

Multilingualism in Rural Africa

Pierpaolo Di Carlo, Jeff Good, and Rachel Ojong Diba

Summary

The pervasiveness of multilingualism throughout the African continent has led it to be viewed as Africa's "lingua franca". Nevertheless, sociolinguistic research on this topic has concentrated mostly on urbanized areas, even though the majority of Africans still live in rural regions, and rural multilingualism is clearly of much older provenance than its urban counterpart. In urban domains, individual language repertoires are dominated by the interplay between European ex-colonial languages, African lingua francas, and local languages, and language ideologies emphasize the ordering of languages in a hierarchy that is tied to social status. The situation in rural areas is clearly distinct, though it has yet to be thoroughly investigated, and the goal of this review is to summarize what is currently understood about rural multilingualism in Africa, highlighting, in particular, the ways in which it varies from better-known urban multilingualism.

This survey begins by examining how early work on rural language use in Africa tended to background the presence of multilingualism in these societies. It then explores rural multilingualism through the examination of relatively recent case studies drawn from areas of high linguistic diversity in West and Central Africa. These case studies document the presence of individuals with linguistic repertoires that are primarily oriented around local languages, ideologies, and practices and that do not clearly fit with what is known from urban environments. The most important theme that emerges is the extent to which rural multilingualism is linked to the specific dynamics holding among communities that are near to each other rather than being a reflection of a more general, externally-imposed value system.

While this result makes it difficult to characterize rural multilingualism as a single, coherent phenomenon, it does point to the utility of a shared toolkit of research strategies for exploring it in more detail. In particular, ethnographic methods are required in order to ascertain the major local social divisions which language choice both reflects and constructs in these areas, and it is additionally important to focus on how individual repertoires are tied to specific life histories rather than to assume that groupings that are salient to the outside researcher (e.g., “villages” or “compounds”) are the relevant units of analysis.

The survey concludes by considering the ways in which the investigation of multilingualism in rural Africa may yield important insights for the study of sociolinguistics more broadly.

Keywords: multilingualism, Africa, rural, sociolinguistics, codeswitching, language ideologies, language and identity

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1 Rural multilingualism in Africa: An underexplored area of research

The pervasiveness of individual multilingualism in Africa has led to the view that multilingualism is “the African lingua franca” (Fardon and Furniss 1994:4), and it is almost certainly the case that “multilingualism has been a fact of social life in Africa for a very long time” (Whiteley 1971:1).² Yet, what we know about this impressive sociolinguistic phenomenon is based overwhelmingly on studies of urban environments (see, e.g., Mc Laughlin 2009:3–13). The goal of the present article is to provide an overview of work on multilingualism in rural African settings.³

In order to contextualize the discussion for a general linguistic audience, Eckert’s (2012) application of the wave metaphor to different phases of research on variation and social meaning within mainstream sociolinguistics is adapted below. In this scheme, the first wave consists of work focusing on quantitative studies of how variation can be accounted for in terms of high-level demographic categories (e.g., age, sex, and class), the second adopts ethnographic methods to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between variation and social categories as understood in their local context, and the third explores the social meaning of

¹ Di Carlo was responsible for the overall structure of the article and the majority of the literature review. Di Carlo and Good both contributed equally to the text. Ojong contributed substantially to the discussion in §4.3 and other parts of the paper referencing that section.

² The present article focuses only on Sub-Saharan Africa, given the very different linguistic situation of Africa north of the Sahara.

³ Two clarifications are needed. First, we use the term *multilingualism* solely to refer to individual multilingualism, where “a multilingual individual is anyone who can communicate in more than one language, be it active (through speaking and writing) or passive (through listening and reading)” (Li 2008:4). In this sense of the term, a country, for instance, cannot be multilingual (but see Council of Europe 2007, for instance, for a different definition). Second, how to distinguish between “urban” and “rural” environments in Africa is an issue that historians, anthropologists, and geographers have long debated (see, e.g., Coquery-Vidrovitch 1991, Mabogunje 1969, and Winters 1983). For present purposes, we understand rural environments to be characterized by a relative lack of demographic pressure, where most inhabitants are engaged in food production.

variation itself and emphasizes the ways in which individuals use language to construct social meaning.

The survey begins by providing a summary of studies of African multilingualism that can be usefully associated with Eckert's (2012) first wave (§2), and then moves on to studies that can be associated with the second wave (§3). We then look at studies of multilingual language use in rural Africa and examine how they relate to studies of language attitudes and ideologies (§4) since these represent the available work that is most closely aligned with the third wave. The specific contribution of these studies for our understanding of the relationship between language and identity is then briefly explored (§5). The article concludes by summarizing the main points that emerge from the survey as a whole (§6).

2 “First-wave approaches”: The urban–rural divide and the legacy of colonialism

2.1 Multilingual “erasure” in rural settings

As mentioned in §1, work on multilingualism in Africa has mostly focused on urban domains rather than the rural domains that are in focus here. There appear to be two reasons for this. The first has been a tendency on the part of outside linguists to view African rural spaces in terms of “tribes”, each associated with its own language, which has led to a kind of “erasure” (Irvine and Gal 2000:38) of multilingual behavior (§2.2). The second is that the generalized adoption of diglossia theory in the study of multilingualism has made urban, rather than rural, areas more salient to sociolinguistic investigation (§2.3). Due to its emphasis on high-level social categories and externally-defined models of the role of language choice in a multilingual space, work discussed in this section can largely be seen as aligned with first-wave sociolinguistics.

2.2 Linguistic heterogeneity

Cities have long been seen as locations where linguistic heterogeneity is concentrated (see, e.g., Gumperz 1977:5). In Africa, this assumption gained further ground due to the opposition between the social situation of urban areas—largely viewed as outgrowths of the colonial period—and the centrality of the notion of “tribe” in conceptualizations of the social structure of the continent in precolonial times. The resulting idea was that rural Africa was populated by “tribes” and that each “tribe” occupied a bounded territory and spoke its distinctive “language” (see, e.g., Hymes 1968, Kopytoff 1987:4). Although this notion has long been known to be analytically inadequate (see, e.g., the studies in Helm 1968 and Southall 1970), it became so heavily entrenched in the colonial era that its residue is still very much present in discussions of African languages today (Blommaert 2007:128).

The effect of tribe-based conceptions of social organization is evident in some of the early studies of multilingualism in rural areas. Whiteley (1974:329), for instance, suggests that linguistically heterogeneous rural communities do not represent the normal state of affairs but, rather, are specific to “settlement” or “border” areas. Myers-Scotton describes the target rural community (Shiveye, a hamlet in the Western Region of Kenya) as linguistically homogeneous (1982:126) but then, shortly after in the same work, reports that all but six percent of respondents “reported knowing some other language or languages in addition to the home language” (1982:128). She further concludes that “the amount of bilingualism in such a homogeneous community may be one of the most revealing findings of this study, for it shows that simply reporting the ‘surface structure’ of usage at any point in time may mask the actual parameters of linguistic repertoires” (1982:129).

One of the few works pointing to a sociolinguistic reality that was not congruent with the assumption of rural homogeneity is Kashoki (1982). He summarizes the picture emerging from language surveys of Zambia as one of “a great mixture of people within Zambia, particularly in the North-Western and Western Provinces where very often people speaking different languages live side by side either in the same village or in different villages located in the same area” (Kashoki 1982:142 quoting Kashoki 1978; on Zambia see also Marten and Kula 2008).

2.3 Diglossia/polyglossia and multilingualism

Another likely reason for the scholarly neglect of rural areas in studies of multilingualism is that “individual multilingual behavior is more salient in urban areas than in the rural ones” (Lopez Palma 2008:94). For instance, colonial languages are more likely to be spoken in urban areas, and it is much easier for most outsiders to know when a speaker switches between a colonial language and a local one. Moreover, it is worth bearing in mind that the conceptual foundation of most studies on African multilingualism is the notion of diglossia (Ferguson 1959), as found in its “extended” version (Fishman 1967). This was intended to describe situations where the use of different languages was understood to depend on the idea that “one set of behaviors, attitudes and values supported—and was expressed in—one language”, while “another set of behaviors, attitudes and values supported and was expressed in the other” (Fishman 1967:29).

In this compartmentalized view of the linguistic space of a speech community, different languages can be associated with different social spheres, and these spheres may additionally be ranked in a prestige hierarchy. In African settings there are usually three recognized “ranks” along this scale: European languages are highest, African lingua francas occupy a middle position, and local languages are lowest. We can thus speak of polyglossia rather than diglossia

scales (see also Wolff 2015:229).⁴ This pattern of “stable triglossia” is described, for instance, by Abdulaziz Mkilifi (1972) for Tanzania, Johnson (1975) for Ghana, Whiteley (1973) for Kenya, and Woods (1994) for the Republic of Congo. Spitulnik (1998:170) offers a somewhat more complex pattern of polyglossia in Zambia, which nevertheless adheres more or less to this general pattern. Alexandre (1971) provides an early model of African triglossia. (For criticism of this notion, Kropp Dakubu (1997:33–37) is a good starting point.)

Because it is based on the idea that a society’s linguistic space can be cleanly subdivided into externally-defined “compartments”, diglossia theory accords limited possibility for the analysis of the motivations of individuals who may use sets of languages, rather than just one, in the same compartment. Kropp Dakubu (1997) offers compelling cases that suggest this is a significant issue (see also Jaspers 2016 and Kulick 1992:9). This is true especially for the lowest level of the triglossia hierarchy, which is where nearly all of Africa’s linguistic diversity is found. The domains of these languages are normally understood by sociolinguists to be confined to the home or to intragroup interaction, and thus thought to have the primary function of fostering solidarity. This understanding is evident in all the early works on multilingualism in rural Africa. O’Barr (1971), for instance, in summarizing the composition of individual language repertoires among Usangi villagers in rural Tanzania, lists Asu (treated as *the* local language), Swahili, English, and an undistinguished class of “Other African vernaculars” (O’Barr 1971:290). Sixteen percent of respondents in this study reported some fluency in one of these “other vernaculars”, but O’Barr does not name them and provides only a short discussion explaining competence in these languages in terms of people’s movement and, rather surprisingly, degree of schooling (O’Barr 1971:293). Whiteley (1974), Ring (1981), Polomé (1982), and Myers-Scotton (1982) all show a

⁴ Wolff (2015:210) offers a model of polyglossia based on a pyramid (with local languages at the bottom and official languages at the top) as a way to provide a fuller picture than is possible with a scale.

similar bias.⁵ Spernes (2012) is a recent example of a study on multilingualism in rural Africa adopting the stable triglossia perspective.

3 “Second-wave” approaches: Multilingualism in endangerment contexts

3.1 Endangered language documentation and African multilingualism

Due to their emphasis on ethnographic data and methods, studies that we treat here as aligned with the second-wave approaches in mainstream sociolinguistics have been able to move beyond some of the limitations that have hindered research using methods more in line with first-wave approaches (see §2). Such studies—especially those reviewed in §3.4–§3.6—have been largely carried out by scholars focused on the “non-ancestral” mode documentation of endangered languages (see Woodbury 2011:177 and Childs et. al. 2014), and this seems to be the most promising route through which advances in the study of multilingualism in rural Africa are likely to emerge. This section details the results of several relatively recent studies in the context of a broader discussion on the role of prestige and ideologies in shaping the repertoires of rural multilingual speakers. The ways in which multilingual repertoires are deployed in use are treated separately in §4.

These studies are all focused on communities found within areas of high linguistic diversity within the Sub-Saharan Fragmentation Belt, a macro-area running from the Atlantic shores of Senegal to the West to the Ethiopian highlands to the East (Dalby 1970:163).⁶ Patterns of multilingualism are especially salient in regions of high language density, though we have no reason to suspect that similar situations cannot be found elsewhere in the continent under the

⁵ Ring (1981) deserves a special mention for the impressive depth and degree of information collected in the field (rural Ghana).

⁶ This region is roughly the same as Güldemann’s (2008) Macro-Sudan Belt, though he defines it in terms of shared grammatical features among languages rather than language density.

right conditions, such as in regions where the boundaries of larger language groups intersect.

Figure 1 gives the location of the case studies along with a rough indication of the boundaries of the Fragmentation Belt.⁷

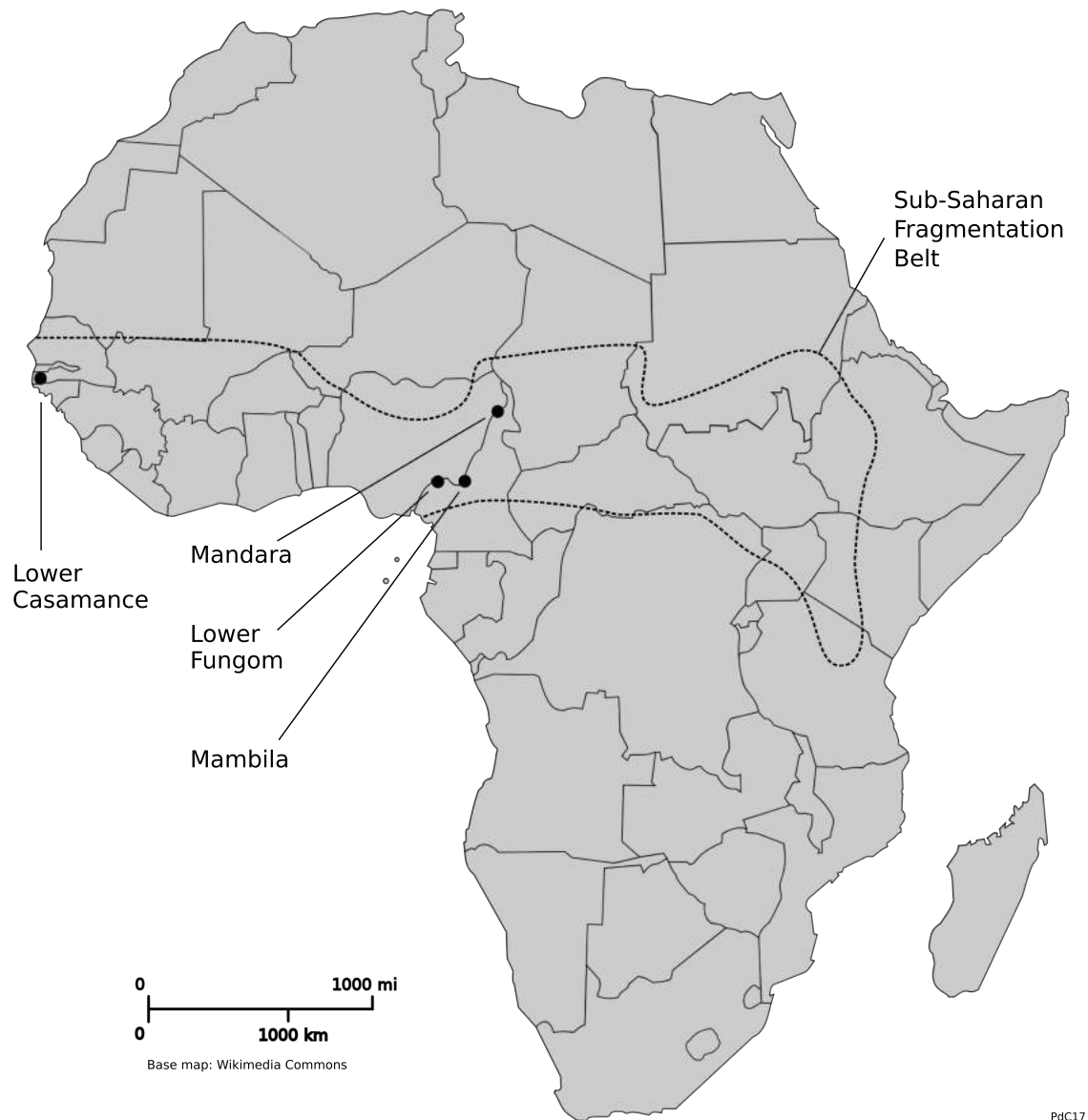


Figure 1: Location of case studies and the Fragmentation Belt

⁷ Figure 1 is based on Dalby (1970:167) and the map *Languages of Africa* created by Steve Huffman, available at http://www.worldgeodatasets.com/files/5212/6771/8375/Huffman-Africa_Langs-wlms32.jpg.

3.2 Different ways of being multilingual in rural Africa

An important observation from existing studies of rural multilingualism in Africa is the extent to which multilingualism does not seem to be a unitary phenomenon from a sociolinguistic perspective (cf. also Juillard 2005). This can be seen, for instance, in work by Moore (2004, 2008, 2009), one of the few instances where there is a specific focus on second-language acquisition in rural Africa. This research focuses on the small village of Jilve, located on the plain surrounding the Mandara mountains in northern Cameroon (see Figure 2).^{8,9}

⁸ The linguistic diversity of Cameroon, paired with its relative political stability, has made it a good location for studies of rural multilingualism, which is one reason why three of the case studies described here are of communities based in the country.

⁹ The map in Figure 2 is based on MacEachern (2003:415) and David (2012:4).

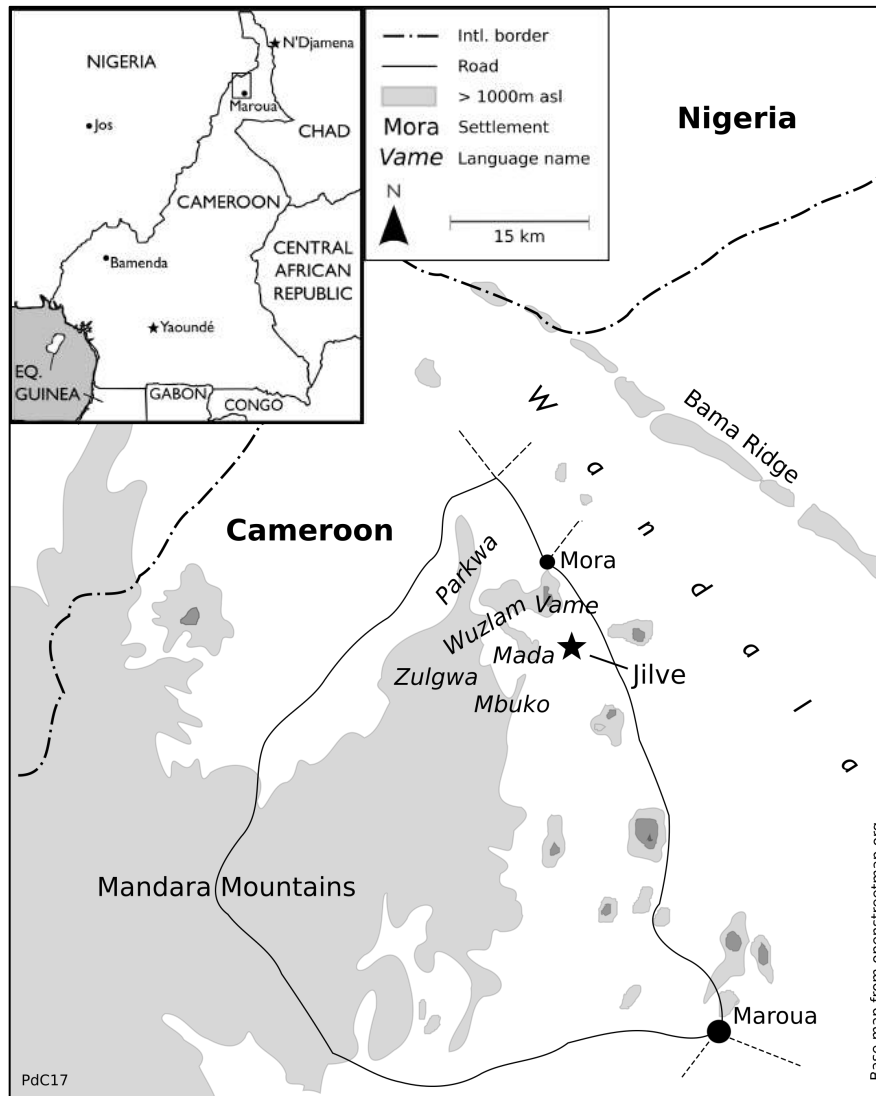


Figure 2: The languages in and around the village of Jilve

The population of Jilve (1,100 in 1992) is ethnically and linguistically diverse and includes two main sociocultural groups: the Wandala and the montagnards. “For several centuries the plain has been dominated by the Wandala, a Muslim polity, while the traditionally animist montagnard groups have controlled the mountains. The Wandala are the socioeconomically dominant group, and Wandala–montagnard relations have long been characterized by

interdependence and ambivalence” (Moore 2004:132). The linguistic ecology of Jilve, like that of the surrounding area, is characterized by the sociolinguistic dominance of the Wandala language ([mfi], Biu-Mandara, Chadic) and a number of languages of wider communication, including Fulfulde ([fub], Atlantic, Niger-Congo), Kanuri ([kau], Nilo-Saharan), Hausa ([hau], Chadic)), as well as French and, to a lesser extent, English and Cameroonian Pidgin English [wes]. Also present are a number of more localized Chadic languages of the Biu-Mandara branch. These are associated with the montagnards, and they include Vame-Pelasla [mlr], Wuzlam [udl], Mada [mxu], and Zulgwa [gnd].

The Wandala and montagnards have been in close contact for centuries in Jilve. However, they inhabit the local linguistic ecology in very different ways. Moore (2004) examines this dynamic by focusing on the speech practices of four adolescents, two Wandala and two montagnards. The montagnards not only master more languages (around five or six) than the Wandala (around two or three), but they also show a much more positive attitude towards language learning in general, an activity for which they have also developed a higher metalinguistic awareness (Moore 2004:143). Moore concludes that, “Wandala children grow up in a largely monolingual world, where languages other than Wandala are learned under formal instruction and used in religious [i.e. Arabic] or educational settings [i.e. French], or learned much later in life for purposes of work, travel, or commerce [i.e. Fulfulde]. Montagnard children are socialized into multilingualism from birth, taught early on by the examples, opportunities, and challenges in their immediate environment to use the resources of multiple languages for both communication and second language learning in a variety of settings and for a variety of purposes” (Moore 2004:145).

Moore (2004) demonstrates that “rural” multilingualism is not a unitary phenomenon, in this case even within a single small village. Rather, it is strongly conditioned by the language ideologies held by speakers, that is the “the cultural (or subcultural) system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests” (Irvine 1989:255). In the Jilve case, the Wandala hold a language ideology where one language is “primary”, while others are learned for specific functions. The montagnards, by contrast, are characterized by an ideology which emphasizes general multilingual competence without specific compartmentalization of languages. The Wandala language ideology can be understood as a kind of polyglossia (see §2.3), and, as such, it overlaps with what is often taken to be found in urban environments, while the montagnard one has more in common with what will be described for other rural environments below.

3.3 Historically endogenous and historically exogenous ideologies

The coexistence of multiple language ideologies within a single community is not necessarily surprising given the anthropological linguistic insight that “the multiplicity of meaningful social divisions (class, gender, clan, elites, generations, and so on) within sociocultural groups” (Kroskrity 2000:12) will produce different perspectives within a community regarding the social import attached to any given language within a linguistic ecology. What is of special interest here is the fact that, in Jilve, as well as in the other cases we will review below, some ideologies can be recognized as stemming from relatively recent sociohistorical circumstances, while others seem to represent the persistence of older patterns. The ideology observed among the Wandala, just discussed above in §3.2, is clearly connected to the arrival of Islam—which the Wandala

progressively adopted in the 18th and 19th centuries (MacEachern 2003:77)—and modern schooling—an essentially postcolonial (i.e. post-1960) phenomenon.

By contrast, the dominant language ideology among the montagnards shows no sign of being due to a recent cultural imposition and is likely of great historical depth. We can, therefore, consider the montagnard ideology to reflect “endogenous” cultural influences and the Wandala ideology to have been shaped by “exogenous” influences. While these are not established terms, they are adopted here as a means of being able to clearly reference the distinction below.

3.4 The place of prestige and ethnicity

When considering the case of multilingualism among the Wandala and montagnards as described in §3.2, we can usefully invoke the role of prestige in structuring Wandala language learning attitudes (though Moore 2004 does not specifically use this term). In the wider local context, Wandala is more prestigious than the montagnard languages, as evidenced by its status as a lingua franca, and, when the Wandala learn a second language, they favor languages that are also associated with prestige such as French or Arabic. Within the region’s linguistic marketplace (Bourdieu 1991), these languages are stable assets, providing access to improved economic and social prospects. Language acquisition among the montagnards, by contrast, does not show a bias towards prestige.¹⁰ They learn both montagnard languages and “prestigious” languages (Moore 2004:145).

Patterns like what is found for the montagnards are described elsewhere in West Africa. Something similar, for example, is found in another region of Cameroon, over 500 kilometers to the southwest of the area examined by Moore (2004). Connell (2009) examines language use in a

¹⁰ However, the fact of being multilingual might in and of itself be matter of personal prestige (cf. Moore 2009: 247).

market setting in the village of Somié, which is in an area associated with the Mambila language cluster (Mambiloid, Benue-Congo), with the local Mambila [mcu] dialect of Ba predominating. Other languages present in the local ecology, in roughly decreasing order of prominence, include Fulfulde as a lingua franca, French, various other varieties of Mambila, including Mbar, as well as some close relatives of Mambila in the Mambiloid group, more distant relatives within the Bantoid subgroup of Benue-Congo, and Cameroonian Pidgin English (Connell 2009:133–134).¹¹

Figure 3 provides a map of the area that is the focus of this case study.

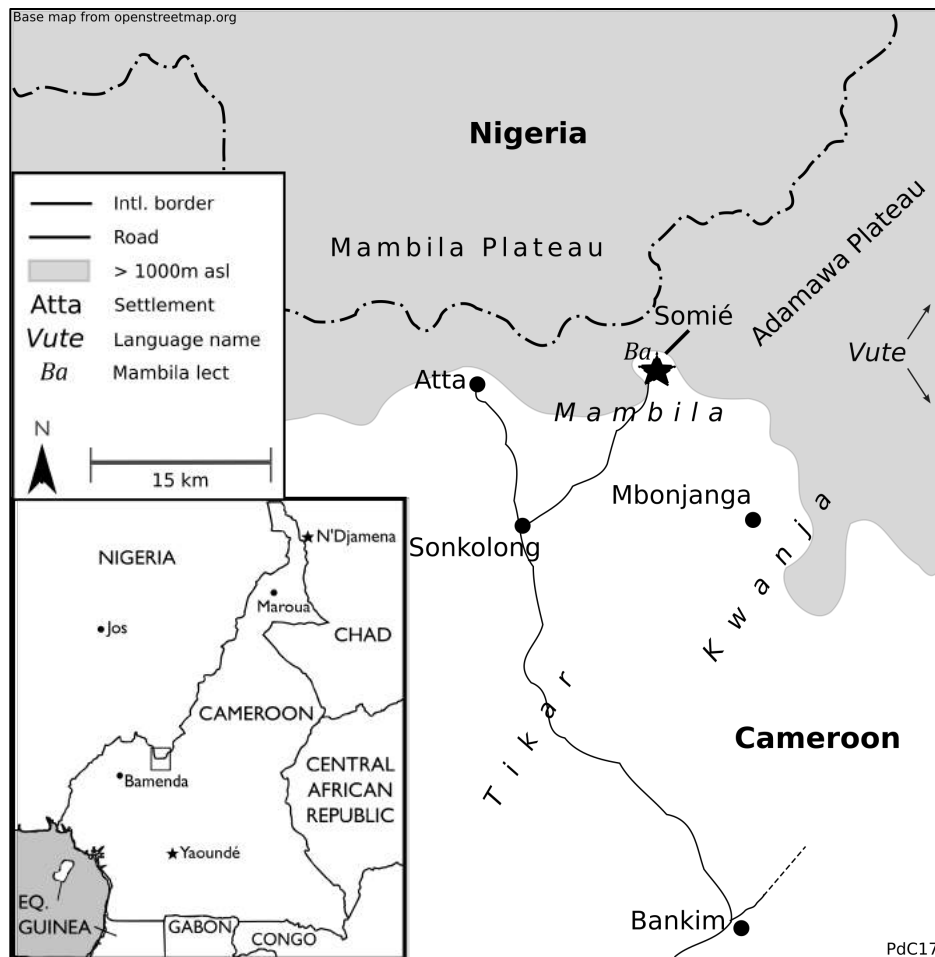


Figure 3: Languages of the Somié area (based on Zeitlyn 1994:23)

¹¹ See Zeitlyn and Connell (2003) on the complicated linguistic situation on and around the Mambila Plateau.

Except for French, Connell (2009:134) found that none of these languages “appears to have greater prestige than the others...the society is essentially unstratified, and language knowledge or use does not serve as a social class marker”. This finding parallels what was discussed above for Jilve on the basis of Moore (2004). Notions of prestige are associated with languages that have entered the region recently along with an exogenous ideology, while they seem to be absent with respect to relationships among local languages.

In order to better understand the area’s language ecology, Connell (2009:137–140) examined the language choices of an assistant, SM, during a two-hour visit to the Somié market based on recordings made with a concealed microphone. SM reported proficiency in at least eight languages: Ba Mambila, Fulfulde, French, and some others that he learned when living outside of the Somié area, including the Mambiloid language Vute [vut]. In this village, having a “language repertoire this extensive...is not typical...but neither is it unique and...most people have command of at least three or four languages” (Connell 2009:138).

Across forty-five interactions that were examined on the basis of recordings from SM’s visit to the market, he was found to have used eleven languages. Language choice appeared most strongly correlated with interactants’ “ethnicity” (Connell 2009:138), for instance Mambila varieties were used among individuals primarily identifying as Mambila, while SM used the Grassfields Bantu language Bamoun [bax] with two visiting Bamoun traders. However, several of the recorded interactions cannot be straightforwardly explained by appeal to any obvious sociolinguistic features. For instance, “conversations...took place with people identified as being Tikar [tik], in one of which Tikar was used by both speakers. In the other, however, Tikar was

not used at all: SM began in Ba while the Tikar man replied in Fulfulde. When SM then used Fulfulde, the Tikar speaker switched to Vute!” (2009:139).

Connell’s (2009) study emphasizes the extent to which language choice is driven by consideration of the entire context of a situation. Moore’s (2004) work, discussed in §3.2, revealed factors that motivate individuals in rural African settings to learn different languages and how language choice is influenced by local ideologies. Taken together, they show how understanding multilingual behavior in rural Africa requires knowledge of the details of the specific situation in which any given interaction takes place (i.e. setting and participants) and also knowledge of what has been called “extra-situational context” (Goodwin and Duranti 1992:8), which, in this instance, includes local patterns of social organization, cultural values, and language ideologies. This is why the advances represented by second-wave studies rely strongly, as will be seen, on ethnographic data collected through observational techniques.¹²

3.5 Localist ideologies and what counts as a “language”

Whether focused on linguistic repertoires, or on how they are deployed in interaction, studies on multilingualism are normally concerned with “languages”, where these are minimally understood to be lexicogrammatical codes that are not mutually intelligible with each other. Competence in what linguists consider to be distinct language varieties, whether distributed diatopically (i.e., across space), diastratically (i.e., across social strata), or in some other way (see, e.g., Coseriu (1981)), is usually not considered under the heading of multilingualism. However, taking this “objective” stance would run counter to speakers’ notions of what counts as a language,

¹² Such work can be seen as a recent continuation of long-established anthropological linguistic traditions such as work under the heading of the ethnography of communication (see Hymes 1964 and Johnstone and Marcellino 2010), even if this is not explicitly recognized.

therefore compromising one's ability to understand, on the one hand, the speakers' motivations for developing multilingual repertoires (especially involving local languages) and, on the other, the social significance of choosing to speak one variety over another, whether or not these varieties are treated as distinct "languages" by linguists (see e.g. Auer (1999: 312)).

Dealing with speakers' conceptualizations of language boundaries requires the adoption of ethnographic methods of inquiry and may yield unexpected insights. An exemplary case is offered by the work of Di Carlo and Good (2014) on the languages of Lower Fungom, a rural area characterized by exceptional linguistic diversity located in Northwest Cameroon (see Figure 4). Inhabitants of the region show high degrees of individual multilingualism, with many speaking three or more local languages as well as Cameroonian Pidgin English and some claiming to speak more than ten local languages (Esene Agwara 2013). The scholarly linguistic classification of the speech varieties of this area suggests: "Seven languages, or small language clusters, are spoken in its thirteen recognized villages" (Good et al. 2011:102). However, this characterization is at odds with the local conception of linguistic distinctiveness which treats each of the region's thirteen villages as having its own "talk".

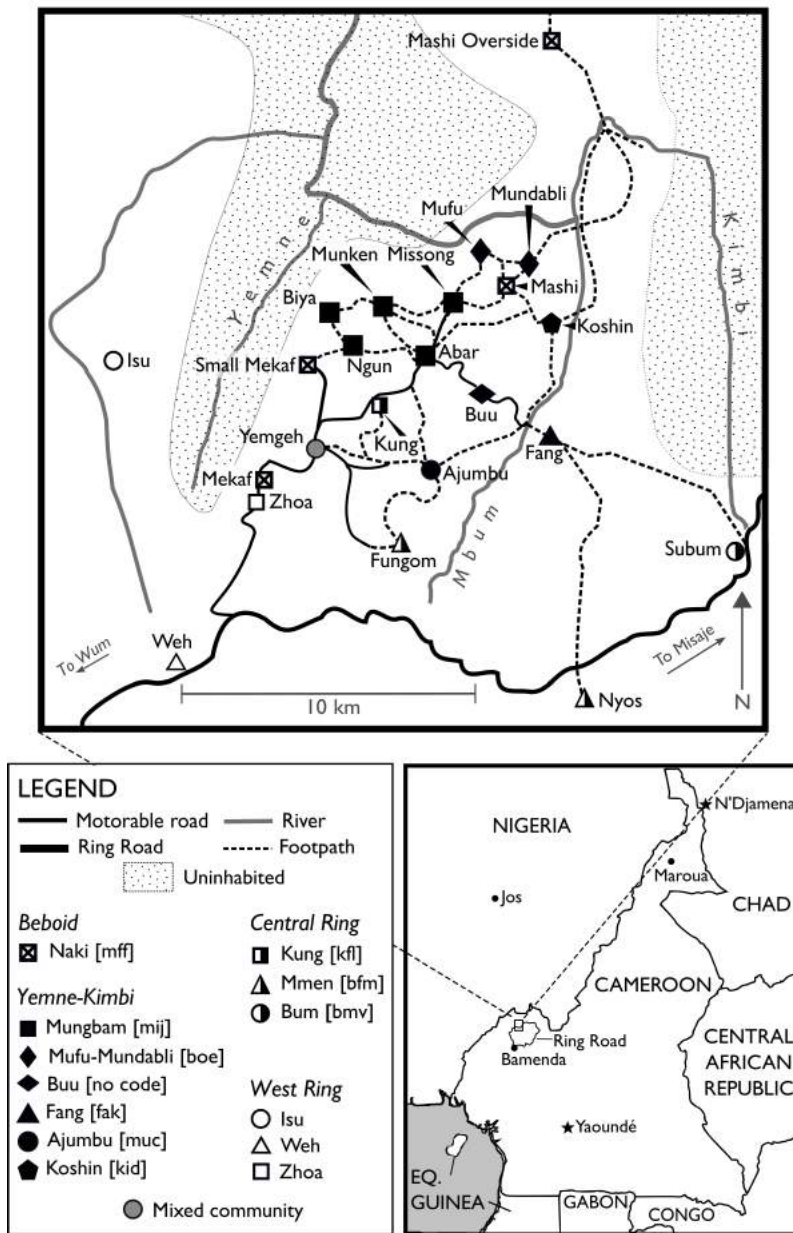


Figure 4: The languages and villages of Lower Fungom (Di Carlo and Good 2014:231)

Unsurprisingly, the reason for the prevalence of this localist attitude to lect classification (see Hill 2001) is sociocultural in origin. A “village” in the local context, is not merely a residential cluster but a locally salient sociopolitical unit headed by a traditional chief. The presence of a

distinctive “language” is a crucial part of the identity of these villages as traditionally independent polities, resulting in the local ideological equation “one village/chieftom = one language” (Di Carlo and Good 2014:233). Thus, the local definition of language is intimately connected to local political structures. Even if a linguist might label the speech varieties of two villages as “dialects” of each other, the inhabitants of Lower Fungom’s linguistic landscape would see competence in both those dialects as, in effect, a kind of multilingualism.

The ideological basis of this linkage between village and language in Lower Fungom can be further understood by relating it to the results of ethnographic investigation in this part of the world. In particular, examples abound, both from precolonial and contemporary African societies, establishing an intimate link between the political and spiritual dimension of life. As argued by Geschiere (1995), the relationship between the two is so tight that it is not possible to fully understand political life in Africa without considering how it is entwined with local conceptions of witchcraft. In Lower Fungom this is manifested, in particular, in a hierarchical social organization resting upon village-based secret societies and centered around the figure of the chief, who is believed to possess spiritual powers and is expected to manage them for the prosperity of his subjects (see Di Carlo 2011:70–76). In this context, “political independence” crucially includes, from an emic perspective, “spiritual independence” of the polity as a whole and, at the same time, villagers’ dependence on their chief’s spiritual powers. Speaking a certain village lect, then, can be seen as the primary means for an individual to signal that they should be included among those who benefit from the chief’s spiritual protection (Di Carlo 2016:83–89).

Underscoring the fact that the different ways of being a “language” in social terms is significant for the study of multilingualism is the social value attached to Cameroonian Pidgin English in Lower Fungom (see Ojong 2017+). Unlike the local languages, Cameroonian Pidgin

English is not linked to any one village, and its status is not determined by the endogenous layers of the local language ideologies (see §3.3) but, rather, falls more in line with the predictions of polyglossic models of multilingualism. It is used, for instance, as a default language for communication in settings where information is intended to be widely known or, especially in its more Standard English-like forms, as a way for a speaker to establish prestige, consistent with its general use in Cameroon (see Anchimbe 2013:170–174).

The specific pattern that we see in Lower Fungom should not be understood to be typically “African” since other linkages between local sociopolitical structures and “languages” are also reported. A relevant case is the Lower Casamance region of Senegal, and the discussion here is based on the work of Lüpke (2017+) (see §4.2 for further discussion of Lower Casamance). This is a rural area bordering Guinea-Bissau, which is also linguistically highly diverse. As in Lower Fungom, we find a dissociation between the scholarly and local systems of language classification. Linguists’ analyses suggest fifteen languages are spoken in the area, whereas the local system of language classification gives around thirty named languages, each of which is nominally associated with a village, a hamlet, or a land area (Lüpke 2017+).

This sociolinguistic feature of Lower Casamance “languages” seems to be the reflection of a pre-colonial socioeconomic dynamic which has been characterized in terms of a dichotomy between first-comers and late-comers (Kopytoff 1987) or landlords and strangers (Brooks 1993): “First-comers are the ones that lay claims to the land and, through their descendants and linguistic identity, determine its patrimonial language” (Lüpke 2017+:6). The ideological connection between language and land is also revealed by a language naming convention that Lüpke (2017+:7) terms “patrimonial deixis” where languages are referred via a construction along the lines of “language of X” that indicates which group is understood to be descended from

the first-comers to that area. For example, one named language is *Jóola Kujireray*, which can be translated as “the Jóola language spoken in the village of Jire” (Lüpke 2017+:6). This name simultaneously connects the language to the larger Jóola (also known as Jola) linguistic group (classified within the Atlantic branch of Niger-Congo), asserts that the founding clan of Jire is Jóola in origin, and marks it as a distinctive linguistic variety.

If one were to look at standard linguistic maps of Africa, Lower Casamance and Lower Fungom would not seem all that different in terms of their linguistic patterning. However, ethnographic techniques reveal that “languages” in these two areas have different kinds of sociocultural associations. Further discussion of Lower Casamance and Lower Fungom will be found in §4.2 and §4.3.

3.6 Endogenous ideologies leading to the development of multilingual repertoires

With the exception of the Wandala in Jilve (see §3.2), none of the case studies described above revealed communities whose multilingual patterns are in line with the polyglossic model (see §2.3). That is, local languages are neither valorized based on some external notion of prestige nor consistently assigned to a specific social domain (e.g., trade, household, etc.). To the extent that a generalization can be made, it appears that in these settings speakers “use multilingualism as a social strategy that maximizes alliances and protective networks through different languages providing indexical cues according to context” (Lüpke 2016:53).

The prominence of achieving security in the local context, rather than signaling prestige, as the principal motivation for the development of localized multilingual repertoires finds illuminating parallels in anthropological literature. Relevant work stresses the presence of a pervasive cultural tendency in this part of the world towards cultivating multiple social

affiliations: “far from there being a single ‘tribal identity’, most Africans moved in and out of multiple identities, defining themselves at one moment as a member of that cult, at another moment as part of this clan, and at yet another moment as an initiate in that professional guild” (Ranger 1983: 248). In this regard, Kopytoff (1987) adds that, “each person was attached to several groups of solidarity. Depending on the context, one expected support from each and offered it to each of them. In times of conflict, one tried to mobilize the maximum contextually relevant group. *Since traditional African societies were structured in terms of corporate groups, individual survival was possible only by being under the protective umbrella of one or another such group*, and the larger and more powerful it was, the safer one was” (Kopytoff 1987:24, emphasis added).

While still relatively limited in scope, the work that has looked into this issue seems to confirm that there is a link between a desire to achieve personal security through multiple affiliations and endogenous patterns of multilingualism that lead people to enlarge their language repertoires and, thereby, signal their connection to additional groups of people (Di Carlo 2016; Di Carlo and Good 2014:250–253; Lüpke 2016; 2017+).

4 Approaching the “third wave”: Multilingualism and language use

4.1 Existing work on language use in multilingual contexts on Africa

The discussion to this point has emphasized language attitudes and ideologies rather than actual language use (with the partial exception of the discussion of the work of Connell (2009) in §3.4).

While there is not yet a substantial body of work examining how multiple codes are employed in natural discourse in rural Africa, this is clearly a central topic to understanding the nature of multilingualism in this part of the world. Consistent with broader patterns of sociolinguistic

research on African languages (see §2), most work on language use by multilinguals has been focused on urban settings, and it emphasizes the interaction between languages occupying different ranks within a posited polyglossia scale, typically a local language of wider communication and an ex-colonial language (see, e.g., Gafaranga 2001, Myers-Scotton 1993a, Scotton 1976, and Swigart 1992).

The lack of work on multilingual language use in rural Africa is partly attributable to the fact that most of Africa's languages still lack basic descriptive materials, a lacuna that undermines researchers' abilities to transcribe and analyze conversational data. It should come as no surprise, then, that in studies of codeswitching—broadly understood here as “the selection by bilinguals/multilinguals of forms from two or more linguistic varieties in the same conversation” (Myers-Scotton 1993b:480)—most work undertaken in rural areas has focused on the interaction between a local language and a lingua franca (e.g., Rosendal and Mapunda 2016), especially in the classroom (e.g., Makgato 2014, Sailors et al. 2010). Muaka (2009:64) suggests that codeswitching between local languages is genuinely rare in Kenya, while the work of Connell (2009) described above in §3.4 indicates that it is common in the Mambila region of Cameroon, and it is also common in the Lower Casamance region of Senegal and, to some extent, in the Lower Fungom region of Cameroon, as will be discussed below in this section. There is simply not enough work on this topic to know if these different results reflect general regional patterns or if other factors are involved.

Additional work where conversations involving the use of multiple local languages are considered involves studies whose primary concern is the effect of language contact on local languages by larger languages. This includes, for instance, Dada (2011) on the interaction of Erushu [aqg], Yoruba [yor], and English in the speech of Erushu speakers (Ondo State, southern

Nigeria), Dorvlo (2014) on Ewe [ewe] influences in Logba [lgq] (Volta region, Ghana), or Essizewa (2014) on Kabiye [kbp] and Ewe in Lomé (the capital of Togo).¹³ In many cases, these instances of “codeswitching” involve the use of a single morpheme from one language embedded in a larger stretch of discourse drawing on vocabulary from another language. The difficulty in clearly separating instances of codeswitching and borrowing in such instances presents another methodological concern in studies of multilingual language use in rural Africa: Historical records are lacking which might establish which patterns of language use represent new cases of interleaving among codes and which represent long-standing patterns of integration of words from one language into another.¹⁴

The limited available data on language use by multilinguals in rural areas of Africa makes it impossible to contextualize it fully within the multifaceted literature on codeswitching in Africa as a whole.¹⁵ However, it is possible to note some significant trends in data that have been collected on rural African contexts and to consider their implications for research on codeswitching and language contact studies more generally. Two of the case studies discussed in §3 are drawn on again in this section, that of Lower Casamance and Lower Fungom. As will be seen, by focusing on the social meanings conveyed via language in use, the work described here can be seen as roughly similar to third-wave studies in mainstream sociolinguistic research.

¹³ Another relevant study is Purvis (2008), based on a corpus including conversational data. It examines register variation among L1 speakers of the northern Ghanaian language Dagbani [dag] in written and oral texts, where data on the alternation among English, Akan [aka], and Hausa [hau] are briefly discussed (e.g. Purvis 2008:83–84,128).

¹⁴ See Schadeberg (2003:158) for a relevant caution in this regard in a discussion of historical multilingualism among Bantu-speaking groups. Also relevant in this context is the work of Beyer and Schreiber (2013) and Schreiber (2009), who explore social network analysis to understand dynamics of contact-induced language change in West African rural communities with high incidence of individual multilingualism.

¹⁵ Good starting points to explore this vast research area are Kamwangamalu (2000), Myers-Scotton (1993a), Connell and Zeitlyn (2010), Higgins (2010), Mesthrie (2010), and Amuzu and Singler (2014).

4.2 Varieties of codeswitching in Lower Casamance

As part of a broader discussion of multilingualism in Lower Casamance (see §3.5), Cobbinah et al. (2017+) briefly present conversational data collected as part of documentary work on the languages of the region. A key point that emerges from their analysis of this data is that the ways different languages are used do not allow for any straightforward categorization. There are instances of extended single-language use (i.e. no codeswitching); multiple language use where the languages are nevertheless used relatively “discretely” (i.e., intersentential but not intrasentential codeswitching, as in (1)); as well as intense codeswitching, within sentences and even words, as in (2) (see Green and Abutalebi (2013) for relevant general discussion). The languages involved are the Gubëeher variety of Bainounk (Atlantic, Niger-Congo), Wolof [wol] (Atlantic, Niger-Congo), and French.¹⁶

(1) *Multilingual interaction (Gubëeher, French, Wolof)*

Antoine: **Acingi acingi**

He went out, he went out.

Isidore: **Ihokoro ajiiba**

I’ll win a lot.

Alian: **Uruk gahuy boneh nini bimbej belbaf... an mi mehun gumehun nah** *mes six cartes*

If someone had taken a [belbaf]...and I put down my cards.

Isidore: **Angu suwe alian neh ajiba balób**

Now play, Alian talks too much.

Juliette: Claude!

Claude!

Claude: Naam?

Yes?

¹⁶ The Bainounk variety seen in (2) and (3) is not associated with a standardized ISO 639-3 code. English translations are based on French originals in (1) and (2).

Juliette: Añ!
Lunch!

Claude: Waw mani ñów!
OK, I'm coming!

(2) *Intense codeswitching* (Kujireray, **Gubëeher**, *French*, Wolof)

Camille: Namuge!
He killed!

Jean-Tomi: Nifacaw!
One time!

Dodo: Fujin beenoor ufe!
Beenor's bull is there!

Camille: **Ĕó innuq?**
Where is mom?

Jean-Tomi: **Innoq bijeen**
Mom is over there.

Damace: Dodo!
Dodo!

Dodo: *Père!*
Father!

Damace: *Qu'est-ce qu'il y a?*
What's the matter?

Dodo: *Père naka mu?*
Father, how are you?

Damace: *Kati réunion ou bien?*
Perhaps a meeting or something else?

Dodo: Waaw. Réunion, liggey, lep!
Yes, meeting, work, everything!

Cobbinah et al. (2017+) observe that the type of language use in a given context can be partly accounted for by the linguistic identities and knowledge held by those individuals who are interacting with each other. Monolingual discourse might take place among individuals from the same household, for instance, while more extreme instances of codeswitching might take place among speakers who are very familiar with each other and have clear knowledge of each other's linguistic repertoires. In other cases, codeswitching can be understood as a kind of accommodation. A conversation dominated by one language may shift to a different one when a speaker who does not know a given language enters the conversational space.

Consideration of this conversational data yields interesting results with respect to a concern raised in §3.5 regarding what constitutes a “language” when studying rural Africa. Cobbinah et al. (2017+) note that the “mixed” code produced in the most extreme forms of codeswitching blurs the boundaries between what are recognized as distinct languages from both a local and a scholarly standpoint. Nevertheless, speakers have intuitions regarding whether someone is speaking in a manner more strongly associated with one language over another. The specific examples discussed by Cobbinah et al. (2017+) involve an opposition between Bainouk and Eegimaa (also known as Bandial [bqj]) ways of speaking. These varieties are associated with the Atlantic group of Niger-Congo, though they are not closely related.

The distinction between these “languages” has an emblematic value in keeping village communities ideologically distinct. Identification of a given stretch of discourse as “Bainouk” or “Eegimaa” can be done on the basis of relatively limited material such as the use of certain noun class prefixes or of a single phonological isogloss found amidst other forms which are not associated with a specific language. Cobbinah et al. (2017+) suggest that these facts can be usefully examined with respect to prototype theory as developed within the field of psychology

(see, e.g., Rosch 1978). This approach to categorization allows for gradient category membership, with some members being seen as more central to the category than others.

Applying prototype theory to a multilingual context means that, rather than viewing a given “language” being as a fixed and bounded code, it should be seen in terms of a more fluid set of properties (e.g., specific roots, noun classes, or formulaic expressions), some of which are viewed, in local terms, as more prototypical of a given language and others as less prototypical. Those features that are both prototypical and distinctive can serve as emblems of a particular language and establish that a given speaker is intending to use that language in a given context—a highly economic adaptation in an extremely complex language ecology.

4.3 Code choice in interaction in Lower Fungom

The linguistic situation of Lower Fungom was summarized in §3.5. Superficially, it resembles Lower Casamance: A large number of languages are used in a relatively small area, and residents tend to be highly multilingual. However, as documented in the work of Ojong (2017+), the use of local languages in conversation is quite different from what is found in Lower Casamance. In particular, the presence of individuals with large language repertoires does not seem to correspond with extensive codeswitching in interaction. Rather, there is a strong preference towards single-language interactions. This is reflected not only in ideological orientations, as revealed through speakers’ reports on how languages should be used—that is, through their discursive consciousness (see Giddens 1984)—but also in observational data.

To the extent that intrasentential codeswitching is observed in Lower Fungom, it appears to be largely limited to the use of words from Cameroonian Pidgin English within stretches of discourse that are otherwise clearly identifiable as belonging to a single local language. When

intersentential codeswitching is found, it is generally reflective of changes in the interactional context, e.g., a change of addressee or the arrival of new participants in a conversation. Deviations from this tendency appear to be rare but can be used to achieve specific pragmatic effects, as in (3).¹⁷

(3) *N is a sixty-year-old man from the village of Buu who is married to B's older sister. B is about forty five years old and is from the village of Missong, where he is the son of the chief. They each speak Buu [boe], Missong [mij], and Cameroonian Pidgin English, among other languages. On a market day in the centrally-located village of Abar, B enters a drinking establishment and encounters N. (Buu, **Missong**, Cameroonian Pidgin English)*

B: ndɛ...a ye ne...be de be
Uncle...How are you? Isn't there kola?

N: nfo *question* wa tume
You had asked me before

B: a fe ŋkwo mi tume be? a fe so hene. n du we kwe fa mi emu be...
What is it about? You remembered. I asked you to buy Kola for me...

[noise]

B: ai ca n se keke wu!
Ah! Don't flatter me!

N: a ke ya le dzeng? ŋ wu ye bu ka *follow* wa ton
Did you come up to Fang? I heard that you were chased there

B: ŋ ka *follow* be mi? ŋge du ye a ka de mi. e be kehe manto
Chased away? It was not me, it was Manto

N: a ke wou ye kem jo uwa de?
Are you all listening to what I am saying?

B: ben wou gin ta?
What should we listen to?

N: a ge ke ke ta?
So, where did you go?

¹⁷ The data in (3) represents a rough transcription (without tones) and preliminary word segmentation. While higher levels of accuracy would clearly be desirable, this is difficult to achieve when researching codeswitching in a region with seven to nine local languages, none of which are associated with any kind of written standard.

B: *offlicense wo ne mi wo me ma baɛ ti ma*
I reached here and saw you in this off license.

N: *bi kie lahe*
You are still a child.

[After some grumbling, N stops speaking to B who then leaves.]

Consistent with broader patterns of the local culture, it is expected that a junior person should accommodate to a senior person's primary linguistic identity to the extent possible. In choosing to use Buu, this is exactly what B (junior) initially does in his interactions with N (senior). However, when N began to reprimand B, the latter first did his best to argue against N's insinuation using the Buu language, but then shifted to his own primary language, Missong. This had the effect of putting an end to the interaction. What is crucial to note here is that the change in code did not go unnoticed and that both interlocutors understood it in the same way: as an act of social distancing. Even though the data in (3) appears superficially to be an instance of codeswitching similar to what was seen in Lower Casamance in (1) and (2), it has a quite distinctive local social import. This stretch of discourse reveals a feature of Lower Fungom ethnopragsmatics that is both illustrative of local language ideologies and would not be predicted if it was assumed that polyglossic models of language choice applied in the region and will be further discussed in §5.¹⁸

5 Language choice and identity in endogenous ideologies of multilingualism

One of the areas in which the findings of the studies discussed in §3 and §4 seem particularly relevant to the sociolinguistics more broadly is the relationship between language and identity. A

¹⁸ See Duranti (1993) for discussion of ethnopragsmatics.

common approach to the study of identity in the sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological literature relies on the essentialist assumption that “those who occupy an identity category...are both fundamentally similar to one another and fundamentally different from members of other groups” and cultural essentialism, in particular, “relies on language as a central component” (Bucholtz and Hall 2004:374).

Such approaches result in a situation where a given sociolinguistic fact, including language choice, is taken to index a certain population and, by association, some set of distinctive features. Indices of this kind can be further subject to what Irvine and Gal (2000:37) have called the process of “iconization”, where “linguistic features that index social groups or activities appear to be iconic representations of them, as if a linguistic feature somehow depicted or displayed a social group’s inherent nature or essence” (Irvine and Gal 2000:37). This would be an instance of a second order index following Silverstein’s (2003) terminology. First, the perception of a linguistic feature distinguishing a given population is taken to index a speaker’s membership in that population. This index of membership is then transformed into a higher-level index for features that are assumed to define that population (see, e.g., Eckert (2012: 94); Johnstone and Kiesling (2008) is a useful complement to Silverstein (2003)).

Such indices contribute to the development of a kind of identity that, in a sociological context, Brubaker and Cooper (2000) have labeled “categorical”, through which “one may identify oneself (or another person) by membership in a class of persons sharing some categorical attribute (such as race, ethnicity, language, nationality, citizenship, gender, sexual orientation, etc.)” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000:15). This is opposed to a relational identity, which involves locating individuals within a web of relationships (e.g., within a kin group).

Urban language ideologies in Africa largely appear to associate the use of specific languages with second-order indexical features (see §2.3). Colonial languages, and, by extension, those who master them, are assigned the highest levels of prestige, followed by African lingua francas, and, then, local languages. This pattern can also be found in rural areas to the extent that exogenous language ideologies are present, such as what was found for Arabic in Jilve (§3.2) or French in Somié (§3.4). By contrast, endogenous layers of language ideologies seem to exemplify a quite different system.

As seen in §3, for all of the communities reviewed with the exception of the Wandala Muslims of Jilve, there was no indication of a hierarchical arrangement of languages (or lects) within local systems of language valorization. Their social role does not appear to extend beyond indexing membership in the local groups which they are associated with, for instance the socio-political unit of the village (coinciding with a chiefdom) in Lower Fungom or an individual's patrimonial group in Lower Casamance (§3.5). In terms of indexical order, the use of these languages has not been observed to go beyond the first level. That is, the languages indicate group membership without suggesting any additional associations in and of themselves: Being member in a given group merely means having a certain position in relation to the other members who participate in the interaction.¹⁹

The interactional data illustrated in (3) (§4.3) seems to confirm this view that the “ideological moves” (Eckert 2012:94) that are called up by the choice of using any particular language are limited to affiliation. By switching to Misson, B chooses to represent himself as member of the

¹⁹ This is not to say that there cannot be special features attributed to the groups that these languages are associated with. For instance, in Lower Casamance (§3.5), some languages are associated with first-comer groups, and first-comers have privileges not accorded to newcomer groups. What is crucial here is that first-comer status is not linguistically defined. That is, while a specific language may serve as an index of first-comer status, it is not a determinant of it.

village of Missong, a community in which he is the chief's son and where N, being from the village of Buu and having only in-laws in Missong, does not have the right to criticize his actions. Thus, choices made by the two interactants rely on an ideology where the local lects of Lower Fungom index not "identity" as "categorical identification" but, rather, as "relational identification" and whose interpretation depends on the specific position that an individual occupies within the relational "web" indexed by a lect (Brubaker and Cooper 2000:15).²⁰ This is possible in part because, in small societies like those of Lower Fungom, practically all adults are already aware of the major relational groups to which a given resident of the region may belong and of their relative positions within such groups. This again demonstrates the importance of ethnographic methods for interpreting rural multilingual language use (see also Stroud 1998:322–323).

The apparent prominence of relational, rather than categorical, identification in endogenous layers of rural African language ideologies is probably a central factor in allowing individuals to accumulate and shift "identities" in ways that are surprising to Western observers.²¹ Further research on this topic would likely contribute useful additions to the set of interpretive tools employed within sociolinguistics to explore connections between language and identity, which could be applied both within, and outside of, Africa.

²⁰ The distinction between relational and categorical identification is what Di Carlo and Good (2014) referred to in terms of an opposition between language ideologies characterized by an indexical orientation, where only group membership is implicated in the use of a language, as opposed to an essentialist orientation, where qualities beyond group membership are implicated.

²¹ See, for example, the fact that Childs (2003:20) takes time to discuss this issue in the introductory chapter of an introductory textbook on African languages.

6 The future of research on multilingualism in rural Africa

While multilingualism in rural Africa remains a very under-researched area given its pervasiveness, available work suggests that it is not only quite different in character from urban multilingualism but also that there are significant differences in the social significance of multilingualism across rural parts of the continent. Unlike urban settings, there is no indication that local languages are associated with a hierarchy of prestige or social compartmentalization (§3.3–3.6). However, beyond this, they can vary with respect to the nature of the social group they are attached to (§3.5) and how they are deployed in language use (§4). To the extent that any generalization can be made, multilingualism in this part of the world appears to revolve more strongly around relational identities than essentialist ones (§5).

Perhaps the most important result of this survey is that it establishes a need to study rural multilingualism in Africa in a much wider range of contexts than has been done to date so that the diversity of rural African “multilingualisms” can be better established. Such social patterns are likely to be much more endangered than languages themselves, adding a degree of urgency to this work. Finally, from the perspective of linguistics in general, a key point that emerges from this survey is the extent to which a full understanding of this topic requires greater adoption of ethnographic methods than is typical in linguistic research, especially within the domain of language documentation.

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