The Problematics of Language Choice in The Kenyan Film: Lessons from *Nairobi Half Life*

Moses K. Wamalwa[1] and *Maina T. Sammy*[2]
[1]*Kenyatta University*
[2]*Moi University*

Abstract

The authenticity and originality of film is not only realised through settings and events but also through actor performance (characterization) in the representation of those events and experiences. This paper analyses how choice of language in film affects actor performance especially in the portrayal of a realistic and authentic characterization, and how this impacts the overall authenticity in the film *Nairobi Half Life* by David Gitonga. Employing selected tenets of the realist film theory espoused by Andre Bazin, Stanley Cavel, Rudolph Arneheim and Siegfried Kraucer, the paper undertakes a critical analysis of language and performance in the selected film and looks at how choice of language aids in the enactment of character that meets the threshold of being genuine, authentic and realistic – 'reality' and 'authenticity' being at the centre of a film's quality. It interrogates how actor performance in the scenes is affected by the spoken language used by the actor in two ways; one, whether the language spoken corresponds to the actual language used in the real world and two, whether the language chosen fits the character's physiognomy in bringing out a genuine rendition.

Key Words: *Kenyan Film, Language, Nairobi Half Life, Authenticity, Quality*

Introduction

This paper discusses the problematics of language use in Kenya and how these have led to the English language being used as the language of choice of film in Kenya contrary to actual language use by ordinary Kenyans. It begins by discussing the different modes of knowing language and the competency one displays in each mode. A section that looks at a study by researchers on the psychosocial process of language performance that ties language to action and thought, consequently linking appropriate choice of language to effective performance follows before a final section that discusses the problematic language history in Kenya and how this seems to have transposed itself onto the Kenyan film.

Performance in film is an art in which an actor uses imagination, intelligence, psychology, memory, speech and vocal technique, facial expressions, body language, and an overall knowledge of the filmmaking process to realize, under the director's guidance, the realistic representation of the character created by the screenwriter. Thus, language is an integral part of performance in film and when voice texture fits the performer's physiognomy and gestures, a whole and very realistic persona emerges (Waite, 2010).

The issue of language choice and actor performance in the Kenya film remains problematic precisely because of the speech (language) discourse characteristic in most third world countries that went through the process of colonization and the consequent foregrounding of the colonizers languages as the gate pass to economic empowerment. An analysis of most Kenyan films makes one to come to the conclusion that the English language is preferred by most film makers as the linguistic expression in film contrary to actual language practice in the country where a majority use mother tongue and Kiswahili. Thus, in a way, this thesis examines whether one language system representing one knowledge system can be successfully supplanted onto another knowledge system and retain the same potency in meaning making.

In an acknowledgement that Kenya's film actors are yet to master the art of performance in screen acting, one of Kenya's most prominent and experienced actors, Oliver Litondo is quoted thus;

> Being original in an actor's portrayal of a character is key to success. It is not advisable to mimic how others would portray the character you are assigned. The actor has to give serious thought how to portray the assigned character from the actors 'own perspective.....Acting for TV, for theatre and for film are all different. My work with big film industry has taught me that Kenya actors tend to over-act (www.Standardmedia.co.ke).

Indeed, both the Kenya Film Commission (2011) and Edwards (2008) aver that one of the factors contributing to the poor quality of the Kenya film is poor performance by actors. For instance, in the short student film *Hooked* by Hilary Mongera, the performance by the various characters in the film comes off as stiff and unnatural. This takes away authenticity from the film and therefore affects the film quality which is premised on film's ability to realistically represent action in which the characters are seen as ordinary human beings going about their daily chores. This is replicated in films such as *Malooned*, *Illegal Impulse*, *Let's Play Pretend* and *Mob Doc*. The tendency in most of these films is to attempt to pass off English as the native language of the speakers (actors).

It is thus the purpose of this paper, using the film realist theory, to examine how the English language has impacted on actor performance, hence, the authenticity and quality of the film in Third World countries and specifically in Kenya through an analysis of how choice of language and performance work together to produce credible character representation in film. The paper makes an assumption that when actors use a language that is not their first language in a way that the film attempts to pass off such a language as such, their ability to link language and experiences is greatly impaired. Hence, their performance too is negatively affected which impacts on the quality of film.

Experiences that are honestly represented become capable of attracting audience appeal. An original and authentic film, for which appropriate choice of language is a part of, should result in a commercially viable film industry that produces local content to fill the 40% content requirement by Kenya's broadcast law (Kenya Information and Communication Act, Cap 411A of the Laws of Kenya, 2009). It is in this light that this paper seeks to contribute to the forging of an acceptable Kenya film aesthetic by analysing how choice of language as speech in the selected films affects performance and therefore the authenticity and quality of the films.

Nairobi Half Life by David Gitonga

Nairobi Half Life is a 2012 Kenyan drama film directed by David Gitonga. The film was selected as the Kenya's entry for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 85th Academy Awards. Although it did not make the final shortlist, it was the first time Kenya has submitted a film in this category.

The film features a young man, Mwas (Joseph Wairimu) who still lives with his parents in their rural home in Kenya. He makes a living by selling western action films. He dramatically acts and portrays most of the action figures in his films in order to entice his customers. He is an aspiring actor and when he comes across a group of actors from Nairobi performing in his town, he asks one of them to help him jump start his acting career. But in return he is asked to give Ksh1000 in order for him to be cast in one of the plays. He can only afford Ksh500 and is told to take the other Ksh500 with him to the National Theatre in Nairobi. He is very excited and after receiving some money from his mother he embarks on his journey to Nairobi with a brief stopover at his village's marketplace to bid his friends goodbye. He meets his cousin (a gang leader) who gives him an expensive radio system and some money to take to Khanji electronic shop in downtown Nairobi.

After making his way to Nairobi, he quickly learns that there is more to Nairobi than just opportunities and glamour. On the first day, Mwas loses everything he has to Nairobi thugs and is left stranded and confused especially because he knows no one. He gets arrested and even spends a day in jail. In a twist of events, he meets a Nairobi crook named Oti (Olwenya Maina) in the police cells who becomes a close friend and takes him into his criminal gang. The gang itself specializes in snatch and grab thievery with vehicle parts being their main targets. During this time, Mwas auditions and

successfully lands a part in a local play set up by Phoenix Players. He finds himself struggling and juggling the two separate worlds. Mwas finally meets his cousin again who ends up forcing him to steal a car in order to clear his debt. He thinks this is a good idea and convinces the gang to move up from stealing car parts to stealing whole cars in order to earn more. During this time he falls in love with Oti's onscreen love, Amina, coming to see her at the lodgings where she receives customers. He even takes her out to the film shows.

Nairobi half Life is a journey that takes the main character from the rural area, escaping from the vagaries of poverty in the village to the city in the belief that the city will offer some relief. However, although the film manifests a common story line, that of immigration from the 'backward village 'to the life of 'bliss in town 'rampant in most African films, it presents a plotline that is more complex comparatively. The complexity is provided through the main character who presents a multiplicity of character traits, a kind of split personality. Mwas, the main character, becomes a gangster on one hand, mixing it up with the city's underground gangs and also an ambitiously aspiring theatre actor who cuts the figure of a straight member of society and is interested in highlighting societal problems. Another complexity is provided through the use of theatre forms in the film. Just after the first scene where Mwas is introduced, the scene that follows involves a theatrical performance. It is used to advance two ideas in the film. The first and direct one is that it provides the route through which Mwas finds his way to the city to advance his ambition of becoming an actor, and the second one which is more covert is to comment on the poor state of leadership which requires being overhauled. The genre of this theatre is Theatre for Development (TFD) which advocates change in the status quo in leadership structures as well as exhorting the people to demand for services from the leaders. In the conventional theatre form that Mwas takes part in in the city, a number of other issues are also explored, including, same sex issues as well as issues of inequality. The same sex issue is broached in a conversation between Mwas and his theatre partner when they go out for a drink after an evening's rehearsal. This theatrical form even weaves itself into being part of the film itself. This happens when crowds at the open air theatrical performance uniformly responds by shouting back in unison to Mwas 'questions after he is challenged by a young boy to demonstrate the action in the films he hawks. Usually such an interaction lends itself to a theatrical performance rather than a realistic one which film depicts.

Nairobi Half Life starts with an over the shoulder close up (CU) shot of Mwas as he begins one of his performances to potential customers. The performance is a synopsis of the DVD films for which he uses to promote sales. The camera then pulls back to a medium long shot (LS) to show the customers attentively listening. Other elements too such as music, choice of language and the arrangement of characters, objects and shot framing in this opening sequence all work together to provide the necessary tension to give the film a very powerful beginning. This start also goes against the convention of film language which prescribes that a film sequence should start with a long shot (LS) before it ends on a close up (CU). This subversion works to create instant interest in the film. In this sequence the way elements are arranged in the frame, in a triangular way, especially the characters, where some are seated and some standing, yet again with another one walking into shot in a way that gives the new comer prominence creates sufficient tension and potential of a conflict that sustains interest.

The spatial arrangement of elements in a shot is also used to devastating effect at Mwas 'home at night as he tries to borrow money from his brother and parents to enable him travel to the city. The second shot in this sequence is especially poignant. It is a medium long shot (MLS) and in it, Mwas is standing, leaning in the doorway with bright light coming from inside the house behind him. On his left is his brother, seated with a kerosene lamp hang above his head. This accentuates the dire situation Mwas finds himself in especially with his burning desire to raise funds to enable him go to the city to embark on his acting career. This shot enhances our understanding of the realities; the tensions and crises that obtain in an ordinary homestead in the villages. Indeed these tensions continue to manifest when in the same sequence Mwas 'father comes home drunk and causes mayhem, making everybody, including neighbours who had come to raise money for Mwas 'fare to the city to scamper.

However even if the pro-filmic elements are used to greater extend to tell the *Nairobi Half Life* story than in most other Kenyan films, the authenticity and attendant commercial success of this film is supplied through the choice of language at each new instance of scene, location and settings as the film progresses that seems to imbue the film with originality. This paper isolates and analyses some of the scenes in the film to demonstrate the portency of appropritae langauge choice to film aesthetics.

Language and Knowledge

As provided for in the Kenya constitution (2010), English is the main language in Kenya, at least from the point of policy and the provisions of the constitution. However, this is heavily contested by what obtains in actual process of language use in the everyday life of the people where most people use their indigenous language. In view of various language acquisition theories, this immediately raises the question whether a language symbolizing one knowledge system can successfully be supplanted onto another knowledge system and retain the same potency in meaningful interactions. A number of scholars have since made their contributions concerning this topic by analyzing language through various theoretical standpoints. Chomsky(1965, 1968, 1977) and Hymes (1972, 1982) have documented findings in their researches that provide useful understanding of how languages are acquired and how they are gainfully deployed in the process by which humans make sense of the world around them and thus make interactions possible. Indeed, it is the process of making sense that is named by language and which the film camera and microphone strive to capture in their concrete form.

While Chomsky's conception of language is from a structural perspective where language structures are analyzed away from language practice, Hyme's approach takes as its starting point that an analysis of language and how it generates meaning cannot be separated from the context (culture) in which it is deployed, thus coming up with the Ethnography of Speaking (ES) model. The ethnographic study of language use aims at describing the knowledge participants in verbal interaction need and display in order to communicate successfully with one another. *Communicative competence* is the term Hymes (1972) uses for this kind of complex expertise, which includes but goes beyond Chomsky's (1965) *competence* (Hymes 1982).

According to Chomsky (1968), a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences, not only as grammatical, but also as conceptually appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, and in what manner. In short, a child becomes able to accomplish a repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events, and to evaluate their accomplishment by others. This competence, however, is integral with attitudes, values, and motivations concerning language, and the interrelation of language with other codes of communicative conduct (Hymes, 1972). In Ethnography of Speaking and sociolinguistics, the discussion of communicative competence versus linguistic (or grammatical) competence usually centres on two issues: namely the need to accompany grammatical description with conditions of appropriateness and the complementarities of the grammatical (or linguistic) code with other aspects of co-occurring rule-governed behaviour, Non-Verbal Communicators (NVC) such as gestures and eye-gaze (Hymes, 1982).

In fact, a crucial difference between Chomsky's notion of *competence* and Hymes's notion is that the former relies on the assumption that knowledge can be studied separately from performance, meant as the implementation of that knowledge in language use, whereas for Hymes, participation, performance, and inter-subjective knowledge are all essential features of the ability to 'know a language'. Furthermore, Chomsky presents the hypothesis of autonomous grammar as a prerequisite to maintaining 'order' in the object of study. This requires the researcher to have the ability to construct hypotheses about linguistic forms without having to make reference to non-linguistic factors such as beliefs and attitudes. Thus, a large part of the work done by Chomsky and his students is based on their ability to find or imagine appropriate contexts for the uttering of certain utterance-types.

Despite the theoretical assumption of the innateness of certain aspects of grammar as pure cognitive or biological endowment, the actual definition of such aspects rests on the possibility of matching sentences with possible worlds, which are, in turn, constructed on the basis of the experience linguists have of the world in which they live. Criticism of this methodology by Ethnography of Speaking model and other approaches is not a rejection of abstraction or idealization, but rather a fundamental scepticism about the uncritical use of what phenomenological sociology calls 'pre-understanding' of the world (Bleicher, 1982). In the case of linguistic research, it is the pre-understanding of the relationship between linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour that is usually ignored by formal grammarians.

Most people in Kenya acquire their mother tongue from infancy through experiential socialisation. As one grows up and starts to venture out of the confines of the house and village, one is then likely to be socialized into the Kiswahili language. However, to learn English, one has to go through the school process. Hence, in Chomsky's and especially Hyme's conception, it would be impossible that communication in this language ever attains full potential. Similarly, when film makers choose dialogue that is not the actual social language of the settings and cast actors who are far removed from the space represented in the film, the actors often are unable to project an honest characterization owing to their limited knowledge of the English language, where they have learned the structural and not the performative aspects of the language.

Thought, Physical Action, and Language

This section discusses the psychophysical processes through which communication behaviour arises by looking at recent research on the relationship between thought, physical action and language. When it comes to film, this relationship also takes note of the difference between written and spoken language. This is because the difference between the two is partly at the heart of the challenge that actors face. This is even more profound today for Africa considering that writing is largely a European phenomenon where European languages were imposed on Africans yet most communication among them occurs through indigenous languages. This imposition is so pervasive that whereas most Africans will speak their mother tongue very fluently, they can hardly write the same.

Films originate from a script, which is comprised mostly of dialogue (sound), visual description and plotting. However, how one says the dialogue is vitally important, since the 'how 'is what mostly communicates in film. In a novel, the author can describe the unspoken thoughts, feelings and motivations of a character. The author even makes it clear that what is written is a translation from the original language of the characters in the novel by mentioning the language a character speaks in. In other words the author does not have to write in the native language of the characters but the reader will read the novel as though it is in the characters language. The film script-writer, however, is restricted largely to the words that a character says, and it is up to the actor to contextualize those words by deciding on motivations that drive the words, to create facial expressions and physical behaviour that make the speech sound life-like through the use of vocal tone, varied emphases, accent, tempo and cadence of speech. But things are even more complicated for the African film script writers, who are likely to script in the colonisers 'language because this is what they have been conditioned in when they first interacted with the written text. As a result a film director would have to retranslate the script into the actual language of the character. However, this has not been happening in the case of Kenya hence, the purpose of this study which argues that only the actual language of the settings and actors who are fluent in that language are capable of giving a performance that meets the threshold of realism required in film.

Film acting involves a psychophysical process that combines thought, imagination, and expression as the actor seeks to embody the fictional content of the script. McNeill (2000), a cognitive linguist, has carried out research in which he argues for the place of non-verbal communication as being an equal if not bigger partner in conveying meaning in human communications. He states that 'utterances possess two sides, only one of which is speech; the other is imagery, actional and visuo-spatial. To

exclude the gesture side, as has been traditional, is tantamount to ignoring half of the message out of the brain.'(Mcneill, 2000, p.37)

Earlier, Mcneill (1992) probes the difference between the ways our brains process written and spoken language and concludes that gestures are an integral part of language as much as are words, phrases and sentences and therefore part of one system. Hence, an understanding of the difference between the ways that language and gesture operate underscores the importance of physicality and image in the actor's process. Despite this recognition of language and gesture as parts of the same system, Mcneill proposes a view of their functions that makes them complementary to one another, and identifies crucial differences between them by stating that 'language has the effect of *segmenting* and *linearizing* meaning. What might be an instantaneous thought is divided up and strung out through time…the total effect is to present what had been a single instantaneous picture in the form of a string of segments '(Macneill, 1992, p.40). In written language, this effect is unmediated by any physical action, but when language is spoken, meaning can be complemented or modified by gesture. Thus, 'gestures are different in every way because they are themselves multidimensional and present meaning complexes without undergoing segmentation or linearization '(McNeill, 1992, p. 19).

McNeill (1992) uses the term 'hierarchical 'in analysing speech and gesture and contends that speech relies on 'bottom-up 'processing where the meanings of the words are combined to create the meaning of the sentence. In understanding a sentence we start with the lower level words, hence 'bottom-up', whereas in gestures, we start with the overall concept portrayed by the gesture. It is this concept which gives rise to the meaning of the individual parts, hence 'top-down'. Thus, in McNeill's conception a gesture would be a symbol, global in that the whole is not composed out of separately meaningful parts. Rather, the parts gain meaning because of the meaning of the whole. To illustrate this, McNeill provides the example of a person representing a running cartoon character by moving his hand through space whilst wiggling his fingers: 'the hand is not a hand but a character, the movement is not a hand in motion but the character in motion, the space is not the physical space of the narrator but a narrative space, the wiggling fingers are not fingers but running feet. The gesture is thus a symbol, but the symbol is of a fundamentally different type from the symbols of speech ' (MacNeill, 1992, p.42).

A further, and significant, difference between language and gesture is that gestures have no standards of form. These are the linguistic rules that utterances must follow, or be rejected as ungrammatical. Gestures have no such rules and therefore reflect the idiosyncrasies of the speaker and his/her community: 'Precisely because gestures are not obliged to meet standards of form, they are free to present just those aspects of meaning that are relevant and salient to the speaker and leave out those aspects that language may require but are not relevant to the situation '(Macneill, 1992, p.41).

McNeill (2005) develops an analysis of the relationship between gesture and speech, arguing for a new conception of language by viewing it as an imagery-language dialectic, in which gestures provide imagery. He posits that gestures are key ingredients in an 'imagery-language dialectic 'that fuels both speech and thought. Thus, gestures become an integral component of language in this conception, not merely an accompaniment to, or ornament of, speech but synchronous and co-expressive with it. The gestures are shown to be active participants in both speaking and thinking and both participate in formulating meaning, with their opposition creating instability that gets resolved in expression. The instability of the confrontation of opposites (imagery and language) in the process of thinking for speaking seeks resolution in utterance that can be expressed either as gesture or speech, or both. Through close observation of the synchrony of speech forms and gestures, a suggestion that they are co-expressive of the same underlying thought unit is given credence.

Macneill (2005) names the smallest element of this relationship between language and gesture as the Growth Point (GP), a snapshot of an utterance at its beginning psychological stage. This analysis has exciting implications for actors, since it includes immensely valuable information about the relationship of thought to expression - the core of meaning in a performance. A key feature of McNeill's analysis is the differentiation of 'background 'and 'focus '- visual metaphors that

distinguish contextual information from information that is 'newsworthy'. McNeill describes a process whereby we construct meaning as we speak: The speaker shapes the background in a certain way, in order to make possible the intended significant contrast within it. Background and contrast are both necessary and are constructed together. A new 'meaning 'is a fresh differentiation from a constructed background. Thus, meaning has this dual character of being both a focal point and an implied background, and both are necessary (http://mcneilllab.....uchicago./growth_points.html).

The GP can be thought of 'as an image that is being categorized linguistically '- an image with a foot in the door of language. The combination is called a growth point since it is meant to be the initial form of a thinking-for-speaking unit out of which a dynamic process of organization emerges. A further feature of the GP is that it addresses the concept that there is a specific starting point for a thought. Although an idea unit continues out of the preceding context and has ramifications in later speech, it does not exist at all times, and comes into being at some specific moment; the formation of a growth point is this moment made visible in the onset of the gesture (Mcneill, 2005). The suggestion is that in everyday speech, when speakers are mentally focused on the content of their communication, a new idea is marked by the preparation phase of a gesture. Consequently, when an actor identifies a new idea in a passage of dialogue, he or she knows that this is the appropriate moment for a gesture, and in choosing to use one, helps to clarify meaning for an audience. In this model, meaning progresses in a stream of contrasts between context and GPs. Thus, information communicated by a GP forms context for the next new idea.

Another significant feature of McNeill's model is the concept of the catchment. This is 'a kind of thread of consistent dynamic visua-spatial imagery running through the discourse segment that provides a gesture - based window into discourse cohesion '(p. 47). It is recognized when two or more gestures in a sequence of discourse display recurring features, such as shape and movement.

McNeill's analysis agrees with a widely used categorization in social psychology of types of gestures. British psychologist Beattie (2003) explains these in *Visible Thought - The New Psychology of Body Language.* Beattie takes care to distinguish between gestures and 'emblems', which are physical signs that are consciously sent and consciously received. Easily reproducible, these are signs such as the 'thumbs up 'that have become codified in the cultures in which they are used. In contrast, the vast majority of gestures are unconsciously generated, produced alongside words (rather than substituting for them), and almost impossible to inhibit. This last feature probably explains the fact that most people, when confronted with a discrepancy in meaning between verbal and nonverbal communication, will trust the nonverbal.

Spontaneously occurring gestures that accompany speech can be divided into two main categories; iconic and metaphoric. The iconic gesture is one 'whose particular form displays a close relationship to the meaning of the accompanying speech '(Beattie,2003, p. 48). These are generally pictorial representations that show the speaker's mental image and point of view. Beattie cites an example from McNeill's *Hand and Mind*(2000) where a speaker describes a cartoon figure bending back a tree, saying 'he bent it way back 'and accompanying this by the physical action of grasping and pulling back. Sometimes, iconic gestures add information to what is said. In the example quoted above, the gesture shows that the tree was attached to the ground - information not explicitly mentioned in the verbal portion of the utterance.

An important feature of the gesture analysis described by Beattie is that of timing. Gestures generally have three phases; the preparation, where the arms move from their resting position, the 'stroke 'where the main action occurs, and the retraction, where the arms return to their resting position. In spontaneous gestures, the preparatory phase normally precedes the noun or verb most closely associated with the gesture, so that this can be synchronous with the stroke. Contrived gesturing often looks 'wrong 'because the timing is off. These indicate how an individual groups meanings, or separates them. Again, an understanding of this naturally occurring phenomenon gives the actor a useful tool in consciously choosing gestures that help audience members understand the implicit meaning of a piece of dialogue by showing them the linkages between different ideas. The concept of the catchment also helps us to identify lack of differentiation in a performance; if we see

repetitive gestures when the content varies in ideas, it suggests that the actor has not successfully established this variety at an ideational level.

These findings have important implications for actors. They identify one of the crucial components involved in transferring written scripts into embodied behaviour. Bad acting often arises because the actor hasn't made the mental leap from the linear nature of written language into the gestural imagery of spoken language. This study seeks to add to this knowledge by arguing that for gestures to rhyme with language, such language must be native to the speaker (actor). If the language used by the actor is a second language then the film must be plotted in such a way that it makes this explicit. This way, even if the gestures and language seem not to rhyme, the audience will expect it because they know it is only a learned language to the speaker (actor).

Given that about 90% of spoken utterances in daily life are accompanied by gesture, acting whose gesture and language do not rhyme will appear stiff and unexpressive. In film, this is often referred to as a lack of 'investment', meaning that the actor does not seem to be fully engaged in the character's thought processes. Common responses from instructors and directors include exhortations to 'feel it more', or to transpose biographical experience to the fictional circumstances, or to discover analogous situations that might prompt imaginative identification. But it is necessary that film directors, especially Africans, are made acutely aware of not only the close relationship between thought, language and gesture but also that choice of appropriate language for the actor and settings have the effect of making an actor give a performance that achieves the threshold of being genuine, authentic and realistic - a primary aesthetic requirement of the film medium.

Language and Film in Kenya

Kenya is inherently multilingual both at the societal and individual levels. An average person speaks at least three languages, namely, vernacular, Kiswahili and English. This stems in part from the different ethno linguistic groups that are found in the country and their daily need to communicate with different people in different contexts. Indeed, Africa is one of the regions in the world with extensive linguistic diversity. Of the world's estimated 6,000 plus languages, Africa has more than 2,000 languages which represents about a third of the world's languages (Heller, 2006). However, Djité (2008), Kiarie (2004) and Nettle and Romaine (2001) observe that not much empirical research has been done and this has created more gaps in ascertaining some facts about the linguistic situation in Africa.

Although most African education systems focus on the use of international languages, only between 10 and 15 per cent of the population in most African countries are estimated to be fluent in these languages (Muaka, 2010). Nevertheless, these languages, besides their strong weight in governance, dominate the educational systems, with the result that there is a serious communication gap between the formal education system and its social environment (http://www.africafocus.org/docs10/educ1007.php). Indeed it is this social environment that film's source as a medium of reality is derived.

In the Kenya Constitution (2010), it is stated that the national language of the republic is Kiswahili while the official languages are given as both Kiswahili and English. It is also stated in Chapter 7, Article 3(c) of the constitution that the country should promote and protect the diversity of languages of the people of Kenya as well as promote and develop use of indigenous languages, Kenyan sign language, Braille and other communication formats and technologies accessible to persons with disabilities. On interpreting these provisions, one is left with the conclusion that indigenous languages are headed to the archives. Even though indigenous languages are mentioned, the constitution does not go on to expressly provide for the spaces that would make such languages thrive like it does for English where it is specifically mentioned that this will be the language of instruction in the education sector. Foregrounding English by defining space for it to operate and making it the only conduit through which knowledge is acquired and therefore employment, obviously gifts advantage to the English language over indigenous languages. Yet according to Muaka (2010), these are erroneous

provisions that are not cognizant of the role indigenous languages play as the people's initial identity markers and as major tools for businesses in the everyday activities of the people that allow ordinary people to carry out transactions in the informal settings.

Muaka (2010) further observes that indigenous languages also serve important roles in religious and community development. At the same time, at the local level, indigenous languages facilitate administrative work which is carried out by local leaders such as the village headman, the sub-chief and chief. Indeed Muaka (2010) concludes that without Kenya's indigenous languages, no meaningful interactions can take place among a majority of them. Since settings are ethnic in nature and the camera purports to record the settings as it is, appropriate choice of language then becomes paramount to imbue a setting with the required threshold of reality.

Nabea (2009) observes that while barely a quarter of the Kenyan population can adequately use English, it remains the official medium of dialogue in offices and during official transactions and the medium of instruction in the education system, unlike Kiswahili, the co-official language. However, while the leadership appears comfortable with this linguistic situation and would wish to have the status quo maintained, the linguistic situation among lay Kenyans demonstrates that not all is well on the ground (Nabea, 2009).

Ogechi and Ogechi (2002) contend that the problem of languages in Kenya cannot be addressed without taking a historical perspective. The language situation in Kenya has its basis in the colonial language policy following the scramble for Africa by European powers, which took place towards the end of the 19th Century. In the ensuing partition, Kenya became part of the British East Africa Protectorate. Among the issues the British considered to facilitate their rule in Kenya was language. With respect to the colonial language policy, two epochs are worthy scrutiny: Pre-Second World War and post-Second World War. In the first epoch, there were several players involved in the formulation of language policy. According to Nabea (2009), Christian missionaries, colonial administrators and the British settlers for varying reasons refused to teach English to Africans. While the missionaries were motivated not to do so because they thought the gospel would best be spread in vernacular, the colonial administrators were only anxious to control the teaching of the language in order to obtain low cadre employees in their administration while the settlers feared the Europeanization of Africans through the English language lest they became too educated to accept the role of wage labourers. Thus, many European settlers regarded the teaching of the English language to 'natives 'as a means of providing a potentially subversive force (Nabea, 2009). Social distance between master and subject had to be maintained partly through linguistic means. Mazrui and Mazrui (1996) and Brutt-Griffler (2002) however argue that denial to teach Africans the English language, on the contrary, provided a stimulus for Africans to study it. The colonized people had already realised that the English language was a sure ticket to white collar employment and wealth, such that to deny them a chance to learn it was tantamount to condemning them to perpetual menial jobs. The Kikuyu of Kenya in a move to contest this arrangement started independent schools to learn English in the 1920s (Whiteley, 1974).

The second epoch was after the Second World War where there was a shift in the British colonial language policy which appeared to hurt local languages. According to Whiteley (1974), when self-rule was imminent in Kenya following the freedom struggle, the British colonialists mounted a campaign to create some Westernized elite in the country. They believed that such an elite group would protect their interests in independent Kenya. In 1950-1951, Whiteley (1974) observes, the Education Department Reports pointed out that it was inappropriate to teach three languages at the primary school. These reports included Beecher's 1949 and the Drogheda Commission of 1952. The documents recommended that English be introduced in the lower primary to be taught alongside the mother tongue, and called for the dropping of Kiswahili in the curriculum, except in areas where it was the vernacular.

Kiswahili's elimination from the curriculum was partly aimed at curtailing its growth and spread, on which Kenyan's freedom struggle was coalescing (Chimerah, 1998; Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998). Further boost for English, at the expense of local languages occurred when the Prator-HutasoitCommission endorsed that English be the only language of instruction in all school grades,

heralding the New Primary Approach, better known as the English Medium Approach (Chimerah, 1998). To implement the new curriculum, teachers were to be trained in English, while their mother tongues were viewed as a premium in teaching the lower primary schools.

Going by the colonial language policy in Kenya after the Second World War, suffice it to state that English was supported at the expense of local languages. However, it has been observed that this support was not motivated by the interest to make Kenyans learn the language, but more in the interest of preventing Kenyan nationalism which was solidifying around African languages, especially Kiswahili (Chimerah, 1998). The move also bequeathed Kenya an iniquitous linguistic legacy after independence, taking into account that English continued to play the divisive role of the haves (English users) and have-nots (non-English users). Now, over fifty years after Kenya's independence, English is yet to be rid of its elitist and exclusionist status.

On surface, the teaching of English in the Kenya education system was an advantage in the sense that the medium was already a world language that facilitated communication with the outside world. However, its teaching to the Kenyan pupils was also at a cost. Thiong'o (1978) demonstrates that the colonial linguistic conquest of African scholars has impacted negatively on them. He argues that they start deriding their local languages leading to alienation. By citing cases in schools and universities where Kenyan languages were associated with negative qualities of backwardness, underdevelopment, humiliation and punishment, Ngugi (1978) states that school leavers have been graduating with a hatred for their people, their culture and languages. On this cultural alienation, Thiong'o comments thus:

> We have already seen what any colonial system does: impose its tongue on the subject races, and then downgrade the vernacular tongues of the people. By so doing, they make the acquisition of their tongue a status symbol; anyone who learns it begins to despise the peasant majority and their 'barbaric 'tongues. By acquiring the thought-processes and the values of his adopted tongue, he becomes alienated from the values of his mother tongue, or from the language of the masses (1978, p.16).

Onyango (2003) also states that the sociolinguistic situation in Kenya today is triglossic and in the following order: English is top of the rank as the official language; Kiswahili is in the middle of the rank as the co-official language, while at the base are the local languages or mother tongues. He further states that most of the Kenyan indigenous languages have no written material, have never been standardised and have no orthography. They also have a limited number of speakers, and are less used in the media or in literature writing. These rankings illustrate that the recognition of local languages in Kenya is wanting. Thus, the languages that are mainly used by the majority of the population are disadvantaged over the English language.

However, according to Chomsky (1968), there is a great difference between first language acquisition and second language learning. Not only are the ways of learning different but the processes within the brain also differ from each other. Chomsky (1968) asserts that first language acquisition is mostly passive. We listen to the people around us, their speech melody, their sounds, their words and their sentence structures. Before we can even read or write a single word in our first language, we already use an impressive vocabulary and many important grammar structures. Some people never learn how to read or write but still speak their first language fluently (ibid). Second language learning, on the other hand, is an active process. We need to learn vocabulary and grammar in order to achieve our goal. Most people will need an instructor, either a teacher at school or the instructions of a course book or audio course. If we ever want to achieve fluency or near fluency in a second language, it requires years of studying and likely a long stay in another country that uses that language (Chomsky, 1968). Many people will never reach anywhere near fluency with any second language.

As such, the difference between first language acquisition and second language learning is so great that it can be the difference between language genius and language struggles. Film, being a medium that is premised on reality, exposes this struggle when actors in the course of performing character

roles appear stiff and unnatural while using a foreign language but attempt to pass it off as their native language. This study therefore examines whether indeed second and third language acquisitions used as native languages in film takes away reality and therefore authenticity in film bearing in mind that authenticity is what defines beauty in film. .

Thus the language problem in Kenya and indeed in most colonised countries has had consequences in that two classes of citizens are immediately created, the class of the advantaged, and therefore *included*, and the class of the disadvantaged, and therefore, *excluded.* The included are a major stumbling block in the use of African languages in a wider range of domains (Onyango, 2003). It is safe to therefore conclude that since most Kenyan films use English language (idiom) as dialogue, Kenyan film makers have chosen and indeed see themselves as being part of the included, consequently perpetuating the class divide in the Kenyan society and completely ignoring reality. It is important to note that film is a medium of reality and its starting point on how it works is always the representation of reality where object and its representation tend to be related iconically. Spoken language too, being an element of film language, needs to be realistic in order for a realistic representation to occur. This thesis argues that it is this ignorance of appreciating film's realistic properties by Kenyan filmmakers to choose appropriate language as dialogue in films that has played a part in the rejection of the films by audiences because the films do not meet the authentic threshold.

Nairobi Half Life deploys a different language every time the location, circumstances and situation changes. By analysing how character performance in these selected films is affected by the spoken language used in every setting in each of the films, this study aims to reposition the place of appropriate choice of language as being part of the elements that make film a medium of actuality.

The Journey of Language in *Nairobi Half Life*

That *Nairobi Half Life* has been successful both in Kenya and abroad speaks volumes about its quality and consequently, its originality and authenticity. The film's first sequence opens with a conversation at a village shopping centre. This conversation occurs in the local language, Kikuyu. This indeed works to give full cultural identity to the participants in this sequence and also fortifies the notion of the location being in the rural area. As a result, the participants appear natural and authentic. Even when Mwas infuses English words in his speech to demonstrate action in the DVD movies he hawks as a sales strategy, this only works to enhance reality of the context. For instance, it is well understood that in Kenya we mostly consume western and oriental films which come to us in the English language. And so there is nothing amiss. In the same vain there is nothing wrong when Mwas carries out further demonstration in English albeit broken to a larger audience in a road show performance after being challenged by a boy among the crowd attending the road show.

But Mwas does not just shift from mother tongue to English. In a clear indication of how language is problematic in Kenya and that English has problems being spoken, when Mwas approaches two members of the road show performance, they laugh at his English pronunciation. The pronunciation is heavily influenced by mother tongue. This demonstrates that English is a contested language and that it is clearly not the people's first language. In addition, before Mwas meets the two theatre men, they converse in Sheng a language that has its grounding in Kiswahili but borrows from English and indigenous languages. Indeed this brings home the idea that language use in Kenya is multilingual and the language code switches as the context changes and demands. It also describes the reality of the multi-tribal nature of interactions in Kenya. It is known that cities are multi-ethnic and have to find a common language that they adopt to suit their communication and socialisation needs; hence, the emergence and use of Sheng in Kenyan towns.

A gem of conversation occurs in the sequence at Mwas 'home when his father comes home in the evening in a drunken stupor and finds Mwas, his brother and mother entertaining neighbours. Mwas and his brother are engaged in a heated conversation where Mwas has been trying to get his brother to lend him money to travel to Nairobi to pursue an acting career. Though the conversation is carried out in Kikuyu, Swahili and English words are thrown in from time to time and this reflects what actually

obtains in such settings in reality. We also come to know that the father is coming in when we hear a manly howl coming from off camera and Mwas and his brother become alert. When the camera cuts to the location of the sound, we see Mwas 'father who begins to sing in mother tongue. The howl is actually meant in keeping with typical African tradition to warn of the coming of the man to his home.

The father continues to sing and approaches Mwas 'mother and neighbours who are seated and begins to harangue them, making them to scamper away. After they have left, the father turns and beckons Mwas. All this time, Mwas 'father has been talking in mother tongue but when Mwas tells him he wants to go to Nairobi, he switches to English. The idea is so that he can demonstrate that despite being in the village he knows the ways of the city and he can even speak the language of the elite who reside in the city. The sub-text of all this is to show that he is a good example who has not struck it well despite knowing the ways and the language of the privileged. It is meant to dissuade Mwas from asking for money to go to the city because in all probability, the father does not have the money anyway. In this sequence is demonstrated how language code switching enhances reality of the film. A switch to English could also work to emphasize his father's insistence that he does not go to the city something that speaks to a depth of fear in the father of losing his son in the big city. Another subtext brought about by language code switching is when Mwas 'father sings a Swahili song 'wamama musilale 'to his wife to mock and intimidate her as a way of hiding his own fears. The song is normally used to rally women to a cause towards self-empowerment.

In the city, the sequence at the police station where Mwas is booked following his arrest for loitering on the streets also demonstrates how difference in language enhances film's authenticity. In this sequence, the policeman who books Mwas uses Swahili language with heavy a mother tongue accent. Mwas 'Swahili can be said to belong to the language used by largely young people who have not grown up in an urban setting, one can even detect the faint mother tongue affliction in his pronunciation. A Kenyan watching this sequence will readily place the origin of the policeman in the western part of the country inhabited by the Luhya community. Similarly a non-Kenyan will grow to appreciate that by no means is the Kenya nation homogeneous and that accent supplies the differentiating identity.

While in the police cell, Mwas is introduced to what is going to be his life in the city in the coming future by Otis, a gangster who mistreats him when they meet but finally becomes his friend out of the cells. Otis uses Sheng, a kind of language that is rampant in the streets of Nairobi. The conversation between Mwas and Otis that occurs in the cell serves to introduce Mwas to a new language register used among young people on the streets of Nairobi. This conversation also serves to provide a transition in Mwas from the rural to the city life so that later when we hear him use the correct Nairobi street language register, we know that a learning process has occurred in the young man. The language used by the inmates is majorly Sheng. Mwas sings in English though he does not fully understand the words of the song hence the song ends up being mere noise.

Indeed, the conversation that realistically and authentically qualifies the film as genuine occurs between Mwas and Otis towards the end. Mwas and Otis are seated leaning on a wall, waiting for near certain death that is coming by way of rogue policemen who are in pursuit of them. The topic is on Amina, Otis 'mistress but whom Mwas has come to love dearly. Otis has just been told that Mwas has been sleeping with Amina. The conversation runs in this manner;

Mwas: Sikiza Oti, siku manga Amina (*Listen Oti, I have not slept with Amina*)

Oti: Poa (It is ok)

Mwas: Lakini kuna vile ninamfeel (*But I love her*)

Oti: Basi niko na wewe (*Then now it is me and you*)

The words used in the above conversation are idioms borrowed from words used every day within the streets but are turned to refer to matters love and sex. These words imbue this sequence and conversation that is laden with heavy subtext, with subtlety for effective communication. For instance, the word *manga* is a Sheng word whose literal meaning in the street is 'eat 'but in this instance, it is

being equated to an act of making love. The word *poa* in its literal meaning refers to 'coming to an end 'but in the conversation it is turned to mean acceptance. The word *ninamfeel* is a combination of a Swahili word *nina* (I am) and an English word *feel* implying a sensory perception. A combination of these words in the context supplies the meaning of the act of falling in love. Because this is the actual language of the street and the actors are well socialised in street ways, they are able to utter these appropriate words with appropriate non-verbal accompaniments thus imbuing the conversation with authenticity. A translation, as can be seen, would not even begin to scratch the surface of meaning to which this particular words supply to the viewer.

The Indian trader to whom Mwas is sent to by his gangster cousin speaks in heavily accented Swahili. This works well to reflect reality. The settings involve an Asian émigré who has a smattering of the local language and therefore one expects him to speak in that manner. At the national theatre, English is the language mostly used for communication without any native language hindrance. This is easily acceptable because in theatre, actors and characters do not have to be the same. Indeed film is a realistic medium where the object and what is represented are related iconically whereas theatre works mainly through symbolism.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that appropriate choice of spoken language in film is important especially when considered against context for a realistic actor performance that impacts on the quality of film. It is only a realistic and honest representation of the Kenyan experience which choice of language plays a part that will find favour with Kenyan and indeed international audiences. This in turn will result in the production of the necessary critical numbers of films that will satisfy local and international demand.

Thus, a number of conclusions can be reached:

1. That it is reality (content), depicted in films that is paramount over and above film form as demonstrated in the analysis of the film *Nairobi Half Life.* Whereas *Nairobi Half Life* does not deploy portent film formal elements to tell the story, the content of the film based on its close approximation to reality using appropriate choice of language ensures that it is better received by local and international audiences.
2. That when film directors cast for their films they should select actors who have been socialised in the immediate environment that constitutes the settings of the film.
3. That when scripting for a film, the script writer should always give characters in the film language that is appropriate as well as use words characters are likely to use in the natural settings.

References

Beattie, G. (2003). *Visible Thought - The New Psychology of Body Language.* HoveBerndtson, A. (1969) *Art, Expression and Beauty.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Brutt-Griffler, J. (2002) *World English; A Study of its Development.* Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Cavell, S. (1979). *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Chimerah, R.M. (1998). *Kiswahili: Past, Present, and Future Horizons.* Nairobi: Nairobi University Press.

Chomsky N. (1968).*Language and Mind.* New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

Chomsky, N. (1965).*Aspects of the Theory of Syntax.* Cambridge: M.I.T. Press.

Chomsky, N. (1977). *Language and Responsibility. Based on Conversation with MitsouRonat.* Trans. by J. Viertel. New York: Pantheon.

Chomsky, N. (1980). *Rules and Representations.* New York: Columbia UP

Djité, P. G. (2008). *The Sociolinguistics of Development on Africa.* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Heller, M. (2006). *Linguistic Minorities and Modernity: A Sociolinguistic Ethnography.* New York: Continuum Group.

http://www.africafocus.org/docs10/educ1007.php

Hymes, D. (1962). The Ethnography of Speaking. In Gladwin, T. & Sturtevant, W.C. (eds), *Anthropology and Human Behaviour* pp. 13–53. Washington: The Anthropology Society of Washington.

Hymes, D. (1972). On Communicative Competence. In J. B. Pride & J. Holmes (Eds.),*Sociolinguistics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Hymes, D. (1982). *Vers la competence de communication.* Trans. by F. mugler. Paris: Hatier-Credif.

Kenya Constitution. 2010. Nairobi: Government Press.

Kenya Film Commission's Newsletter (2011)

Kenya Information and Communication act Cap 411A of the Laws of Kenya 2009. Nairobi:Government Press.

Kiarie (2004).Language and Multiparty Democracy in a Multiethnic Kenya. *Africa Today, 50* (3), 56-73.

Kim, L. S. (2003). Multiple Identities in a Multicultural World: A Malaysian Perspective.*Journal of Language, Identity and Education,2* (3), 137-158.

Kopecky, A. (2007), August 4). *Slum boy shines in award-winning international film*. Daily Nation. Retrieved September 5, 2012, from http://www.tucacas.info/kibera/ pdf/DailyNation_KiberaKid_Aug07.pdf

Kracauer, S. (1997). *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lodhi, A. Y. (1993). The Language Situation in Africa Today. *Nordic Journal of African Studies,2*(1), 79–86.

MacCabe, C. (1976). Theory and Film: Principles of Realism and Pleasure. *Screen 17*(3), 7–27.

Mazrui, A. A. & Mazrui, A. M (1996). A Tale of Two Englishes: The Imperial Language in the Post-Colonial Kenya and Uganda. In: Fishman, J. Conrad, A. & Lopez, A.L. (eds.) *Post Imperial English*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 271-302.

Mazrui, A., &Mazrui, A. (1998). *The Power of Babel: Language and Governance in the AfricanExperience.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McNeill, D. (2000). *Language and Gesture.* Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.

McNeill, D. (2005). *Gesture and Thought.*Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McNeill, D.http://mcneilllab.uchicago.edu/topics/growth_points.html Accessed 1.18.10

Metz, C. (1974). *Film Language: A Semiotics of Cinema*. Translated by Michael Taylor, New York, Oxford University Press, 1974, reprinted by University of Chicago Press, 1991. Translation of *Essaissur la signification au cinema*.

Muaka(2010). *The dynamics of Language Use among Rural and Urban Kenyan Youths*. Unpublished Post Graduate Thesis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Nabea W. (2009), Language Policy in Kenya, Negotiation with hegemony

Nettle D. and Romaine S. (2000); *Vanishing Voices; The extinction of The World's languages*; Oxford University press

Ogechi, N., &Ogechi, E. (2002). Educational Publishing in African Languages, With a Focus on Swahili in Kenya. *Nordic Journal of African Studies,II* (2), 167-184.

Onyango, J. O. (2003).*The National Language Policy Implementation and Experience; The Case of Kiswahili in the Parliament of Kenya*. Unpublished PhD. Thesis, University of Vienna.

Perez de Cuellar, J. (1994). *Our Creative Diversity. Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development*. France: Egoprim.

Republic of Kenya (2008). *Kenya: Commission of Inquiry into the Post Election Violence (*CIPEV*) Final Report*. Nairobi: Government Printers.

Stanislavski, K. (1995). *Inner Impulses and Inner Action; Creative Objectives.*InRichard, D. (ed), *Twentieth Century Theatre:A Sourcebook* (253-257). London: Routledge.,

Stanislavski, K. (2008).*An Actor's work: A Student's Diary.* (Jean Benedetti, transl. & Ed.) London: Routledge.

Thiong'o, N. (1978) *Homecoming*. London: Heinemann

Thiong'o, N. (1980). *Introduction to CaitaaniMuthabaraba-ini*. Nairobi: Heinemann.

Thiong'o, N. (1994). *Decolonizing the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Literature*.Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House.

Thiong'o, N. (1997). *Writers in Politics: A re-Engagement of Issues of Literature and Society*. Oxford: James Currey Limited.

Vogler, C. (2007).*The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*. California*:* Michael Wiese Productions.

Whiteley (1974). *Language in Kenya*. Nairobi: Oxford University Press.

www.filmservices.go.ke(accessed, 3/5/2020 3.02pm)

www.kenyafilmcommission.com/ (accessed, 3/5/2020)