

# 'They wouldn't allow me in their conversations'

## Communication experiences of immigrant traders in a Kenyan informal market

*Agnes W. Muchura-Theuri & Jared Obuya*

Moi University

### Abstract

This paper reports findings of a study that investigated intercultural communication experiences of immigrant traders in a Kenyan informal market. The study employed a qualitative approach, hence a case study of one large urban informal market in Nairobi. In-depth interviews were conducted with twenty two participants purposive sampled and the findings were analysed thematically. Findings of the study revealed that cultural challenges, characterized by divergent language and communication styles, led to a breakdown in intercultural communication, and social communication exclusion of the immigrant traders by their hosts. Therefore, local authorities need to initiate cross-cultural adaptation programmes within the informal markets in order to enhance the efficacy of the immigrant traders in intercultural communication.

**Keywords:** *Intercultural communication, immigrant traders, informal markets, cross-cultural adaptation, experiences*

---

### Introduction

This paper examines the communication experiences of immigrant traders in one large informal urban market in Kenya. We define intercultural communication as communication that occurs when persons from different cultures exchange verbal and non-verbal symbols (Neuliep, 2009). Intercultural communication "occurs when people from two or more cultures interact" (Varner and Beamer, 2011: 28).

Globally, intercultural communication has become pervasive mainly due to globalization and increased integration among regional communities or nations. Kim (1991), observes there is unprecedented movement of people and intercultural encounters due to globalization. In light of this, the end result of globalization is a mixture of individuals who are culturally different and speak different languages. Kim (1988, 2001, 2005), argues that individuals who find themselves in new cultural environments are tasked with adaptation challenges that are primarily associated with the person's inability to communicate in the new culture. Therefore, learning how to communicate across cultures in today's globalised world has become a dire necessity. To this end, there is an increasing focus on studying intercultural communication in different contexts more than ever before in order to respond to the intricacies of intercultural communication in the modern world.

According to Gudykunst (2005a, 2005b), immigrants with low perceived communication effectiveness suffer uncertainty and anxiety in their encounters with strangers. They feel uneasy interacting with the hosts of the receiving society and even avoid communication with them. In Africa, regional integration and movements across the borders have necessitated more intercultural communication among people. According to Dinka and Kennes (2007), regional market is the stepping stone for the global market as it

provides a platform for competitiveness and skills acquisition in the regional market before competing at the global level. Therefore, the basic rationale for regional integration is to serve as a learning platform for competition in the global market. Regional integration brings together people from different cultural backgrounds and since effective communication is paramount in the realization of the benefits underpinning it, insights derived from intercultural communication studies would have a place in steering the benefits enshrined in regional integration.

On a local perspective, the East African Community is one of the regional integration platforms and Kenya being a partner state is touted as the regional business hub for the other partner states and beyond. Furthermore, Kenya's strategic location is one of the pull factors that attract immigrants across the African regions with majority of them coming from East African countries (IOM, 2015). As such, effective intercultural communication is paramount for people from different cultures who engage in business transactions and this perspective foregrounds the investigation of the present study.

## Review of related literature

A number of recent studies have documented the communication experiences of immigrants in intercultural settings, highlighting language differences as a major challenge in adapting to intercultural communication. Shi and Wang (2014) in a study of Chinese business expatriates in Russia, Brazil, Middle East, UK, Germany and USA found that differences in the use of language was an outstanding communication challenge that led to poor adaptability in various business environments. The findings further revealed that use of different communication styles between the expatriates and the host nationals and language variances emanating from differences in the meanings of some words led to word confusion and grammatical mistakes and ultimately resulted in misunderstandings for the expatriates.

Differences in the use of personal space and eye contact were other aspects of communication difficulties experienced by the expatriates in their communication with the host nationals (Shi and Wang, 2014). To mitigate the challenges, the study underscored the need for international corporations to improve cross-cultural adaptation processes for expatriates through language training for effective business performance in international business contexts of the host culture. Differences in the use of language and communication inhibited adaptation for the Chinese immigrants due to misunderstandings. The study recommended language training for effective communication in international business contexts.

Another relevant study was carried out by Hebbani and Colic-Peisker (2012) on cross-cultural communication and employment of African born former refugees settling in Brisbane, Australia. The study focused on cross-cultural communication experiences in job search and specifically in the job interview situation and work place communication with supervisors and co-workers. The findings revealed that the use of vernacular slangs by the host nationals to address the African born immigrant refugees during job interviews made it difficult for the immigrants to pass the interviews and secure jobs in the host country. This was compounded further by the immigrants' lack of English proficiency, strong African accent and non-verbal communicative behaviours that were determined by their culturally specific rules.

A related study by Holmes (2015) inquired on intercultural communication experiences for immigrants as they entered the workforce in New Zealand through a volunteer work-placement scheme. In-depth open-ended interviews were used to generate data. The findings revealed that the participants had difficulties constructing collegial relationships. Their attempt to build relationships with colleagues through small talks communication during tea breaks was hindered by their colleagues' use of informal language register that was unfamiliar to them and discussion of topics that were specific to the New Zealand experience and context thereby subjecting them to feelings of exclusion from the conversations. Furthermore, small talk contexts caused awkwardness and embarrassment for the participants as their colleagues talked fast, used colloquial terms and spoke in a register they described as "Kiwi" English.

The author suggests the need to encourage and support new immigrants/colleagues through tolerance, sensitivity and respect towards language differences as work-placement programmes for immigrants provide valuable resource in initiating immigrants into the workplace and as well help them manage their

intercultural encounters with co-workers and employers. These studies relate to the current study in that they investigated intercultural communication in a work environment although in different contexts.

## Methodology

The qualitative approach was used as it allowed in-depth exploration of communication experiences for the participants under study. According to Creswell (2009), qualitative research is done in a natural setting where the researcher holds a face to face interaction with the study participants over an extended period of time. This was in tandem with the present study as we had face to face interaction with the study participants on their intercultural experiences in a market setting where they were carrying out business activities. The approach was also viable as it provided us the opportunity to explore the subject and capture data, using a non-standardized way of collecting data (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2003).

The case study method was used to carry out the study because it allows researchers to carry out in-depth exploration of social phenomena in their natural contexts (Creswell, 2009). The study adopted an intrinsic case study which allowed a better understanding of intercultural experiences of the immigrant traders. Stake (2005) explains that a case study is classified as intrinsic if the study is undertaken because first and last, one wants better understanding of that particular case.

Purposive sampling was used to select the site and the participants of the study. The market, based in Nairobi was selected because it is one of the largest informal markets known to host immigrant traders from the wider East African regions. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to interact with informants who are experts in the area, have experienced the phenomenon and have information or interest in the area under study (Lindolf and Taylor, 2002). The participants identified had rich information of the phenomenon under investigation.

Twenty-two in-depth interviews were conducted with the immigrant traders between January and March 2014. Hargie (2000) contends that in-depth interviews require that a few participants are used as the study may reach saturation quickly. The participants comprised of fifteen males and seven females and were mainly drawn from the East African regions, namely, Tanzania, Uganda, Sudan, Rwanda and DR-Congo.

The participants who were considered for participation were only those who had lived in Kenya for not less than a period of two years. The period was prescribed by Kim, (1988, 2001, 2005) cross cultural adaptation theory that posits that the two year period is good enough for a sojourner to have gone through the adaptation process. The dates and times of interviews were agreed upon beforehand and were scheduled at the convenience of the participants. As such, the interviews were carried out in the participants' business premises in the market at their convenience, mostly during the morning hours before their customers began trickling in. A written consent was signed beforehand. All the interviews were audio taped and supplemented with field notes taken while the interviews were underway.

All the recordings were transcribed in Kiswahili, which was the language used for the interviews and then translated into English. The data was analysed using Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis procedure that entailed familiarizing with the data, generating the initial codes (data coding), searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming of the themes before the final report was written.

## Findings

The findings revealed that the Swahili language spoken by the local traders/host nationals posed communication challenges for the immigrant traders due to mother tongue interferences and differences in accent. The findings further revealed that use of local languages, English and *Sheng'* (a mixture of Swahili and English) by the local traders/host nationals led to communication breakdown for the immigrant traders. Lexical variations in meanings of some Swahili words were other communication challenges for the immigrant traders since they ultimately led to lexical ambiguity.

According to the findings, the immigrant traders had difficulties comprehending the Swahili language spoken by the host nationals as it had mother tongue interferences. A participant reported that he had a problem in my communication with the local traders because he could not fully understand their Kiswahili, which was full of mother tongue interferences.

*I could not fully understand their Swahili as it was coupled with mother tongue interferences. They for instance use –sa, -si, -ii, and pronounce words as -gapi, instead of Ngapi (which means: how much?), niusie, instead of niuzie (which means: sell to me...), shange instead of change (which means: loose/broken money) in their speech. So it was hard at first trying to make out what they meant*

The differences in the accent for the Swahili language spoken by the immigrant and local traders led to ridicule by the host nationals while use of local languages by the local traders to address the immigrant traders posed a communication challenge to immigrant traders since they were not familiar with the languages as the following participant revealed:

*When I talked to the local traders here, they found the Swahili I spoke different from theirs due to accent and they ridiculed me. That made me shy away from talking to them and I was very uncomfortable.*

Another participant stated:

*I was used to Kiswahili only back home, but I realized they use English and so many local languages which were very hard for me to comprehend, so I would sit and listen to them talk while I wondered what they were saying.*

Use of informal language (Sheng') by host nationals such as: *hii unausa how much?* (to mean: how much are you selling this item?), *nipatie discount* (to mean: give me a discount), were common communication hindrances to the immigrant traders during their initial days in the in the host country. Moreover, language used to negotiate the prices was characterized by Sheng' language. A participant illustrated the finding as follow: *hii imefade kidogo, unafaa unipatie discount*, (to mean: this one (item) is faded a bit so you need to give me a discount).

Lexical differences in Kiswahili used by the host nationals and that of the immigrant traders at times resulted in communication breakdown. A turn-taking exchange between the immigrant and local traders was demonstrated by one participant who narrated how she had requested to be served at a hotel but due to lexical differences, the waiters dismissed her thinking she was begging for food:

*I had some communication problems at first... I was used to the polite way of communicating in Tanzania, where even when you are buying something, you request for it in a polite manner. I remember I went to a hotel and said “naomba nyama kwa ugali” (meaning: I am requesting to be served meat and Ugali) and I was told “hapa hatuombi, tunauza” (here we don't give out things for free, we sell!). There was confusing because the waiters thought I was begging (ku-omba) for food when I was just requesting (ku-omba) to be served.*

Furthermore, the local traders perceived the immigrant traders as non-members due to their foreign identity and as such excluded them in their social communication. This is what one participant to the study stated:

*People here mistreated us because we are not Kenyans. This affected how I communicated to them as I felt inferior and unwelcome in their midst... They wouldn't allow me to mingle with them especially when they were in a group conversing and would say I was a foreigner and did not know anything about them. I felt left out. Again, some issues were considered to be for Kenyans and they wouldn't allow me in their conversations because I am a foreigner.*

Another participant attributed this exclusion to the perception that Kenyans do not open up easily to strangers. He said:

*Kenyans don't open their hearts fully to strangers. For example, if we are in a group and they realize I am a Tanzanian, they would treat me in a different way and even the conversation might change and I might not feel free in their midst. I had a problem starting life in Kenya. I had to be humble to start life as everything was difficult for me, but I stayed focused because I knew what I wanted to achieve. But for now I thank God that everything has been going on well and I have adapted well in the environment.*

Participants from Uganda, where Kiswahili is not well established, had communication difficulties as the local traders addressed them in Kiswahili which was rarely spoken in their country. To mitigate the challenge, the participants embraced learning the local languages from the host nationals as the following transcript demonstrated:

*Kiswahili was a major problem for me. I could not understand a word they were saying. So communication with the locals here was a problem for me. But since they knew I was from another country and had language issues, they even started teaching me some of the basic Kiswahili, for example, how to greet someone, how to count money, and how to ask for change. In three months, I had learnt much of the Kiswahili that enabled me to communicate with them.*

Another participant revealed that she turned to observing the nonverbal communication of the host nationals to mitigate her communication challenges.

*When I came to Kenya for the first time, it was hard to communicate with Kenyans. In Tanzania we are used to a single language; Swahili, while Kenyans have so many local languages. I found it hard to communicate with customers since I could not speak in English or their local languages. So I turned to observing their non-verbal communication such facial expressions as these are not any different from those that we use back in Tanzania. Kenyans love using facial expressions, which communicate a lot especially when they are angry.*

Another strategy the immigrant traders devised to mitigate communication challenges was to label the prices of the commodities they were selling, but this did not deter customers from seeking details about the items.

*I could not communicate well with the customers as well as the people around me so I used price labels on my items and it was easy for me to sell to customers who came to buy from me. But if someone came and asked me so much detail about an item or spoke to me in English, I could not respond*

There was also frequent miscommunication during business transactions between the immigrant traders and the locals leading mistrust. The following statement by one of the participants attests to this:

*We bought a stall in this market from Kenyans but the same people came for it later on and said they had only rented the stall to us and that our time had elapsed so we should move out. We had an argument but eventually let it go because this is not our country and to avoid anything serious that could result in death, it was best for us to let it go. I got so scared that I cannot trust them anymore or invest more in Kenya.*

Harassment by local traders and law enforcement personnel also affected the social communication of the immigrant traders. The local traders, who feared competition, harassed them by vandalizing their premises and organizing the stealing of their commodities. In some instances, they were set up for arrest

by the local police, who put them in on flimsy charges. As a result, the immigrants became quite distrustful and timid in their communication with the host nationals.

*I have been arrested on several occasions even though I have my passport and documents in order. I have had to bribe the police officers on many occasions because that is all they want. On other occasions, our fellow traders from Kenya have sabotaged my business by paying people to steal from and sometimes vandalize my business. That's why I no longer trust them and have become a lot more careful about what I communicate with them.*

The participants felt that the host nationals still perceived them as “immigrants” even after living in the country for a while and that affected them psychologically and how they communicated with them. They were out-rightly hostile to them as a participant revealed:

*Sometimes Kenyans treat us in a bad way since we are Tanzanians. They feel we don't have a right to be amongst them in this market. For example I am a secretary to the market hall that serves the community but whenever there is a slight problem, they always tell me that I am here illegally, that I am living with temporary papers and that one day they will evict me from their country. This perception has had an impact in our conversations with them.*

However, a few of participants had positive remarks to report on their social communication with the local traders, especially when they first came to Kenya. They reported having had a cordial working relationship of fellow traders and customers.

*Everything has been good and is still improving and I think my relationship in future with Kenyans will be even better given that I now know much about their culture and the way business is done here. We have developed great level of trust and hope this will continue for long. The only time I felt annoyed about Kenyans when I first came was when my wife had an argument with a neighbor here and she was insulted for marrying a foreigner.*

Another participant also reported being “warmly”. He stated Kenyans “loved me ever since and my social relationship” with them is good. The participant said he was much appreciated by the locals thereby making him feel quite at home in his communication with them.

Although the immigrant traders had communication challenges with the local traders and nationals during their initial days in the country, they had overcome these challenges at the time the present study was carried out. As such, they expressed their desire to continue living in the host country for a longer time as it offered them better prospects. More importantly, the participants reported having adjusted to cultures of the host country, thereby ensuring effective communication with the host nationals. This implied that they had gained host communication competencies, which has inspired them to stay longer. A participant even contemplated acquiring a Kenyan citizenship as captured in the following statement:

*We have learnt the local cultures and are able to communicate effectively with the locals. I would love to continue doing business here in Kenya and hope the relationship will remain the same or even get better. Nowadays, we are okay, we have become part of the community; and they see us as part of them. I'm contemplating staying permanently here and would like to acquire citizenship in Kenya.*

## **Discussion**

The findings reveal that differences and variations in pronunciations, accent, of the Swahili language, the use of other local languages, English and Sheng' by the host nationals in their communication with the immigrant traders, and lexical ambiguity resulted in communication breakdown for the immigrant traders.

These findings are consistent with Neuliep (2009) and Kim (2001) who observe that communication for people from different cultures is hindered by their differences in communication styles that in turn lead to communication breakdown. Furthermore, the findings reveal that people in new cultural environments experience various adjustment challenges due to language differences (Kim, 2001). For the immigrant traders, the variance in meaning of some words led to lexical ambiguity resulting in communication breakdown for the participants. This underscores the observation by Furham and Boncher (1986) that effective intercultural communication is hindered when communicating partners operate from a set of different rules.

In addition, the findings correspond with those for Shi and Wang (2014)'s study on Chinese business expatriates in international business contexts who experienced language difficulties due to differences in the language use and communication styles, leading to word confusion and grammatical mistakes. The differences in the Kiswahili accent for the immigrant and local traders subjected the immigrant traders to ridicule that in turn made them shy away from communicating with the locals. For Hebbani and Colic-Peisker (2012) in their a study on cross-cultural communication and employment of African born former refugees settling in Brisbane, Australia reported that the African accent dissuaded them from securing jobs. Thus, there are varied repercussions of differences in the accent, underscoring the importance of accent in intercultural communication.

The findings on the use of unfamiliar languages by the local traders to address the immigrant traders also relate to those for Holmes (2015) who reported that immigrants joining the New Zealand work force had difficulties establishing collegial relationships as their colleagues could use unfamiliar language register and discuss topics that were specific to the New Zealand experience thereby excluding them from the discussions. Similarly, Hebbani and Colic-Peisker (2012) reported that the African refugees experienced language difficulties in job interview situations and work place communication due to the use of vernacular slangs by the local nationals in their communication with them.

The findings further show that immigrants with low perceived communication effectiveness suffer uncertainty and anxiety in their encounters with strangers as they feel uneasy interacting with the hosts of the receiving society (Gudykunst, 2005a, 2005b), while cultural noise interferes with the process of encoding, decoding and interpreting of messages (Neuliep, 2009). The findings reveal that the local traders could exclude the immigrant traders from their social communication as they perceived them as non members due to their foreign identity. Consequently, the immigrant traders felt inferior and unwelcomed in the social communication for the local traders/host nationals. These findings echo Kim (1988, 2001, 2005), who argues that people adjusting in new cultural environment encounter various challenges propelled mostly by lack of host communication competence. The findings further support Furham and Boncher (1986) and Neuliep (2009) who agree that cultural difference is a hindrance to effective intercultural communication. In this respect, the need to make various adjustments strategies such as learning new methods of communication and adapting to new communication social structures for people adapting to new cultural environments is pertinent. For the present study, the participants devised various strategies to counter their communication challenges. They would, for instance, observe non verbal expressions of the host nationals as they communicated to them and label the prices of the merchandise to avoid elaborate communication with the host nationals. The findings coincide with Gudykunst (2005a, 2005b, Kim, 2001) who observes that immigrants with low perceived communication effectiveness feel uneasy interacting with the host nationals and also avoid communicating with them.

On adaptation experiences that impinged on their communication with the host nationals, the immigrant traders resolved to give up on their rights of material ownership when threatened and they also acquired necessary immigration documentation to avoid confrontation with the law enforcers. Essentially the immigrant traders acquired host communication competencies (Kim (1988, 2001, 2005) that consequently improved their social relationships with the host nationals. This enticed them to aspire to live in the host country for longer.

## Conclusion

In view of the findings for this study, it can be concluded that lack of host communication competence leads to cross cultural adaptation challenges. Therefore, communicating in a different cultural set up requires the learning of communication styles for people from different cultures in order to minimize miscommunication that ultimately lead to communication breakdown in intercultural encounters. Local authorities hosting informal markets with immigrant traders need to initiate cross cultural training programmes within the confines of the informal market sectors to enhance intercultural communication. The learning of host languages and communication styles of the host nationals should be the basis of the programmes.

Creating awareness of the cultural differences between the culture of the immigrant traders and the host cultures should be part of local training in order to enhance the self efficacy of the immigrant traders in adapting to the host culture. Since the immigrant traders in the Kenyan informal urban market play a fundamental role in the growth of the country's economy, creating awareness to the local traders and other host nationals on the need to embrace cultural diversity in informal business arenas and beyond in today's globalised world should be a priority for the local and national government. This may be done through awareness programmes in the media, as well as grassroots forums such as local meetings in the informal sectors.

## References

- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3: 77-101.
- Creswell, W. J. (2009). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). London: Sage.
- Dinka, T. & Kennes, W. (2007). *Africa's Regional Integration Arrangements: History and Challenges*. Discussion Paper No. 74.
- Furnhan, A. & Buchner, S. (1986). *Culture Shock: Psychological Reactions to Unfamiliar Environments*. New York: Routledge.
- Gudykunst, W.B. (2005). *Theorizing about Intercultural Communication*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gudykunst, W. B. (2005a). An anxiety/uncertainty management (AUM) theory of effective communication. In W. B. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Theorizing about intercultural communication* (281–322). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gudykunst, W. B. (2005b). An anxiety/uncertainty management (AUM) theory of strangers' intercultural adjustment. In W. B. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Theorizing about intercultural communication* (419–457). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hargie, O. (2000). *Handbook of Communication Audits for Organisations*. Chicago: Psychology Press.
- Hebbani, A. & Colic-Peisker, V (2012) Communicating One's Way to Employment: A Case Study of African Settlers in Brisbane, Australia, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 33:5, 529-547.
- Holmes, P. (2015) 'The cultural stuff around how to talk to people': immigrants' intercultural communication during a pre-employment work-placement, *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 15:1, 109-124.
- International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2015). *Migration in Kenya: A country profile 2015*. Kenya: IOM.

- Kim, Y. Y. (1988). *Communication and cross-cultural adaptation: an integrative theory*. Clevedon, Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters.
- Kim, Y. Y. (1991). Intercultural Communication Competence. In: Ting-Toomey, S. & Korzenny, F., eds. *Cross-Cultural Interpersonal Communication*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications, pp. 259-275.
- Kim, Y.Y. (2001). *Becoming Intercultural: An Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-cultural Adaptation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kim, Y. Y. (2005). Adapting to a new culture: An integrative communication theory. In W. B. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Theorizing about intercultural communication* (pp. 375-400). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Lindlof, T. & Taylor, B. (2002). *Qualitative communication research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Merino, M. E & Mellor, D. J. (2009) Perceived discrimination in Mapuche discourse: contemporary racism in Chilean society , *Critical Discourse Studies*, 6:3, 215-226.
- Neuliep, J. W. (2009). *Intercultural Communication: A Contextual Approach* (4<sup>th</sup>ed). California: Thousand Oaks.
- Pedersen, P. (1995). *The Five Stages of Culture Shock: Critical Incidents around the World*. USA: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Stake, R.E. (2005). Qualitative case studies. In N.K.Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.),. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., pp.443-446). California: SAGE
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2003). *Research Methods for Business Studies*. Harlow: Financial Times/Prentice Hall.
- Shi, L. & Wang, L. (2014). The Culture Shock and Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Chinese Expatriates in International Business Contexts. *International Business Research; Vol. 7, No. 1; 2014*.
- Varner, I. & Beamer, L. (2011). *Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace*. 5th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.

## About the Authors

Dr Agnes W. Muchura-Theuri is an adjunct lecturer in the Department of Communication Studies of Moi University. Her research interests are in language and culture, intercultural communication and qualitative research. Email: [muchuraagnes@yahoo.com](mailto:muchuraagnes@yahoo.com)

Dr Jared Obuya is a lecturer in the Department of Communication Studies, School of Information Sciences, Moi University. He has many years of experience as a journalist with Kenyan, as well as, international media organizations. His research interests are in media governance, journalism theory and practice, and qualitative research.

### Authors' Address

Moi University  
Kesses  
Uasin Gishu county  
Kenya  
Email: [jaredobuya@hotmail.com](mailto:jaredobuya@hotmail.com)