

SPECIFIC LANGUAGE IMPAIRMENT IN THE SPEECH OF MESHACK, AN EKEGUSII SPEAKER

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Research on SLI, mostly on European languages like English, German and Italian, has suggested that it mainly affects inflectional morphology and, to a lesser degree, syntax and phonology. The present study researched SLI in Ekegusii, an African language which, unlike those three, is a tone language. The study found that the impairment in the case studied significantly affected not only inflectional (essentially verbal) morphology, but also phonology, especially tones. It found much fewer instances of lexical and syntactic impairment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Specific Language Impairment (SLI) is a type of linguistic deficit that affects first language acquisition. This is how Fromkin et al. (2011: 18-19) introduce the topic of SLI:

In addition to brain-damage individuals who have lost their language ability, there are children without brain lesions who nevertheless have difficulties in acquiring language and are much slower than the average child. They show no other cognitive deficits, they are not autistic or retarded, and they have no perceptual problems. Such children are suffering from **specific language impairment (SLI)**.

For their part, Radford et al. (1999, chapters 15 & 26) compare what happens in SLI with what happens in two aphasic syndromes, Broca's aphasia and Wernicke's aphasia.¹ But, from early on in their book, they too

¹ There are more types of aphasia. Fabbro (1999: 43-45) describes eight types, on the basis of what he calls "a brief review of the most accepted and currently most widespread classifications of aphasia..." (p. 43). However, Broca's aphasia and Wernicke's aphasia, which are the most widespread, are the most widely studied in the literature.

make it clear that SLI is “a language disorder that needs to be distinguished from [disorders due to aphasia], which are *acquired* as the result of damage to the brain” (p. 15). They go on to say that

The *specificity* of SLI is indicated by the fact that SLI subjects have normal-verbal IQs, no hearing deficits and no obvious emotional or behavioural difficulties. ... The nature of the impairment displayed by SLI subjects seems to be fairly narrow in scope, affecting aspects of grammatical inflection and certain complex syntactic processes...”. (Radford et al., 1999, p. 15)

Further (in Chapter 15), the authors show how SLI children have difficulties with both nominal and verbal inflections, like the past tense marker *-(e)d*, or the third person singular present tense *-s* and plural *-s*. But they also point out that

... the development of inflection is selectively impaired: the acquisition of regular inflection causes more problems than learning irregulars, and inflectional morphemes encoding tense/agreement seem to be more adversely affected than pluralisation morphemes. (p. 252)

Further (in Chapter 26), Radford et al. look at the possibility that SLI children’s syntax is also impaired. They start their discussion by noting that “English-speaking SLI children do not have problems with word order” (p. 413). They assume that this may be due to the fact that “the word-order system of English is rather simple”, and then go on to explore the possibility that “it might well be that SLI subjects do show word-order problems in a language [like German] which has a more complex system” (ibid.). They observe that what appear to be word-order problems (involving finite vs. non-finite verbs) in German are in fact linked not to word-order *per se*, but still to morphosyntactic aspects. They conclude in the following way:

Thus, it seems that with respect to word order, the grammar of SLI subjects is in fact identical to that of unimpaired speakers, as all the verbs they use appear in the correct positions. The only difference between SLI subjects and normal children is that SLI children do not produce as many finite verbs as the language requires. (p.415).

...

We conclude that the grammatical problems of SLI subjects lie mainly with inflection, and that word order is in fact unimpaired. Within the area of inflection, subject-verb agreement, case marking, gender and auxiliaries appear to be more strongly affected than, for example, noun plurals.... (p.415)

Fromkin et al. (2011), for their part, note that while “[some] studies of children with SLI reveal broader grammatical impairments, involving difficulties with many grammatical structures and operations, ... most investigations of SLI children show that they have particular problems with verbal inflection ... and also with syntactic structures involving certain kinds of word reorderings...” (p. 19). The authors add that “Recent work on SLI children also shows that the different components of language (phonology, syntax, lexicon) can be selectively impaired or spared” (p. 19).

From the preceding paragraphs it would be interesting to learn more about SLI from studies on as many different languages as possible. It is this that motivated postgraduate research by Otieno (2012), who was lucky to come across a 7-year old boy (Meshack) whose speech in his first and only language had features similar to those reported in the literature. The boy’s language is Ekegusii, a Bantu language spoken in Kenya. To collect data for analysis, on several occasions Otieno visited the boy at his parents’ home to engage him in a series of conversations. The researcher’s analysis of the data showed that the boy had difficulties not only with inflections but also with phonological and lexical aspects of Ekegusii. Illustrating with extracts from the data collected for Otieno’s (2012) study, this paper aims to deepen the analysis of the various linguistic features of Specific Language Impairment observed in Meshack’s speech.

2. MORPHOLOGICAL IMPAIRMENT

Ekegusii, like other Bantu languages, is typologically classified as an agglutinating language, that is, one that attaches several morphemes together to form a word. This is particularly the case of verb forms, in which prefixes and suffixes are affixed to the root to express grammatical meanings related mainly to tense, aspect, and agreement.

2.1 Difficulty inserting the subject and object pronouns into the verb

Ekegusii is an SVO language. In addition, the overt subject is always represented by a pronoun morpheme incorporated into the verb. As illustrated in extracts 1 and 2 below² in the words in bold type, Meshack's speech is atypical in the sense that he has difficulty incorporating the subject pronoun into the verb.

Extract 1

Meshack's utterance	Gloss
M: <i>Rose ikaransete nyomba are</i>	Rose sitting inside the house she is
R: <i>Inki agokora?</i>	What is she doing?
M: <i>Teneine</i>	Standing
R: <i>Naende bata eyende</i>	Press the button again
M: <i>Rose nomwana</i>	Rose with the baby
R: <i>Naende eyende</i>	Get another one
M: <i>Rose are nom... ere bweka</i>	Rose with ... she is alone
R: <i>Inki agokora?</i>	What is she doing?
M: <i>Ikaransete</i>	Is sitting

² The letter *M* refers to Meshack, while *R* refers to the researcher who interviewed him. In the extract, the researcher shows Meshack a picture of a familiar neighbour and asks him to say what she is doing in the picture.

The verbs in bold type (*ikaransete* and *teneine*) lack the prefix that is expected to be used to mark the subject. Meshack's usage *i-karans-et-e* (is sitting) should have been *a-i-karans-et-e* (she is sitting). What is missing is the prefix *a-*, which corresponds to the subject pronoun *she*. Similarly, *tene-in-e* (standing) lacks the *a-* of the target form *a-tene-in-e* (she is standing). It is also interesting that Meshack put the equivalent of the subject *she* in the first line (*Rose ikaransete nyomba are*) at the end of the sentence instead of prefixing it to the verb. He should have said: *Rose aikaransete nyomba* (Rose is sitting in the house).

Extract 2

R: *Mware abana barenga...mware komigana.* How many were you ... were you squeezed up?

M: *Ebirogo gasinini, bike bike.* Tiny chairs, very small.

The dropping of the preprefix³ *e-*, which must be copied from the noun (*ebirogo*) to the adjective (*bike*), is the main impairment here. The *e-* must be copied from the noun to the adjective *bike*. The correct form should have been the following: *ebirogo ebisinini, ebike ebike* (The chairs are small, very tiny). The morpheme *ebi-* (which is actually a “twin” morpheme composed of *e-* and *bi-*, both of which are necessary to represent the subject in this case), is obligatory. The *ga-* in the word *gasinini* used by Meshack is not a plural morpheme in Ekegusii.

Extract 3 below illustrates a different aspect of the impairment: the subject morpheme has been used, but not the right one.

Extract 3

R: *Naki obokima bokorugwa?* How is *ugali* cooked?

M: *Akobeka esuguri riko namache.* She puts a pot with water over fire.

Obeka obero, yabera. Obeka obosi She puts she boils, it boils. She adds

³ This is a term used by Bickmore (1998, p. 165, endnote 1) to refer to that “initial vowel”—as he also calls it.

	flour.
<i>Ochaka koruga.</i>	She starts to cook.

In the verb *o-bera* (she boils), Meshack used the morpheme *o-*, which is used for noun classes 1 and 2 (*o-mo* and *a-ba*) to describe people, instead of the expected morpheme *ya-*, which should be used when referring to things. The correct utterance should have been *yabera* (it boils).

It is, however, interesting to note that while Meshack omitted the subject prefix in the extracts above, he correctly attached it in some instances, as illustrated in extracts 4 and 5.

Extract 4

<i>Ochaka koruga.</i>	She starts to cook.
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Here, the *o-* of *ochaka* (she starts) is the subject pronoun.

Extract 5

<i>Agachaka korera</i>	He started crying.
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This utterance has no impairment at all. The verb *agachaka* starts with *a-* instead of *o-* because the latter is used for the habitual present and the immediate past, while *a-* is used for the recent past and the remote past.

It transpires from extracts 1 to 5 that Meshack's inability to use the subject prefix is not absolute; it is a question of degree. This observation is consistent with results reported by Radford *et al.* (1999), which they reported in terms of percentages, in the following way:

It was found that the SLS children's usage of the third person singular present *-s* was only 36 per cent correct, whereas 83 per cent of their *-s* plurals were correct, this difference being statistically significant. (p. 251)

Meshack's difficulty in inserting the object pronoun into the verb is illustrated in Extract 6.

Extract 6

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| R: <i>Ange barenga?</i> | They are about how many? |
| M: <i>Tibainyorete</i> | They cannot remember. |
| R: <i>Eee?</i> | What? |
| M: <i>Nkobaeba</i> | I forget them. |

Meshack produced *ti-ba-inyor-et-e* (they cannot remember) instead of *ti-mba-inyor-et-i* (I cannot remember them), thus dropping the object morpheme represented by the letter *-m-*. He also produced *nko-ba-eba* (I forget them) instead of *na-ba-eb-ir-e* (I have forgotten them). Here, he correctly inserted the object pronoun *-ba-*, but to the detriment of the rest of the structure of the verb.

2.2 Difficulty in distinguishing the tense-marking morphemes

According to Odero (2008: 83), the Ekegusii tense system is divided into the past and the non-past. The past tense is further divided into three: the immediate past, the recent past and the distant (remote) past. Odero goes further to divide the non-past tense into the non-past in the present and the non-past in the future. This latter is in turn sub-divided into two: the non-past in the immediate future—which also includes the near future (mainly marked by adverbials), and the non-past in the distant future.

The words in bold type in the following extract illustrate how Meshack had difficulty distinguishing between the different past and non-past tense forms outlined above.

Extract 7

- | | |
|--|-------------------------|
| R: <i>Bono... Intebie bono omogano.</i> | Now... tell me a story. |
| M: <i>Omogano yogotereri? Mogano mogano!</i> | A ballad? Story story! |
| R: <i>Mogano ninchwo!</i> | Story come! |

M: <i>Mogano ninchu. Inkonyora omwana onde</i>	come! I get another child
<i>agosibia chianga. Agotiga eyanga ende</i>	washing clothes. She left
<i>eyemo roche. Bono mamomwabo akamotebia</i>	one piece of cloth
<i>at the river. Now,</i>	
<i>her mother told her</i>	
<i>totiga egesibao kiaye nesigati yaye</i>	leave her blouse and skirt.
<i>Mamomwabo okomotebi buna genda</i>	Her mother *tells her that
	to go
<i>onyioyi akonyora esimba “engai ogochi?”</i>	and get it, she finds a lion
	“where are you going?”
<i>“esigati yane naenda kwoyi natiga negesibao”</i>	I went to bring my
	skirt and blouse”
<i>“Esigati?” Esimba ekomotebia “ng’ai ogochi?”</i>	Skirt? Lion says,
	“where are you going?”
<i>“Nesigati negesibao yane naenda kwoyia”</i>	“It is my skirt and blouse I
	went to bring.”
<i>“Ng’a esigati negesibao?”</i>	“That skirt and blouse?”
<i>Eriakane egokora inki? Eyemo esimba ekomotebia,</i>	the fourth time did
	what...one lion told her,
<i>“Kwana buya!” Eyagatato ekomominyokia</i>	“Speak up!” the third
	chased her.
<i>Eyende.</i>	Another one.

Meshack used the present-tense morpheme *-o-* for the past-tense *-a-*. Thus, *i-nko-nyor-a* (I find) should have been *i-nka-nyor-a* (I found), *a-go-tig-a* (he/she is leaving) should have been *a-ga-tig-a* (he/she left), *a-ko-mo-tebi-a* (he/she is telling her) should have been *a-ka-mo-tebi-a* (she told her), while *to-tig-a* (do not leave) should have been *ta-tig-a* (He was not to leave).

It should be noted, however, that a number of verb forms in Extract 7 were correctly marked for tense. Those are: the past tense form *a-ga-chaka* (he started), the immediate past *naenda* (he just went), the present tense *ogochi* (you go), the past tense *natiga* (I left), and the present tense *kwana*

(say). This reinforces the idea that the non-use of a given morpheme is not absolute. Interestingly, the verb forms whose tense marking he did not get right are all in the remote past. So, the selective nature of Meshack's tense-marking rules becomes manifest here.

2.3 Difficulty in using the right final vowel letter on a verb

In Ekegusii, a verb can end in *-a*, *-e*, *-i* and *-u*, depending on its grammatical mood. But Meshack tends to use the vowel *-e* for all the others, as illustrated in extracts 8 and 9.

Extract 8

M: *Goocha. Inge mwake.* Look here. Give me, I take a photo of her.

R: *Naki okomoaka?* How do you take it?

M: *Niiga.* This way.

Extract 9

M: *Mbabwati ... mbabwate chifaeli.* They don't have ... they have files.

In Extract 8, Meshack's use of the final vowel *-e* in *ing'e* (give me) is wrong; he should have said *ing'a* (give me).⁴ The form *ing'e* has no meaning in Ekegusii. In Extract 9, from the context Meshack ought to have said *mbabwate* (they have) instead of *mbabwati* (they don't have). His use of *-i* instead of *-e* made him say the opposite. However, he realized this and corrected himself.

2.4 Difficulty in using the right morphemes in negative verb forms

⁴ It is worth pointing out that this same wrong word *ing'-e* was produced by Meshack in three different sets of data collected over a period of eleven months. It could thus be concluded that the impairment was systematic in his language.

Negation in Ekegusii is marked by prefixing the morpheme *ti-* to the root of the verb. But this morpheme *ti-* can also be realized in its allomorphs as ‘*ta-*’ or ‘*to-*’, depending on number and person. For instance, the verb form *to-ter-et-i* means ‘you did not sing’, in the singular, while *ti-mo-ter-et-i* also means ‘you did not sing’, but in the plural.

While Meshack’s language shows evidence of his knowledge of the negative morpheme *ti-*, he had difficulty with the accompanying morphemes that mark number and person, as the following extract illustrates.

Extract 10

R: *Ange barenga?* They are about how many?

M: *Tibainyorete.* They cannot remember.

The verb form *tibainyorete* can be segmented into component morphemes as *ti-ba-inyor-et-e*, where *-ba-*, meant to be the third person (pronoun) morpheme, is not the correct one. This should have been *-mba-*, for the whole form to be *ti-mba-inyor-et-i* (I cannot remember them), meaning that the correct final vowel should have been *-i* instead of *-e*. So, while Meshack used the negative prefix *ti-* correctly, he failed to use the correct personal pronoun *-ba-* and the final vowel letter *-i*, which should be the second element to signal that a verb is in the negative.

3. PHONOLOGICAL IMPAIRMENT

3.1 Tones

Ekegusii has two major distinct tones: the high and the low. They are used to mark a question and negation and to distinguish between tenses.

3.1.1 Meshack’s non-use of the negation-marking tone

The wrong tone can change a positive statement into a negative one, as in the case of Extract 11.

Extract 11

Meshack's utterance	Gloss	Target word	Gloss
<i>Mbá-n-tèbèt-i</i>	They did not tell me	<i>mbá-n-tébèt-i</i>	They told me
/mbántèbèti/		/mbántéβèti/	

The utterance *mbá-n-tèbèt-i* (they did not tell me), where the high tone is used on the first syllable while the second, third and fourth syllables carry a low tone, is a negative statement. However, from the context that was meant to be a positive statement, one which should have carried a high tone on the first and second syllables, i.e. *mbá-n-tébèt-i*. Many other examples of the same nature from the collected data indicated that this impairment was systematic.

3.1.2 Difficulty with the question-marking tone

In Ekegusii, a change in tone can turn statements into questions and questions into statements. This is illustrated in extracts 12 and 13 below.

Extract 12

Meshack's utterance		Target word	
<i>éy-áng-á</i>	Did it refuse?	<i>èyàngà</i>	(a piece of) cloth
/éjá:ŋgá/		/èjàŋgà/	

In the extract above Meshack used a high tone on all the syllables, making it a question, when he really intended to refer to a piece of cloth, the pronunciation of which is done with only low tones.

Extract 13

Meshack's utterance		Target word	
<i>bá-kò-mbòr-i</i>	They will ask me	<i>bà-kò-mbòr-i</i>	What did they ask me?
/Bákòmbòrì/		/Bàkòmbò:rì/	

Here Meshack's pronunciation turned what was intended to be a question into a statement by placing the high tone on the first syllable.

3.1.3 *Difficulty with the tense-marking tone*

Tense in Ekegusii is marked by a distinct (prefix) morpheme, one which also co-occurs with a specific tone. The immediate past is marked by a low tone, placed on the first syllable *tà-* in *tàrèngè* (he/she was not there); the remote past is marked by a high tone, as in *táréngé* (he/she was (long time ago) not there); the immediate future is marked by a low tone, as in *nàchè* (he will come [shortly]); the distant future is marked by a high tone, as in *náché* (he/she will [eventually] come).

Let us now see how confusing all that is for Meshack.

Extract 14

M: *à-rèng-è omote igoro* 'She was (recently) on a tree'

He should have said:

á-réng-è omote igoro 'She was (a long time ago) on a tree'.

Meshack's use of the low tone on all the syllables made the tense be the immediate past. Yet, he was narrating a story that had taken place a long time before. The intended utterance would have to bear a high tone on the first and second syllables to indicate a remote past.

Extract 15

Meshack's utterance

Target word

á-gò-tèb-èt-i 'She told you (a long time ago)' *à-gò-tèb-i* 'She (just) told you'

In this extract, Meshack placed the high tone on the first and second syllables instead of the low tone, thus saying 'she told you a long time ago' instead of the intended 'she has just told you'. Actually, Meshack's utterances in extracts 14 and 15 suggest that his rule for tone marking is simply the reverse of what it should be: using a low tone instead of a high one and a high tone instead of a low one.

3.2 Other phonological aspects

3.2.1 Non-application of Dahl's law

Dahl's law is one of dissimilation. Dissimilation "refer[s] to the influence exercised by one sound segment upon the articulation of another, so that the sounds become less alike, or different" (Crystal, 2003, p. 144). Dahl's law applies to some Bantu languages. To (over)simplify, this law has the effect of having the consonant in the syllable preceding the root morpheme to be voiced if the first syllable of the root is voiceless, and to be voiceless if the latter is voiced. Ekegusii is one of those Bantu languages where Dahl's law obtains.⁵ But Meshack seems to have difficulty with it, as illustrated in the next two extracts.

Extract 16

Meshack's utterance		Target word	
<i>ki-atek-ir-e</i>	It has burst.	<i>gi-atek-ir-e</i>	It has burst.

Extract 17

<i>gwa-end-a</i>	(You) go	<i>kwa-end-a</i>	(You) go
<i>kwa-kor-ir-e</i>	(You) finish	<i>gwa-kor-ir-e</i>	(You) finish

In Extract 16, since the first consonant in the verb root *-atek-* (in Meshack's utterance *ki-atek-ir-e*) is the voiceless sound /t/, the velar consonant in the prefix to be added should have been voiced. In Extract 17, since the first consonant in the root *-end-* (in Meshack's utterance *kwa-end-a*) is voiced, the velar sound in the prefix should have been voiceless. Conversely, since the first consonant in the root *-kor-* (in Meshack's utterance *kwa-kor-ir-e*), the velar sound in the prefix should have been voiced. Apparently, Dahl's law in Ekegusii is another one which Meshack has got in reverse.

⁵ For a technical description of Dahl's law in Ekegusii, see Bickmore (1998).

3.2.2 Unnecessary or misleading vowel lengthening

For every short vowel in Ekegusii, there is a corresponding long one. Such vowel length is contrastive. For instance, the word *eri* /eri/ means ‘that one (nearby)’, while *eeri* /e:ri/ means ‘that one (further away)’. Although Meshack’s language features both short and long vowels, his use of vowel length does not always change meaning but produces a non-word in Ekegusii, as in the following extract.

Extract 18

Meshack’s pronunciation	Target pronunciation
<i>niiga</i> /ni: ga/	<i>niga</i> /niga/ this way
<i>tobeeke riiko</i> /tobe:ke ri:ko/	<i>tobeke riiko</i> /tobeke ri:ko/ we put on fire

In the above extract, Meshack’s pronunciation elongated a short vowel, but without leading to a change in meaning.

However, in some cases his use of vowel length made him produce words with unintended meanings, as illustrated in the following extract.

Extract 19

Meshack’s pronunciation	Target pronunciation
a) <i>agochaaka</i> /agotʃa:ka/ ‘he/she comes and beats repeatedly’	<i>agochaka</i> /agotʃaka/ ‘he/she start’s
b) <i>amaiira</i> /amai:ra/ ‘He/she has taken (something)’	<i>amaira</i> /amaira/ ‘pus’

4. LEXICAL IMPAIRMENT

4.1 Creation of non-words

Meshack's utterances contain a number of non-words. Some of these resulted from his idiosyncratic articulation of existing words, which makes it possible to guess their meanings. That is the case of *sakara* in Extract 20.

Extract 20

M: O-beka *sakara* o-gacha obisi

'She-put *sakara* she- keep office'

'She puts in a paper bag and keeps (them) in the office'

The word *sakara* does not exist in Ekegusii. But the listener can guess that Meshack intended to say *risakara* (paper bag).

However, in Extract 21 Meshack used two words, *nkorike* and *nacho*, which are so strange that even the context could not help the listener to guess the intended word.

Extract 21

R: <i>Intebie buna kwagaetire.</i>	Tell me how you could walk
<i>Intebie korwa esukuru mbaka nka.</i>	from school to here [home].
M: <i>Nkorike</i> tokoigorerwa,	??? when we are released,
<i>naturumboka naika rikori</i>	I walk down to the foot-path.
<i>Naika obisi. Narigereri gochiari.</i>	I reach the office. I look there.
<i>Rikori. Naturumboka.</i>	Footpath. I go down.
<i>Naturumboka nacho bakobeka chiombe.</i>	I go down ??? they put cows.
<i>Inkominyoka ebituma biaye mogondo.</i>	I am running in her maize garden
<i>Ngoika nkonyora omochionde</i>	I find you another homestead
<i>ingoetera ribwago. Ingosoka igaria.</i>	I pass through the quarry. I come there.
<i>Ingoturumboka, ngoika minto.</i>	I walk down, I reach our home.

Those words that are not recognizable even from the context have been termed "neologisms" by Fabbro (1999: 40) in the case of the speech produced by aphasic patients.

4.2 Difficulty in repeating nonsense words

The following twelve are non-words in Ekegusii, though they would perfectly fit into the morphology and phonology of the language:

embwogori /embwogori/, *ekebwangina* /ekebwangina/, *eting'ori* /etiŋori/, *ekemiri* /ekemiri/, *richwanda* /ritʃwanda/, *riraso* /riraso/, *ekemora* /ekemora/, *rigege* /rigege/, *chinkorosi* /tʃiŋkorosi/, *ching'anya* /tʃiŋanja/, *nyankiri* /ɲaŋkiri/, and *baromo* /βaromo/

They were read to Meshack by his age-mate and family friend called Sarah. He was required to repeat them after her. Extract 22 shows how the repeating went.

Extract 22

S: *Embwogori*

M: ...

S: *Ekebwang'ina*

M: *Ekebanina*

[S repeats the word *ekebwang'ina*]

M: *Eke...*

R: *Naende erinde* 'Another one'

S: *Eting'ori*

M: *Etigori*

R: *Eting'ori. Meshack kwana bo.* 'Eting'ori. Meshack say that.'

M: *Enting'ori*

R: *Sarah, kwana erinde.* 'Sarah, read another one.'

S: *Ekemiri*

M: *Ekemini* 'A tiny thing'

S: *Richwanda*

M: *Richwanda*

S: *Riraso*

M: *Riraso*

S: *Ekemura*

M: *Ekemura*

S: *Rigege*

M: *Rigege*

S: *Chinkorosi*.

M: *Tinkorosi* 'Let me not tire you'.

S: *Ching'anya*.

M: *Chinyanya*. 'Tomatoes'

[S repeats the word *ching'anya*]

M: *Ring'anya - Chinyama* 'Meats'

S: *Nyakiri*.

M: *Nakiri*. 'I made it silent'.

S: *Baromo*.

M: *Baroma*. 'They bit'.

Out of the twelve nonsense words, Meshack could correctly repeat only four of them: *richwanda*, *riraso*, *ekemura*, *rigege*. For six words (*eting'ori*, *nyankiri*, *ching'anya*, *chinkorosi*, *baromo*, *ekemiri*) he was able to produce words that are phonetically similar. For the word *ekebwang'ina*, he managed to repeat only the first two syllables. As for the word *embwogori*, he could not repeat even a single syllable.

5. SYNTACTIC IMPAIRMENT

Meshack's utterances show that by and large his word order is just like that of the Ekegusii speakers who suffer no linguistic deficits. In very few instances did Meshack flout the word order, and they all relate to the position of the adjective vis-à-vis the noun it modifies, as in the following two extracts.

Extract 23

Target structure

M: Eyemo esimba ekomotebia

‘One lion tells him’

Esimba eyemo ekamotebia

‘One lion told him’

The order in the sentence above is wrong because in Ekegusii the adjective should be placed after, not before, the noun that it modifies. The (numeral) adjective in this case is *eyemo* (one).

Extract 24

M: Rikoyi rirabwoni

‘cooked sweet potato’

Target structure

rirabwoni rikoyi

‘sweet potato cooked’

(‘The sweet potato was cooked’)

Rirabwoni (sweet potato) is a noun, while *rikoyi* (cooked) is a past-participial adjective.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper was meant to be an in-depth study of the features of Specific Language Impairment that could be found in Meshack’s speech. The study has found a great deal of morphological and phonological impairment. Morphological impairment in Meshack’s speech was found to consist mainly in his difficulty in inserting the subject and object morphemes into the verb and distinguishing between the morphemes marking the different tenses and nuances of tense (e.g. recent past vs. remote past). But, as is intrinsic to SLI, this difficulty was found to be a matter of degree in some cases, and selective in others. For instance, Meshack had greater difficulty in handling the morpheme marking the remote past than that marking the recent past. Phonological impairment was found to consist mainly in Meshack’s inability to use the right tones. Here, too, selective impairment was evidenced by the fact that the tone marking tense was more impaired than e.g. that marking a question. The little lexical impairment found in Meshack’s speech has to do with his production of some non-words in Ekegusii and his inability to repeat Ekegusii-like nonsense words. The even lesser amount of syntactic

impairment consists in a specific word-order problem: placing the adjective before, rather than after, the noun which it modifies.

While both Radford et al. (1999) and Fromkin et al. (2011) have suggested, as already pointed out in the Introduction, that SLI mainly affects verbal inflections, the SLI found in Meshack's speech significantly affects both verbal inflections and grammatical tones. This finding about tones is "new" (?) to the extent Ekegusii is a tone language. If cases of SLI were not hard to come by, studying them in another tone language would help to corroborate or not the present study's observations. But more can still be done even if with the case of Meshack: it would be interesting to study his speech after a certain number of years to see if, for instance, his use of tones has improved.

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