ABSTRACT

This study investigated the sociolinguistic status of the Elmolo language considering its apparent condition as a language threatened by death and extinction from the onslaught of the neighbouring dominant Samburu language. Cross-cultural marriages, migration and other social and economic factors were also seen to influence the observed sociolinguistic changes. The Elmolo people reside in the south east shores of Lake Turkana in Loiyangalani division, Laisamis district, Samburu County of the Eastern province of Kenya. With a total population of about 700 people (BTL, 2007, 2008), the Elmolo are considered as one of Kenya’s smallest communities. The Elmolo language is classified in the larger Eastern Cushitic group of languages and is closely related to the Albore, Somali, Bran, Rendille, and Dasaanach languages (Sasse, 1974). The study investigated the sociolinguistic changes evidenced by shift in domain use and decrease in the number of users, and their possible contributions to the threatened status of the Elmolo language. The study also investigated the relevance of gender, geography, poverty levels, and age to the observed sociolinguistic changes. While the study recognized that the death of a language could be a consequence of multiple factors, it was delimited to the sociolinguistic factors that contributed to the threatened status of Elmolo. The Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) proposed by Fishman (1990, 1991) and the Indicators of Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory (EVT) proposed by Landweer (2000) are the main theoretical approaches used in the study. The eclectic approach was informed by the individual contributions of each of the theories in addressing the objectives of the study. The GIDS was used to determine the sociolinguistic status of the Elmolo language given its explicit description of characteristics of languages in its typology. The EVT was used to explain what was happening to the Elmolo community and how it influenced the language use patterns among the Elmolo people. Although not used in the study, the researcher was aware of many other relevant theories such as the Gaelic-Arvantika Model of Language Death (GAM), proposed by Sasse (1992). This model provides tools to determine the influence that the External Settings (ES) have on the Speech Behaviour (SB) of a community resulting in particular Structural Consequences (SC) affecting their language(s). An integrated approach using both quantitative and qualitative data was adopted in the study. The analysed data indicate that Elmolo is demonstrably in an acute path of death that may also subsequently lead to its extinction. It was observed that there was lack of intergenerational transfer of the language from the older to the younger generations, lack of documented materials in the language and a very low prestige value of the language among its would be speakers and the neighbouring communities. The study recommends detailed phonological, morphological and syntactic studies of the Elmolo language. These are viewed as having the capacity to enhance possible reconstruction and documentation of the language coupled with advocacy for revitalization and maintenance.