downplayed in promoting national unity. The problem comes when the children grow gaining competence in the two languages but fail to grasp the basic knowledge of their own native languages. A child may be a product of the intermarriage between a Kisii and a Luhya but they fail to identify themselves with either of the two ethnic communities and there comes about the issue of an identity crisis. At some point, the child may be confused as to which group he can associate himself with.

Mother tongue helps an individual gain self-confidence and self-worth as they interact with people whom they share the language with. Many people can attest that it is an exciting experience when one goes out of the country or is in a foreign place and they meet an individual who shares their mother tongue. The joy and excitement is a product of the identity that is shared with the individual. Mother tongue also cements the sense of belonging through the history

shared in the language spoken. One may learn as many languages as they can, but true identity will be felt when they are able to embrace the beauty of their mother tongue by learning, understanding and speaking it.

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### 3. Mother tongue and culture

*'Language, any language, has a dual character; it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture'.*

*Ngugi wa Thiong'o*

Culture is a way of life, as is language (Owen, 2011). The mother tongue one uses speaks volumes about who they are (their identity), how they are (their culture) and where they have come from (their history). Mother tongue is unique in nature since it is a part of a certain community that came up with the language, has used the language and developed it over time.

Mother tongue communicates culture and it can be used to identify the individuals of a certain community to their native location since it communicates the specific components of an individual and their traditions. Through mother tongue, components like the names, naming systems, foods, knowledge systems, music or customs can be communicated from one person to another (Owen, 2011). Cultural togetherness can be enhanced through the use of mother tongue since there is better understanding between people who speak the same native language.

Culture can be a factor to the continuity of the use of mother tongue. As time goes by, people have taken the notion that mother tongue is not as important as it was some few years ago and, therefore, do not take much interest in teaching their children to appreciate their mother tongue. With the increasing efforts reestablish the importance of mother tongue, for instance, by having the International Mother Language Day, there may be hope for increasing the significance of the use of mother tongue in the world (Nguyen, 2018).

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### 4. Language loss and language (linguistic) genocide

*'I am always sorry when any language is lost, because languages are the pedigrees of nations'.*

*Samuel Johnson*

Farhat (2018) revealed that 43% of the languages spoken in the world are endangered. There are approximately 6000 languages spoken in the world. In every two weeks, a language disappears. Loss of linguistic identity is the first stage of ethnic loss, followed by the loss of cultural identity, antonymic identity and finally, ethnonymic identity (Batibo, 2015). Language loss stands to be a great hindrance to the use of mother tongue languages in the world since it prevents the continuation of a language from one generation to another.

The causes of the loss of linguistic identity can be as a result of many factors. Political policies, educational policies, intermarriages, discrimination, immigration and lack of pride in one's mother tongue are some of the factors that contribute to the loss of a language. Taking discrimination, for instance, some people may not be welcoming to an individual who does not share their mother tongue and end up making offensive remarks about their identity. Such kind of discrimination may make an individual resolve to never using their mother tongue to avoid being insulted.

Linguistic genocide was first used by the United Nations in 1948 where the term was used to refer to the prohibition of the use of a language of a group (Rovira, 2008). Linguistic genocide was taken to be a crime against humanity since people, especially in education, were forced to use a particular language and avoid the use of another completely. An example of linguistic genocide can be the forced use of Portuguese in Brazil for the immigrant families (Rovira, 2008). The languages that are given preference over the native languages of people are known as killer languages. In the event when a language is prohibited from being used in publications or in speech, the identity and culture of the group of people is at risk of being lost. The people whose language has been suppressed will not be able to freely express themselves or develop themselves through their language. The long term effect of language loss and linguistic genocide is the extinction of an entire language group.

All is not lost, however, since there is a way to save the mother tongues from being completely wiped out. There should be more campaigns aimed at increasing the use of mother tongue all the way from the family level to the international level. Children should be taught their mother tongues from an early age so that they can identify themselves with their cultural identities as early as possible (Warren, 2017). In addition to that, the policies made in the country should not

suppress the use of mother tongue but rather enhance the use of mother tongue across the country. Other languages should be learnt and used in addition to mother tongue and not instead of mother tongue. For the preservation of the mother tongues that are present in the world, records should be kept in writing, audios and videos for future generations to get a better understanding of the languages long after the pioneers of the languages have gone.

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## 5. Conclusion

In language, one's beliefs, values and culture are found, and despite the many definitions of mother tongue, it is certain that the use of mother tongue creates an enormous effect on the identity and the culture of an individual. The use of mother tongue may have been affected by other languages that threaten to 'kill' the native languages present in the country and the world but there is hope that the situation can be salvaged. There is pride and an increased sense of belonging that emanates from the use of mother tongue by a group of people and this should create a basis for the campaign for the use of mother tongue from the local to the international level. Despite the unique nature of mother tongues, the use of mother tongue should not be used to bring division between people in a particular society. The use of mother tongue should, instead, aim at promoting unity and culture in a country since cultural diversity is a positive feature in a country. All in all, mother tongue language is living wealth to a society and as **Jack Edwards** pondered, *'What is a nation without a mother tongue?'*

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