African Multilingualisms
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Rural Linguistic and Cultural Diversity

Edited by
Pierpaolo Di Carlo and Jeff Good
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This book provides useful field studies on multilingualism, and especially African rural multilingualism. Research on multilingualism has concentrated on cities and towns, and code-mixing and code-switching have been explained as the result of contact among individuals with multilingual repertoires in their daily verbal interactions. Rural areas have tended to be seen as monolingual, because they are treated as the native lands of specific languages. However, careful observation reveals that, even in rural areas, people exhibit large language repertoires, and shifting among codes does not merely reveal mastery of several languages but rather signals or expresses attitudes of togetherness with or separateness from the linguistic groups whose languages are or are not being used. Therefore, linguistic practice and socialization share natural relationships, and linguistic behaviors are linked to physical spaces and interactional situations.

One of the main questions tackled in this volume is the ways in which rural areas become multilingual. Migration—and especially forced migration due to war and other kinds of conflict, which gives rise to the creation of refugee camps and new settlements—is an important way whereby multilingualism can develop, and facilitative multilingualism arising from such circumstances may then become entrenched. Migration changes the linguistic ecology and landscape of all communities. This has far-reaching and pervasive adverse effects on some languages (through language loss or attrition) and on the stability of communities (through a disappearance of local distinctiveness in social structures, a decreased emphasis on local ethnocosmology, or other such processes).

As the studies here reveal, ethnic identity often does not coincide with language identity. Many of the rural areas discussed are hubs of extensive society-level multilingualism as a result of their position at the juncture of
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more dominant and less dominant speech groups. Furthermore, it can be seen that the performance of public identity and accommodation influence language choice, given the large linguistic repertoire of a typical individual. On the other hand, communicative events whose content relates to the speaker’s private life tend to be conveyed through codes that are in an iconic relationship with that speaker’s social identity.

In addition to examining questions related to the presence of multilingualism in rural areas, the chapters in this volume also explore its properties. Studies on multilingualism may yield different results depending on the different conceptual approaches adopted. A distinction between essentialism and indexicality in language ideologies, which can be observed in rural multilingualism, reveals opposing ways in which language can be linked to identity. A sound description of individual-level characteristics relevant to the exploration of identity, as well as how languages can be maintained, can be established by the use of an ecological perspective. Ethnographic approaches collecting detailed metadata from research participants can serve as the foundation for a rigorous study of rural multilingualism, as has been the case for work on Lower Fungom in the northwest of Cameroon.

The various contributors to this volume have tried to present the topics on which they decided to focus with convincing arguments and sound descriptions. As well as Lower Fungom, where the KPAAM-CAM project has investigated rural multilingualism for a number of years, the sites of research include other areas in Cameroon (Ossing village in the South-West Region of Cameroon, the Babanki, Bafut, and Limbum areas in the North-West Region, Kelleng village in the Littoral Region, and the Minawao refugee camp of the Far North Region) and Senegal (Lower Casamance). One of the lessons that can be gathered from the reflections found here is the pragmatic nature of language use by inhabitants of rural areas and how language dynamics are connected to sociocultural ecologies. Culturally determined systems of governing and frameworks of behavior have a strong influence on linguistic behavior and ethnic identity.

Questions about how towns and rural areas become multilingual may have the same basic answers, though the extent of the phenomenon may be greater in towns than in some rural areas. As mentioned above, one frequent source for rural multilingualism found in the case studies of this volume is migration—whether for purposes of integration, increased communication, grazing (cattle-rearing), trade, escape from conflict, or other reasons. In addition, we see that communities that are at the juncture of dominant speech groups experience a complex multilingual situation and display a wide range of patterns of language use among their residents. In the same vein, courtrooms, for example, are at the crossroads of multilingualism in cases where not all participants are linguistically equipped to the same degree and where
there is an enormous need for translation. How do we allow people to maintain their dignity and ensure that justice is rendered in a fair manner if the accused, plaintiffs, judges, and lawyers are not communicating effectively? It is therefore imperative to explore multilingual situations to benefit all individuals, whether they live in cities, towns, or villages. As such, studying rural multilingualism is a vital necessity.

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Editors’ Preface

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A number of individuals were integral to the production of this volume, and we would like to thank Braden Brown for his assistance during early stages of editing, Clayton Hamre for helping with the production of a number of the maps found here, and Timothy Jowan Curnow for his meticulous and prompt copy-editing work. The volume would have taken much more time to see completion if it were not for his assistance. We would also like to dedicate this book to the memory of two individuals who provided us invaluable
support during our own fieldwork in Cameroon, without which we would have never come to understand the richness of rural African multilingualism. These are the late Ngong George Bwei Kum of the village of Mekaf and the late Abanga Christian Mgbe of the village of Ngun.

Finally, we would like to remark on the fact that several junior Cameroonian scholars are publishing for the first time in this volume. We very much hope that this marks the beginning of successful research careers for all of them and that we will see further publications from them in the near future.

LANGUAGE IDENTIFICATION

A volume of this kind always raises editorial concerns regarding language identification, especially when relatively little-known languages and dialects are being considered. Rather than including language codes directly in the individual chapters, we have chosen to provide this information in the index to the volume, where each named variety is associated with the closely matching ISO 639-3 code and Glottocode (see https://glottolog.org).

EDITORIAL WORK

Both editors contributed to the conceptualization of this volume as well as the editing and review of chapters. However, the greater part of the work was done by Pierpaolo Di Carlo, and the ordering of the editors’ names reflects his role as lead editor rather than being an alphabetical ordering by last name.
1. EXPANDING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF VARIATION IN MULTILINGUALISM

The study of multilingualism is traditionally subdivided into two broad branches. One branch focuses on how languages as a whole pattern with society, and is known by terms such as the “sociology of language,” “macrosociolinguistics,” and “societal multilingualism.” The other concentrates on the behaviors of multilingual individuals, and is known by terms such as “(micro-)sociolinguistics” and “individual multilingualism.” Regardless of the important differences between—and within—these two branches, they can be seen as sharing two key features. One feature, which is relatively easy to observe due to its near universality, is a reliance on data collected in urban contexts. The other feature emerges when one carries out research in postcolonial contexts such as sub-Saharan Africa: a reliance on Western models of identity construction. The contribution that this book aims to make is connected to these two concerns, and the diversity alluded to in the volume title—*African Multilingualisms*—springs from this.

In order to stress the complementary nature of the findings discussed in the following chapters with respect to more mainstream scholarship, this introduction is structured in a sort of dialogic fashion, where succinct summaries of widely held views on multilingual phenomena in Africa are contrasted with the main findings emerging from the studies contained in this volume. We will first consider the contrast between rural and urban environments in Africa, and the relevance of this distinction to the study of multilingualism (section 2). Subsequently, we will deal with issues that more closely relate to societal multilingualism, including the significance of studying rural areas to better understand this phenomenon (section 3). This is followed by
consideration of concerns that more clearly pertain to studies of individual multilingualism and the factors that condition choice and the relationship between language and identity (section 4). The introduction concludes with a brief overview of the relevance of the small-scale multilingualism phenomena discussed in the volume from the perspective of language endangerment.

2. URBAN AND RURAL PERSPECTIVES

2.1 Multilingualism as an Urban Phenomenon

Most research on multilingualism in Africa has been done in urban centers, in some cases for good reasons and in others for more problematic ones. Two clear reasons are (a) the conceptualization of urban centers as sites of future potential for the development of African society and (b) the assumption that rural areas are linguistically homogeneous.

With respect to the first point, cities and towns have grown dramatically during the postcolonial period, mostly due to the movement of rural immigrants with diverse linguistic backgrounds into urban environments. The patterns of linguistic complexity that emerged in these environments led to the need for new language policies that would serve as powerful tools for nation-building and that were influenced by competing postcolonial political goals. Where could there be a greater opportunity to develop far-sighted policies than urban centers, where “unlike the more conservative tradition in the villages, both the social and the linguistic situation is [sic] highly fluid, being rapidly and violently affected by numerous contemporary pressures” (Povey (1983, 9))? Scholars’ widespread preference for urban multilingualism is thus not only understandable but also commendable in being an attempt to put knowledge to the service of the greater good.

As for the second point, the conservative nature of rural societies hinted at by Povey (1983) in the quotation above has been assumed to co-occur with a situation in which, much like in the imagined European countryside, one could find “pure ancestral codes.” That is, there was an expectation that in African villages one would encounter linguistically homogeneous communities linked to bounded “tribes,” serving as the basic political unit in the countryside.

A telling example of how the expected linguistic homogeneity was challenged by field data is provided by Myers-Scotton’s (1982) study of multilingualism in Shiveye, a hamlet in western Kenya. The author first describes Shiveye as linguistically homogeneous (p. 126) but then reports that all but 6 percent of respondents “reported knowing some other language or languages in addition to the home language” (p. 128). She 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” (p. 129; emphasis added). Decades later, sociolinguistic research based on similar assumptions can be found, as seen in statements such as “there are . . . geographically overlapping speech communities . . . even in rural areas where homogeneity is often assumed” (Broeder, Extra, and Maartens (2002, 16); emphasis added), with some works even maintaining the use of problematic terminology that has generally been abandoned (e.g., the use of “tribe language” in Spernes (2012)).

An assumption of linguistic homogeneity has led to rural areas playing a relatively marginal role in the study of multilingual behaviors. The possibility that in rural societies one might encounter significant patterns of indigenous, small-scale multilingualism was rendered more or less “invisible.”

2.2 Rurality from a Spatial Perspective

A key unifying factor of the chapters in this volume is an emphasis on multilingualism in rural areas. This is, in part, reflected in the ordering and division of chapters in the volume, with the chapters most closely oriented around this topic appearing at the beginning of the book and constituting its largest section. 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; Winters 1977), and we will not try to settle the matter here. However, we believe that scholars studying African societies will generally share intuitions on how to distinguish between “rural” and “urban” environments in Africa, even if devising a clear-cut way to identify them is difficult. For present purposes, we define rural environments in geographic terms as those areas where population density is relatively low, most inhabitants are engaged in farming, and transportation and network connections to outside areas are relatively limited.

On the basis of this definition, all but three of the chapters of this volume are based on field research in settings that can be broadly classified as geographically rural. The three exceptions are the contributions of Dissake and Atindogbé, Goron, and Sow. Dissake and Atindogbé analyze the highly regimented linguistic space of the courtroom, where the opposition between colonial language ideologies and local language ideologies comes strongly into focus. Goron’s contribution describes the linguistic situation of a densely populated refugee camp where most of the refugees are from rural areas. Sow examines the linguistic practices of a student whose life history has involved movement between more rural and urban spaces. In this regard, even those
chapters not specifically focused on rural areas have significance for our understanding of the dynamics of rural multilingualism.

A separate consideration from whether or not a given region is more rural or urban in character is its local linguistic patterning. Rural or urban areas can, in principle, be linguistically homogeneous or linguistically diverse, and the chapters in this volume are focused on rural areas where significant linguistic diversity is present. This is, in part, because such areas are ideal for the study of rural multilingualism, but another reason is the fact that the volume’s geographic focus is on a part of Africa that falls within a region that has been termed the “Sub-Saharan Fragmentation Belt” (Dalby (1970, 163)) due to its overall high level of linguistic diversity (see figure 0.1). This diversity

Figure 0.1  Map of Africa, indicating the location of the areas discussed in this volume, together with the names of the authors of the relevant chapters. Source: Map created by Pierpaolo Di Carlo.
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has likely been present for millennia, long before contemporary processes of urbanization began to take place on the African continent.

For instance, three of the chapters in this volume, those by Esene Agwara, Mba and Nsem Tem, and Ojong Diba, focus on Lower Fungom, an area of the North-West Region of Cameroon that can be classified as a geographically rural space that is also characterized by high language density and extensive individual-level multilingualism. Two of the chapters, those of Chenemo and Neba and Di Carlo and Neba, look at the Bafut area, found quite close to Lower Fungom, which is also linguistically diverse, in particular in the Lower Bafut area. The chapters by Cobbinah and by Sow look at multilingualism in the Lower Casamance region of Senegal, a large area containing both urban and rural landscapes, once again characterized by a high language density. Cobbinah’s chapter, in particular, focuses on a very linguistically diverse rural area of Lower Casamance. Other chapters, such as those by Akumbu and Chie and by Ngué Um, Makon, and Assomo, focus on single villages that are located in geographically rural and linguistically diverse areas.

3. SOCIETAL MULTILINGUALISM

3.1 Triglossia and “the Spirit of African Multilingualism”

I talk country with my mother. I talk Pidgin and country with my sister and brothers. I talk French when I play with my friends. I talk English and Pidgin at school. (Anchimbe (2013, 82))

According to Bokamba (2018, 442), this excerpt from an interview with a ten-year-old boy living in Yaoundé “aptly capture[s] simply and elegantly the spirit of African multilingualism.” The excerpt exemplifies two significant features. First, as already discussed in section 2.1, the salience of multilingualism in urban contexts has long been noted—Yaoundé is the capital of Cameroon and its second largest city. Second, the languages involved have complementary functional ranges—this individual characterizes his multilingual usage in terms of specific domains. Clear-cut compartmentalization is partially blurred only by a local lingua franca, Cameroon Pidgin English.

This compartmentalized view of a linguistic repertoire has been a key feature of studies of societal multilingualism going back to Fishman’s (1967) extension of Ferguson’s (1959) notion of diglossia. As Bokamba’s (2018) evocative phrasing of a singular “spirit of African multilingualism” indicates, this view has also dominated the epistemology of research on societal multilingualism in sub-Saharan Africa (see, e.g., Anchimbe 2013; Kamwangamalu 2000, 2012). Bokamba (2018), in particular, is an example of work that has seen a triglossic scheme as sufficient to account for the internal subdivision
of the sociolinguistic spaces of African societies. Triglossia, here, refers to “a language situation whereby three languages are involved, having in some areas well-defined complementary functional ranges, and in others overlapping functional ranges because of their varying sociocultural bases, and also varying stages of development” (Abdulaziz Mkilifi (1972, 198)).

In the African context, this is most clearly seen in urban contexts where the introduction of colonial languages has meant not only the presence of additional lexicogrammatical codes in societies that were already multilingual but also the foregrounding of a language ideology that is built on a hierarchical arrangement of languages along a general dimension of “prestige,” with colonial languages at the top of the hierarchy, followed by various regional languages and lingua francas, and with small “local” languages at the bottom (see, e.g., Wolff (2016, 229)). While hierarchical ordering of languages is not unknown in environments that would generally be categorized as geographically rural (as seen, for instance, in the investigation of Chenemo and Neba in this volume), this arrangement is much more strongly visible in prototypical urban contexts, just as social stratification itself is most strongly visible within cities.

3.2 Prototypical Rurality: Beyond Geography

The observations in section 3.1 suggest an important refinement in our understanding of the research foci of the various chapters in this volume. Rather than simply focusing on rural areas in a narrow geographic sense (see section 2.2), most of the studies focus on what we refer to here as “prototypical” rural areas. They demonstrate that the significance of the rural/urban divide for African multilingualism is as much about settlement patterns and the nature of the local economy as it is about cultural and ideological conceptions of the role of language in structuring societies. A noteworthy point about African cities from a linguistic perspective is the extent to which processes of urbanization have gone hand in hand with the imposition of a new kind of prestige-based language ideology, largely as a result of European colonialism but also, in some cases, via the spread of Islam and, with it, the Arabic language (see, e.g., Moore (2004) for a relevant case study in a Cameroonian context).

By contrast, in prototypical rural spaces, in addition to the geographic features mentioned in section 2.2, one finds systems of linguistic valorization where the languages present in the local social context are valued through means other than their arrangement along an idealized scale of prestige and power. To capture this distinction, Di Carlo, Good, and Ojong Diba (2019) distinguish between endogenous and exogenous language ideologies, with endogenous language ideologies being those that appear to be historically old, almost certainly precolonial, while exogenous ideologies represent
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historically newer layers, often connected to colonialism, whether directly or indirectly. Multilingualisms that can be observed today in prototypically rural spaces are those that are most likely to represent continuations of endogenous patterns of language use, while those found in urban spaces are the most likely to have been strongly influenced by exogenous patterns of use. This historical contrast has led us to frame the distinction in these kinds of multilingualism through an opposition between “rural” and “urban” here. However, it is clear that the social and spatial reality of African societies is much more complicated than such a simplistic, binary opposition implies. This is evidenced, in part, in the structure of this volume, where a number of chapters focusing on spaces where both rural and urban patterns of multilingualism are present are grouped together under the theme of multilingualisms in contact.

Of the regions discussed in this volume, Lower Fungom is the one that adheres most closely to our rural prototype. Nevertheless, as found in the study of Ojong Diba, even there one sees the influence of urban patterns of multilingualism in the use of Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE), which has emerged as a lingua franca. Historically, multilingualism itself had been the local “lingua franca” (see Fardon and Furniss (1994, 4)), but CPE has been playing an increasingly important role across the whole of anglophone Cameroon. Its presence has not only changed individual multilingual repertoires but has also resulted in new patterns of language use. For instance, as discussed by Ojong Diba, code-mixing and code-switching among the local languages of Lower Fungom is generally avoided, but this prohibition does not apply as strongly to CPE. This is presumably connected to its status as an “outside” language.

Cobbinah’s chapter considers another prototypically rural area quite geographically distant from Lower Fungom, a part of the Lower Casamance region of Senegal that has been referred to as the Crossroads in linguistic studies. Superficially, the Crossroads area is comparable to Lower Fungom. It is associated with many small languages, and its residents are typically highly multilingual. However, a significant difference in observed patterns of language use is that code-mixing and code-switching among local languages are pervasive in day-to-day speech in the Crossroads, unlike in Lower Fungom. In addition to the high-level urban/rural divide, differences like these seen in rural spaces have also prompted us to emphasize the plurality of African multilingualisms in the title of this volume.

Other chapters in the volume describe patterns of multilingualism in contexts that do not fit the rural prototype as closely as Lower Fungom or the Crossroads area, for different reasons. Di Carlo and Neba’s and Chenemo and Neba’s studies of the Bafut and Lower Bafut areas are focused on a region close to Lower Fungom that, while broadly rural in nature, is not isolated to the same degree since it lies along a major road and is relatively close to the
urban center of Bamenda, and similar conditions hold for the Babanki area
that is the focus of Akumbu and Chie’s study and Ngué Um, Makon, and
Assomo’s consideration of the Bati community. However, these are only
relatively minor deviations in comparison to other settings examined here.

Tabe’s contribution, for instance, reveals the interesting case of the vil-
nage of Ossing, with a relatively small population of around 2,000 people,
found in the anglophone part of Cameroon. It had, until recently, been more
clearly rural than urban in terms of its population distribution and social
structures. Unusually for its area, Ossing has been traditionally associated
with two distinct local languages, Kenyang and Ejagham; more typically, a
given political unit is only associated with one local language even if most
of its residents are multilingual. Ossing’s status as a bilingual village is, in
part, due to its geographic location at a three-way road junction that is at the
border of Kenyang-speaking and Ejagham-speaking areas. Ossing’s position
on a junction already makes it a less prototypically rural location. However,
a more critical development for its current linguistic ecology is the fact that
it is an area where economically valuable forests are present, and this has
resulted in significant migration to the village from other parts of Cameroon,
in particular francophone Cameroon. The increased presence of outsiders has
resulted in a noteworthy rise in the use of French, English, and CPE in the vil-
lage, as well as other languages, and its internal linguistic ecology now more
closely matches what would be expected in a Cameroonian city. Thus, this
one small village appears to be undergoing a transition from a less rural to a
more urban sociolinguistic configuration, and sites like this present interest-
ing opportunities for research on what happens when rural and urban patterns
of multilingualism come into contact with each other.

In a similar manner, Akumbu and Chie’s chapter, based on field research
in the Cameroonian village of Kejom Ketinguh, considers a comparatively
neglected aspect of rural multilingualism that also results from internal shifts
in populations, namely multilingualism among pastoralist communities living
alongside farming communities. In areas of Cameroon around the Nigerian
border, one finds traditionally nomadic pastoralists known as Mbororo who
primarily speak varieties of Fulfulde. Fulfulde is only very distantly related
(if related at all) to the languages of the farming communities, and its closest
relatives are found centered around Senegal. Fulfulde-speaking communities
have spread over wide parts of West and Central Africa, however descriptive
and comparative linguistic studies tend to treat them as “outsiders” among
farming groups and, as a result, the speech practices of these groups have
generally been studied quite separately from those of farming communities.
In fact, the Mbororo show patterns of multilingualism that are superficially
similar to those of farmers. For instance, they often learn new languages
because they have moved into areas where those languages predominate.
However, there are important differences. For example, unlike Babanki children, Mbororo children remain largely linguistically isolated until the age of five or so, at which point they start to learn other languages, with Babanki and CPE being what they typically learn first. Mbororo-Babanki contact in some ways resembles contact within urban settings among groups who have not traditionally interacted, but it is happening in a clearly rural space and where a key difference among the local groups is their primary food subsistence strategy, a highly salient social feature in a rural environment.

More extreme sites of contact are discussed in the chapters by Dissake and Atindogbé and Goron. As mentioned above, Dissake and Atindogbé look at language use in courtroom settings, with a particular focus on the dynamics that arise when speakers of local languages are forced to operate in a context where the hierarchical ordering of languages is not a mere social convention but a matter of law. In a research note, Goron provides what is, to the best of our knowledge, the first study of multilingualism within an African refugee camp. Her study is on the Minawao camp in the Far North Region of Cameroon, where refugees from conflicts connected to Boko Haram have fled from northeastern Nigeria. Most of the refugees come from rural areas and are multilingual in languages local to the region of Nigeria from which they arrived. Some of these languages, such as Kanuri and Hausa, have lingua franca status in parts of Nigeria, while others are quite localized in their use. Clearly, a refugee camp like Minawao cannot be easily classified as “urban” or “rural.” Its inhabitants mainly have a rural background, but they are living in an environment of high population density and internal diversity that is more typical of an urban setting.

While it has not yet been possible to conduct a systematic study of patterns of language use in Minawao, the observations provided in Goron’s chapter are of interest for what they appear to reveal about the language dynamics within a refugee camp. Deeper knowledge of this would not only be valuable from a policy perspective, by giving humanitarian groups a clearer understanding of communicative practices of refugees living within the camp, but it may also prove to be important for predicting the linguistic trajectories of the refugees when they are able to leave the camp. A noteworthy pattern in this regard is that raw numbers of speakers in the camp seem less important in determining which languages become widely used than whether or not a language was already established as a regional lingua franca outside the camp.

Perhaps the most important lesson from the chapters in this volume, in terms of arriving at a better understanding of “rural” language dynamics, is how acute the need is for more study of the kinds of multilingualism that are present outside of prototypical urban spaces. In particular, the category of “not urban” is much more diverse than a simple label like “rural” implies. Moreover, given that the growth of African cities is largely driven by
migration from rural areas, it seems clear that a full understanding of urban multilingualism will require a better understanding of the kinds of multilingualisms that people bring with them as they move to urban spaces or back and forth between urban and rural ones.

4. INDIVIDUAL MULTILINGUALISM AND THE ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

4.1 Domains of Use and Their Alternatives

One of the main analytical tools that has been used in the scholarly consideration of societal multilingualism that has often “leaked” into the study of individual multilingualism is that of domains of use. A rationale can be found along the following lines: If, in a society characterized by extensive multilingualism, different languages are associated with different complexes “of behaviors, attitudes, and values” (Fishman (1967, 29)), then research on multilingualism should try to identify these distinctive complexes—that is, the social domains in which each language is considered by speakers to be best suited—in order to also account for speakers’ linguistic choices in interaction. This approach has been effectively complemented by research done in interactional sociolinguistics, as evidenced, for instance, by work building on Gumperz’s (1982) proposals for a more fine-grained understanding of context as being continuously negotiated by interactants and on Auer’s insight into the interplay between discourse- and participant-related switching during interaction (e.g., Auer (1999, 311)). However, what is striking to us is that this model has been seen as central to the study of the behavior of multilingual individuals who use languages that are themselves poorly described and that are used in sociolinguistic spaces that are also little understood, as is the case for most of sub-Saharan Africa (see section 3.1).

The adoption of a nuanced definition of prototypical rural spaces, as developed in section 3.2, in order to characterize the chapters in this volume is, in part, due to the fact that the perspective many of them adopt is more complex and ethnographically sophisticated than the one that is implied by models which assume that social domains of use are the primary determinant of language choice. A particular limitation of such an approach is that it is based on the idea that it is possible to effectively analyze patterns of reported or observed language use through the lens of externally defined social domains, such as the school, the workplace, the home, the neighborhood, the media, and state institutions. As such, it not only leaves little space for the discovery of locally salient domains of language use that fall outside of well-known categories but also fails to recognize the potential role of language choice in shaping the social spaces that speakers inhabit.
Ngué Um, Makon, and Assomo deal explicitly with their choice to not use social domains as foundational elements in the interpretive framework that they adopt in their contribution. Their research focuses on the multilingual behaviors of a group of women born in different rural areas in central Cameroon but who now live in the village of Kelleng, where a variety of Bati is spoken. The linguistic ecology of this village is complex and includes some nine different “lects” (a cover term we use here to encompass locally salient linguistic varieties whether or not they would be classified as distinct “languages” in scholarly terms). Only one of these, French, is exoglossic to central Cameroon. The others have widely divergent potential for facilitating intergroup communication. For instance, Basaa is used in Kelleng and across central Cameroon as a language of wider communication, while Nyambat is a variety of Bati associated with a tiny village, also called Nyambat, found not far from Kelleng.

Ngué Um, Makon, and Assomo recorded interactions among more than a dozen women, with a focus on four of them, in two activities: (a) while farming and (b) while preparing cassava paste in the house of one of the women. In analyzing their data quantitatively, they do not use social domains as a primary variable but, rather, the location of the interaction and the “frame of discourse.” These frames of discourse are defined in terms of the topic of the discussion, broadly construed. For example, the “public” frame includes those turns in which speakers talk about politics and village-wide events, and the “business” frame refers to turns in which the ongoing economic activity (i.e., farming or preparing cassava) or other possible work-related activities of the group are under discussion. Using this analytical system, variation in the length of turns at talk were measured for four of the participants across six target lects, namely, Kelleng, Basaa, Bisoo, Bongo, Eton, and Ewondo.3

The study reveals that the two independent variables have an effect but are not sufficient to fully account for patterns of language use, and, therefore, that further investigation is needed. Ngué Um, Makon, and Assomo further make interesting ethnographic observations when discussing the findings, implicitly suggesting that another important dimension that needs to be considered is that of audience design. Cassava preparation takes place in a house but, as is common in many other African villages, houses are, in practical terms, “almost” public spaces, open to frequent and unannounced visits by more or less distant relatives and acquaintances. The language choices of the women within houses, therefore, are likely to be conditioned in part by an assumption that they will be overheard. This helps explain why the Kelleng lect is predominantly used throughout the recordings. This is the lect associated with the Kelleng village, and these women have married into Kelleng and are expected to show respect and affection for it.4 The lect that is used most often
after Kelleng is Bisoo. This is the original home language of three of the four women, and they use it especially for gossip.

The importance of such locally specific factors makes clear why Ngué Um, Makon, and Assomo analyze their data using variables not directly connected to social domains to capture and analyze the dynamism of individual multilingualism in actual language use. Something similar is seen in Sow’s chapter. This study is largely centered on an urban context, the city of Ziguinchor in southern Senegal, but in this case, too, it is clear that language choice and language attitudes can depend on a complex and dynamic set of locally salient factors that cannot be described by using a reductionistic and relatively static concept such as “social domain.” By recording instances of the language use of a university student of Bissau-Guinean origin in different environments both in the city—such as the market, the university, the home, and the neighborhood—and during his trips to Guinea-Bissau, Sow attempts to describe the student’s linguistic trajectories within a complex sociolinguistic ecology. Additional data from interviews and direct observation allows her to outline not only the motivations for the development of the student’s multilingual repertoire, which are largely due to his mobility, but also to identify a tension between concrete spaces of interaction and features of the language ideologies brought by Bissau-Guineans to Ziguinchor.

As we shall see immediately below in section 4.2, other studies contained in this volume further highlight how approaches aiming to capture, to the extent possible, the lived sociolinguistic realities of multilingual research participants can lead to novel insights.

4.2 Language Ideologies and Identity

“For the multilingual speaker, language choice is not only an effective means of communication but also an act of identity (Le Page and Tabouret Keller 1985). Every time we say something in one language when we might just as easily have said it in another, we are reconnecting with people, situations, and power configurations from our history of past interactions and imprinting on that history our attitudes towards the people and languages concerned” (Li Wei (2000, 15)). These remarks summarize two key points in the study of individual multilingualism. On the one hand, they make clear that language choice is a fundamental semiotic tool for the representation of identity and, on the other, that identities available to a speaker and the ways in which they are encoded depend on the language ideologies shared by the interactants. We understand language ideologies, in this context, to refer to “the cultural (or subcultural) system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests” (Irvine (1989, 255)).
An important point to make in this context is that, in the existing literature, the factors that have generally been considered most salient in understanding the ways in which language ideologies are linked to linguistic identity involve what Brubaker and Cooper (2000) have labeled “categorical identification,” through which “one may identify oneself (or another person) by membership in a class of persons sharing some categorical attribute” (2000, 15). Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004, 16) place “age, race, class, ethnicity, gender, generation, sexual orientation, geopolitical locale, institutional affiliation, and social status” among these kinds of categories.

Attributes of this kind will typically call up features at the level of moral, psychological, and other personal qualities of speakers via what Irvine and Gal (2000, 37) refer to as processes of “iconization” that are often assumed to be of universal validity. However, there are also cases in which language choice seems to be used to represent nothing more than co-membership in a given group, most commonly connected with some notion of “ethnicity.” Since Rubin (1972), researchers have rarely pushed their analyses beyond recognizing the role of such acts in the creation of bonds of solidarity when accounting for such language choices (see, e.g., Pavlenko 2005). Findings discussed in works specifically focused on language and identity in rural African contexts, such as Di Carlo, Good, and Ojong Diba (2019, section 5) or Lüpke (2018), show that the vagueness of a label like “solidarity” obscures the presence of more specific, locally salient sociopsychological dynamics in interaction that will not be accounted for in approaches emphasizing categorical aspects of identity.

A focus on the understanding of sociopsychological dynamics of this kind pervades a number of the chapters in this volume. For instance, Cobbinah hypothesizes that both ethnic and linguistic identities in the Lower Casamance region of Senegal have been fluid and scalable across different levels of geographic reach for centuries, and that this is indicative of the strategic uses that various populations have made of languages in order to align themselves with a given group, subgroup, or supergroup in times of need. Such fluid practices foreground the presence of multiple, potentially overlapping identities (see also Lüpke and Storch (2013, ch. 1)) and co-occur with a conceptualization of languages as being primarily associated with specific localities via what Lüpke (2018, 187) calls “patrimonial deixis,” where the founders of a village, or even a hamlet, identify themselves through the use of a certain named language, which grants to their descendants access to land rights and the ability to communicate with ancestors. That is, when speakers use a locale-specific patrimonial language, they are representing themselves as connected to the founding “clan” and, thereby, are attempting to affirm their rights to a land-based patrimony. Interestingly, the so-called strangers—that is, individuals associated with a given political unit but who are not viewed as descendants of a founding group—are not seen as illegitimate
inhabitants of these places, which would lead to them being ideologically “erased.” Rather, they simply do not have the same set of rights as those who can lay claim to the local patrimony. This ideological model is quite different from those based on a notion of “ancestral territorialization,” which assumes that the ancestral inhabitants of a place were linguistically homogeneous.

A different view is provided by Di Carlo and Neba in their discussion of the relationship between language and identity in traditional Bafut, in the North-West Region of Cameroon, in which they analyze the polity-wide endoglossic linguistic repertoire and question the kinds of identities attainable through adherence to traditional metapragmatics. This includes codes exclusively known and used by members of secret societies—an extreme form of elite closure (see Myers-Scotton 1993), one might argue—as well as the so-called Bafut royal register. These codes do not appear to reference categorical types of identities. Quite to the contrary, Di Carlo and Neba argue that all the codes populating the repertoires of individuals associated with Bafut society foreground relational identities, through which “one may identify oneself (or another person) by position in a relational web (a web of kinship, for example, or of friendship, patron-client ties, or teacher-student relations)” (Brubaker and Cooper (2000, 15)). The “royal register” is in fact shown to be quite distant from what one would normally expect from registers (see Agha 1998), and ultimately points to the ability of individuals to represent their “Bafutness” via linguistic knowledge that can only be obtained through prolonged stays in Bafut itself.

Similar findings are discussed in Ojong Diba’s chapter. Through the analysis of an extensive spoken corpus, she finds that, in Lower Fungom, local language ideologies dictate that alternations in speech between local languages during one and the same interaction are relatively rare and used to encode specific social meanings. In her analysis of a long interaction between a man named Kulani—the main participant in the research, who is a speaker of no less than six local languages plus English, CPE, and some French—and a man older than him, she observes how Kulani’s choice to stop using the older man’s primary language encodes his resentment for the older man’s subtle insinuation that Kulani is still a “child.” While accommodation theory (see, e.g., Giles, Coupland, and Coupland 1991) offers some possible hints for the interpretation of this interaction, the notion of relational identities provides a better approximation of an emic interpretation, thus facilitating further analysis of the metapragmatic knowledge of individuals from Lower Fungom.

While considerations of variation in language ideologies and processes of identity construction are found in many chapters in this volume, one important aspect of this issue that does not receive much attention is how they interact in ways that result in the creation of distinctive lexicogrammatical codes. It is hard to observe the formation of new codes directly, but the extent of
the linguistic diversity in many of the regions examined in this volume suggests that they must be able to form relatively rapidly under pressure for new identities to be expressed through linguistic difference (see, e.g., Di Carlo and Good 2014). The research note by Ndamsah included in this book contributes to our understanding of this topic by providing an initial documentation of a new code developed by speakers of a particular generation living in two villages in Cameroon otherwise associated with the Limbum language. This new code was given a specific name, Litâ, and it has a distinctive vocabulary, though, syntactically, it appears to be quite similar to Limbum. While Litâ did not become the primary language of any community, its existence is indicative of the presence of a cultural dynamic where identity construction and language construction operate in tandem and suggests that an important research priority in linguistically diverse rural areas would be to look for and document other instances of such “generational” codes. The clear similarities between a code like Litâ and the much better studied urban youth languages in Africa (see, e.g., Kießling and Mous (2004)) further suggests that rural patterns of language formation may be an important historical source for what has been observed in urban environments.

4.3 Methods and Tools

The lack of previous dedicated scholarship on both societal and individual multilingualism in nonurban contexts of Africa, together with the choice to ground research on this topic in a more strongly ethnographic approach in many chapters of this volume, has required the adaptation of existing methods and tools to fit the specific contexts under study. In order to highlight this, we have grouped several chapters together in a section focusing on research methods, though methodological considerations play a significant role in other chapters in this volume as well. Some of the methodological approaches discussed in this volume draw on work that is still in progress. However, even in such cases, they clearly represent significant advances over previous work and suggest clear directions for future research. Moreover, we hope that the diverse tools discussed in this volume—semi-structured interviews (Esene Agwara), matched-guise technique tests (Chenemo and Neba), analysis of recorded language use (Ngué Um, Makon, and Assomo; Ojong Diba; Tabe), and tools to support the assessment of multilingual competence (Mba and Nsen Tem)—will provide inspiration for those who are interested in exploring patterns of multilingualism within societies that have yet to see significant investigation of this kind, both in rural Africa and beyond.

Chenemo and Neba focus on the Lower Bafut region, which is politically subordinate to the Fondom of Bafut but where languages other than Bafut predominate in demographic terms. Many individuals from Lower Bafut
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speak Bafut in addition to a local language, but individuals identifying as Bafut only rarely speak the languages of Lower Bafut. In contrast to this clear hierarchical relationship holding between Bafut and the languages of Lower Bafut, there is no similar sociopolitical asymmetry among the Lower Bafut languages. This divergence has produced a sociolinguistic environment that can serve as a useful testing ground for examining language attitudes within rural communities, and Chenemo and Neba apply the matched-guise technique (Lambert et al. 1960) to explore this topic. This approach, originally developed in Western settings, involves making recordings of the same person speaking multiple languages and other people speaking just one language. These recordings are then played to listeners in a sequence that makes it unlikely that they would recognize the multilingual speaker as one and the same person. Listeners are then asked to judge the different speakers in various ways, such as whether they seemed more or less good looking, intelligent, kind, altruistic, and so on. This technique can then shed light on the stereotypes that hearing a certain language subconsciously evokes in listeners, by comparing the judgments made of the same speaker when they are speaking different languages.

To the best of our knowledge, the work described by Chenemo and Neba represents the first time the matched-guise technique has been used in a rural African setting. Being able to use it appropriately first required the administration of an ethnographically informed sociolinguistic survey, which was performed to establish a basic understanding of the local linguistic environment, including local language ideologies. These ideologies were analyzed through the contrast between two poles of potential variation, namely whether a language is associated with essentialist qualities or indexical ones. Essentialist ideologies link speakers of a given language to specific personal or moral characteristics, while indexical ideologies merely link speakers to a social group associated with the language without additional implications—that is, they are associated with relational identities of the sort discussed in section 4.2. After playing recordings of people speaking Bafut as well as Lower Bafut languages, a questionnaire was administered asking listeners for their impressions of the speaker across different dimensions, with answers classified as more essentialist or more indexical. For instance, listeners were asked whether the speaker seemed intelligent, and a strongly positive or negative answer was considered more essentialist, while an equivocal answer was considered more indexical. Among other things, their results indicate that Bafut was associated with a more essentialist ideology than the Lower Bafut languages. Their study cannot be considered definitive because the methodology employed is so new to this setting, and many details of its use need further consideration. Nevertheless, it establishes the utility of the matched-guise technique for exploring
language attitudes in rural multilingual areas and also yields insights into
the interplay of distinct kinds of language ideologies among rural communi-
ties that interact closely with each other.

Chapter 11, by Esene Agwara, provides important information on patterns
of multilingualism in the rural Lower Fungom region of Cameroon while also
raising significant methodological points. It is clear that a key tool for arriv-
ing at generalizations about rural multilingualism is the use of sociolinguistic
questionnaires. However, when working with rural African societies, which
are quite different from those of the developed world that have informed most
work in sociolinguistics, one must take care to ensure that the questionnaire
is designed to gather information on locally relevant categories and is also
administered in a manner that is appropriate in the cultural context. Esene
Agwara stresses the need for an ethnographic approach that, among other
things, involves spending significant time observing daily life in these com-
munities and making use of semi-structured interviews that allow participants
to answer questions freely rather than encouraging them to respond in prede-
termined ways. This helps reveal the locally salient sociolinguistic categories
that are not only of interest in and of themselves but also allow for more
consistent data collection since they draw on systems of categorization held
in common across a community, which the researcher can then translate into
scholarly categories as needed.

In the Lower Fungom case, this approach has been especially helpful for
collecting information on individuals’ multilingual repertoires. In particular,
they were asked to describe their multilingual competence using local nam-
ing conventions for individual lects, which are typically applied to linguistic
varieties associated with each of the region’s villages. Residents of Lower
Fungom have a very high awareness of lects at this level and are quite con-
sistent in how they refer to them. It is then fairly straightforward to associ-
ate these lects with the scholarly classification of the region’s languages to
get reliable information on reported patterns of multilingualism, some of
which are summarized in Esene Agwara’s chapter. Another advantage of this
approach to administering questionnaires is that their open-ended nature can
also reveal interesting new areas for data collection of which the researcher
would not otherwise be aware. In the Lower Fungom case, an example of
this was the discovery that people of the region often have more than one set
of names that are given to them by different individuals (e.g., they may have
one name given to them by their father and another name given to them by
their maternal grandfather). There is evidence for a connection between the
number of (sets of) names an individual has and the extent of their multilin-
gual repertoires. For instance, those with the highest number of names in the
survey showed a higher degree of multilingual and multilectal competence
than those with a lower number of names.
Also focusing on Lower Fungom, Mba and Nsen Tem explore an area of study that has essentially been completely unexamined, to the best of our knowledge. This is the assessment of multilingual competence in nonstandardized, unwritten, and little-known languages. The research described in the chapter was carried out by Nsen Tem and made use of three main tools. One is more or less identical in practical terms to the technique of recorded text testing (Casad 1974) but repurposed to support the testing of passive competence in multiple local languages rather than mutual intelligibility, which was the technique’s original goal. Listeners were tested for their comprehension of short texts in all the lects found in Lower Fungom. Active competence—that is, the ability to speak a certain language—was tested using two other tools. The first tool made use of 200-item wordlists elicited from self-reported multilingual speakers and compared what they produced to reference wordlists obtained from native speakers of the various languages involved. The second employed visual stimuli in the form of drawings depicting scenes of daily life in Lower Fungom. Participants were asked to describe what they saw using the different languages they reported being able to speak, and their answers were judged by native speakers. Scoring systems were devised as part of this research to allow the results to be compared across participants.

From a methodological point of view, one of the most interesting aspects of Mba and Nsen Tem’s chapter is that it highlights the active role that research participants must play in the work when the languages under analysis are still poorly described and where there are no researchers with mastery of all the languages being investigated. For instance, the administration of the visual stimulus task in the study required Nsem Tem to devote time to the selection of appropriate judges and to devise the best ways to work with them in the field. Mba and Nsen Tem acknowledge that their work could not consider all the details and potential risks involved in adopting this approach. Nevertheless, it seems clear that these exploratory efforts have provided the foundations of a new line of research on multilingualism in rural environments.

5. INDIGENOUS MULTILINGUALISM AND LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT

A final overarching theme to the volume is the relationship between forms of small-scale, indigenous multilingualism and language endangerment. This theme is discussed explicitly in several of the chapters, and it is implicit in other chapters as well.

Multilingualism is, in fact, often cited as a precondition for endangerment. Well-known scales of endangerment—such as Fishman’s Graded Intergenerational Dislocation Scale (Fishman 1991), which is also used, in a slightly
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different format, in recent editions of Ethnologue (see Lewis and Simons 2010)—pivot around the idea that the degree of endangerment of a language is directly correlated with the number and types of domains of use in which speakers have replaced it with another language. As one might expect, this domain-oriented view posits a scale of “modern reward-power” (Fishman (2004, 427)). A language being replaced in domains associated with a higher degree of modern reward-power, such as mass media or governmental operations at the national level, is not seen as strongly indicative of endangerment. When replacement is instead found in domains associated with lower degrees of modern reward-power, such as among members of a family or within a neighborhood, this is a sign of more advanced shift and, thereby, language endangerment.

Ngué Um, Makon, and Assomo consider the proposals that this domain-based view of endangerment has produced in the field of language revitalization. After raising questions about the ability of this approach to account for the dynamic unfolding of individual multilingual behaviors in actual language use (see also section 4.1), they point out that “different lects may map onto different social domains, but also onto different communicative content and ends.” They then suggest that revitalization initiatives in multilingual settings should build not only on the expansion of the domains of usage of a given language but also on “emotional factors” that may influence language choice. They place particular emphasis on the possibility that, by first identifying the frames of discourse in which a target language is used more frequently in a community, this knowledge can then be leveraged to support language revitalization endeavors.

From a slightly different point of view, Cobbinah also discusses the relevance of his findings for the maintenance of the highly localized languages of Lower Casamance. Cobbinah’s ecological, relatively large-scale approach to analyzing his field-based data allows him to consider a key concept in this regard: the different degrees of centralization of power in the various societies of the Casamance region at large. On one end of this continuum, there are highly centralized polities, of which the Mandinka and their language serve as an emblematic example. These polities have exerted pressure on previously diverse groups to assimilate, as has occurred with several formerly Báinounk-speaking and Balant-speaking populations that converted to Islam and adopted the Mandinka language, culture, and ethnic identity. On the opposite end of the continuum, there are small, independent polities of the “confederational type” that are especially common in the western part of Lower Casamance. Here the local communities are first and foremost “confederated” via ritual institutions, such as the bukut initiation that Cobbinah describes. These institutions bind these communities together in multiple ways, including through marriage ties and trade relations, and therefore increase the opportunities for people to be exposed to many highly localized
languages. This type of society, Cobbinah claims, favors multilingualism as a tool for reproducing the essentially egalitarian status held by the various small-scale polities and groups. Contrary to the generally held view that multilingualism is a precursor to endangerment, among such communities, multilingual practices are actually central to the maintenance of these small languages (see also Di Carlo and Good 2017).

This then leads us to a final lesson that can be drawn from the chapters in this volume with respect to rural multilingualism in Africa. The rural multilingual societies described here have potentially important insights to offer linguists and speaker communities throughout the world on how socioeconomically marginalized languages can be maintained even in cases where speakers also begin to make extensive use of other languages in their day-to-day lives. In particular, they point to the existence of diverse systems for linguistic valorization that can help ensure that languages of all kinds hold social value across a variety of cultural contexts and make them more likely to be maintained long into the future.

NOTES

1. Di Carlo and Good both contributed to the conceptualization and text of this introduction. However, the ordering of the names should be understood to mean that Di Carlo is the first author rather than this being due to alphabetic ordering.

2. The conception of a sociolinguistic space subdivided into three macrodomains—state institutions (or prestige), intergroup communication, and “solidarity”—with one language associated with each of them has resonated across the continent to the degree that, following the case of Tanzania discussed by Abdulaziz Mkilifi (1972), other African countries have been described using the same or a very similar framework, including Kenya (Whiteley 1973), Ghana (Johnson 1975), the Republic of the Congo (Woods 1994), and Zambia (Spitulnik 1998). Recent publications such as Zsiga, Boyer, and Kramer (2014) show that this model is still seen as being applicable throughout Africa.

3. Unlike the norm for studies on African multilingualism, colonial languages are conspicuously absent from this list.

4. Participants were aware that they were being recorded, and this may have increased the perceived pressure for them to behave “properly.”

REFERENCES


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