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RESEARCH ARTICLE

LANGUAGE CHOICE IN COMMUNICATION IN A MULTILINGUAL SETTING: A CASE STUDY OF STUDENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST, GHANA

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ABSTRACT

Contrary to what is often believed, most of the world's population is bilingual or multilingual. Monolingualism is characteristic only of a minority of the world's populace. Multilingualism is becoming a social phenomenon governed by the needs of globalization and cultural openness. Owing to easy access to information via the Internet, exposure to multiple languages is assuming rapid frequency, and giving rise to the need for people to acquire more and more languages. Each of the world's nations has groups of individuals living within its borders who use other languages in addition to the national language to function in their everyday lives. A group of people living and working together in close proximity enforced by an institution like the university communicate with one another both formally and informally by linguistic means. Language is therefore the vehicle of communication of information and it is also the channel of establishing and maintaining relationship with other people. Language is also a medium of meaningful interaction among individuals in a social context. The University of Cape Coast community is multilingual. The population is made up of students and workers drawn from the heterogeneous ethnic regions of Ghana. The linguistic situation is such that many different languages co-exist and individuals speak more than one language. Due to the multilingual nature of the University of Cape Coast, various language choices are made in communication. The current study shows the pattern of language choice that exist in the University of Cape Coast community and this is manifested in the use of unmixed codes, a switch from one language to another or the mixing of languages.

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INTRODUCTION

Ghana has a uniquely complex linguistic landscape. Many different indigenous languages are employed for communication in diverse context of situations. Due to the different languages spoken in Ghana, English serves as lingua franca in communication. In a multilingual setting like Ghana, Wardhaugh (1986) has observed that people are nearly always faced with choosing a language when they speak and they may switch from one language to another or mix codes. Code choice is sometimes perceived in terms of an individual who speaks two or more whole languages and has to choose which one to use. However, the phenomenon of language choice also occurs in terms of variation within the same language. In this case, a speaker chooses which set of variants to use within a single language in any given situation (Fasold, 1984). In multilingual communities like Ghana where the majority of the citizenry can speak more than one language, sometimes the situation determines the choice of code.

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In this instance, interlocutors speak one language in one situation and another in a different one. This type of language choice is termed situational code-switching (Wardhaugh, 1986). When a change in a conversation demands a change in the language employed, we have an instance of metaphorical code switching (ibid). The switch from one language to another in communication is often quite subconscious; interlocutors may not be conscious that they have switched from one code to another code. Another kind of language choice is the mixing of languages in communication which occurs when words, phrases or large units of one language are used while a speaker is basically using another language (Fasold, 1984). In code-mixing, interlocutors employ both languages simultaneously in such a way that they change from one language to the other in the process of a single utterance. According to Wardhaugh (1986) two speakers who have access to two languages as they communicate, either by code-switching or code-mixing are employing a third code. The issues of code choice and other functions of language have been regarded as products of the language contact concept which emanates from multilingual speech communities. The current paper is an investigation into the nature of code choice in a multilingual context; an academic speech community in Ghana, the University of Cape Coast.

THE LINGUISTIC SITUATION IN GHANA: Among the indigenous languages in Ghana, the most widely spoken of them is the Akan Language which comprises variants of Twi and Fante (Forson, 1979). Akan is the dominant language in the Central, Western, Ashanti, Eastern, and Brong Ahafo Regions of Ghana. It is most widely distributed geographically. The Ewe Language is the next most important in terms of the number of native speakers. Some of the other indigenous languages are Ga, Efutu and Nzema in the south and Dagbani, Dagaare, konkonba and Frafra in the north. Speakers of these local languages employ them for communication in homes, offices, schools, markets, in the streets, at festivals, funerals, naming and marriage ceremonies, durbars, at the beaches, and so on. English is the language of wider communication in Ghana and it is used side by side the indigenous languages. The English Language is sometimes code mixed with the local language in informal spoken discourses. Where participants do not share a common Ghanaian language, they are forced to use English, if they are educated. English brings people from different linguistic backgrounds together. It is so closely associated with education that it is generally considered as the language of educated people. English is the official language of government, the judiciary and education. It is employed in formal situations like in churches, courts, schools, parliament, offices, by the media, at meetings and for public speech delivery. Apart from Akan, no other Ghanaian language has more speakers than English. Pidgin owes its origin to the coming together of people of different linguistic backgrounds for the purpose of trade. Pidgin is part of the linguistic configuration of Ghana. It is mostly used by uneducated Ghanaians who have to communicate with others they did not share a common Ghanaian language. Pidgin is widely spoken in the armed forces, in the police service, at work places and in schools and colleges in Ghana (Torto, 2000). The use of pidgin signals informality and solidarity. The following is a linguistic map of Ghana from ethnologue (2009) showing the languages of Ghana.

In Ghana, there exist some advances in an attempt to take stock of its repertoire of languages. Kropp-Dakubu (1988) and Dolphyne (1988) had undertaken quite detailed analyses of the language situation in Ghana. However, most of these were concentrated in the southern parts of the country. These previous efforts were complemented with a quite concise sociolinguistic introduction to northern Ghana. Different sources give different figures for the number of languages of Ghana. This is because of different classifications of varieties as either language or dialects. From the linguistic map above, ethnologue, for example, had listed a total of sixty-seven (67) indigenous languages (Lewis, 2009). Eleven of the indigenous languages had the status of government sponsored languages: Ewe, Dagomba, Dagaare, Ga, Nzema, Dangme, Gonja, Kasem, Fante, Twi and Guruni. These government sponsored languages were supported by the Bureau of Ghana Languages. During the periods when Ghanaian languages were used in primary education, these were the languages which were used. Apart from some West African languages such as the Chadic language, Hausa and some Mande languages which are spoken in Ghana but which may not be said to be indigenous to the country, a third group of languages which are clearly non-indigenous to the country can be identified. English is the dominant language in this group and though foreign to Ghana, English is one of the most important languages in the country. English has been used as an official language since the country

was colonized by the British and still enjoys an overwhelming position as the language of education and of mass communication vis-à-vis the indigenous languages. Although some local languages, especially the government-sponsored ones are beginning to challenge this position in their respective.



regions, English is still very widely used in Ghana if we consider all its forms; from pidgin to standard educated English. Other European and foreign languages include French which is taught as a school subject and spoken among educated bilinguals and Arabic which is taught in Islamic schools and spoken in Lebanese communities.

LANGUAGE CHOICE IN GHANA: According to a view widely held by linguists, a native speaker of a given language has in some respects a level of skill which a second language learner can hardly reliably accomplish. In recent years, linguistic research has focused attention on the use of widely known world languages such as English as lingua franca. In this situation, most speakers of the common language are functionally multilingual. In Ghana, research has shown that there are three types of code choice: unmixed Ghanaian language, mixed English and Ghanaian language and unmixed English (Owusu-Ansah, 1997). Ure and Ellis (1982) describe the framework of code choice in Ghana in terms of High, Middle and Low. *High* corresponds to English, *Middle* to mixed English and Ghanaian languages and *Low* to pure Ghanaian languages. The Unmixed languages are employed for communication in highly formal situations as in a Ghanaian chief's address to the public in the Akan Language and news broadcasting or parliamentary proceedings in English. However, both the Ghanaian languages and English

are also used in informal discourse situations. Mixed codes and Pidgin are employed as the level of formality declines. In code-mixing English items are introduced into the local languages.

The linguistic configuration of Ghana is quite complex. Some Ghanaians can be described as monolinguals. These people have not had formal education and for that matter cannot speak or write English. They have not learnt any other local language apart from their mother tongues. There are bilinguals who speak English and their mother tongues. For example, Dagbani-English bilinguals and so on. Some uneducated Ghanaians can speak just two indigenous languages. For instance, in the capital city of Ghana, Accra, many Gas can speak Akan. There are therefore many Ga-Akan bilinguals in Accra. Most Ghanaians can speak three to five languages. Some can speak Ga, Akan, Ewe, Dagbani and English. Contact with different ethnic regions and inter-ethnic marriages may result in the acquisition of other local languages. Forson (1968) is a description of the sociolinguistic situation in Ghana, with a focus on Akan-English bilingualism. According to Forson, Akan-English bilinguals can normally be said to have at least three languages to choose from: Akan, English and Akan mixed with English words, phrases, clauses and sentences. Forson (ibid) points out that the situations where even the most highly educated Akans use or find themselves forced to employ *unmixed* Akan include: when talking to illiterate Akan relations and acquaintances, when participating in a traditional ritualistic performance like libation, dirges and worship, when addressing an Akan community, when presenting folktales or riddles at a gathering which is predominantly Akan, when participating in radio or TV programmes in Akan and when bargaining with uneducated Akan traders. Some of the instances Forson cites when the Akan-English bilinguals use English are when in the company of educated non-Akans, when speaking to a gathering of educated people, when teaching in a classroom setting and for official or formal interactions.

He reports that the Akan-English bilinguals mix the two languages when communicating in the environment of other Akan-English bilinguals. In the instances of mixing, Forson reveals that it is Akan, which is mixed with various items of English and not the other way. It is also Forson's view that the quantity of English elements in the speech of the Akan-English bilingual depends on his knowledge of English and that in an informal discourse, mixing Akan with English depends on the educational backgrounds of the participants. He establishes that mixing occurs in all free discussions and other informal discourses, irrespective of the difference in social status of the interlocutors. Forson concludes that mixing is part of the linguistic behaviour of most Ghanaians. Forson (1979) also postulates that a switch from one language to another (code-switching) occurs in communication in Ghana and this is the product of bilingualism or multilingualism. Forson observed that in code-switching the interlocutors share the same language in contact and he established that the Akan-English bilingual is equipped with three tongues; Akan, English and Akan-English code-switching. According to Forson, these tongues complement one another in offering the bilingual three distinct language choices for separate categories of language use.

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Forson's idea of a third tongue is also the view of Wardhaugh (1986) and Owusu-Ansah (1992). Wardhaugh refers to Forson's third tongue as third code and Owusu-Ansah describes it as a *contact variety*. Forson points out that the sociolinguistic factors which characterise normal code-switching are that there should be at least two tongues of which the non-native should be socially more prestigious than the local variety, the participants should be bilingual in the languages involved in the code-switching, the subject matter should not be typically indigenous and the discourse should be informal, unprepared and spoken. Forson (1979) also reveals that the participants in normal Akan-English code-switching consider themselves to be communicating in Akan. The discourse usually starts in Akan and as it progresses the interlocutors freely employ English items of varying lengths. However, if a subject matter is not easily communicated in English, it does not attract code-switching. Discourses involving topics that come under politics, academic subjects, international sports are usually in English because they are difficult to discuss or describe in monolingual Akan. Therefore, any discussion of these in Akan turns into code-switching.

A situation of diglossia also exists in Ghana where two distinct varieties of a language are kept quite apart in their functions. One variety is employed in one set of circumstance while the other in an entirely different set (Wardhaugh, 1986). For instance, in Ghana, local varieties of English are employed for conversation among friends, but a different variety that conforms more to native variety may be used to perform a formal task such as instruction in schools. In other words, in addition to the community's everyday variety of English, a second variety, a highly codified version of English is employed in formal communication. This is diglossia from the perspective of Ferguson (1959). In the original proposal of the concept, two varieties of Arabic were used in different social situations. For instance, Classical Arabic was the appropriate code in the mosque situation but spoken Arabic was used in informal discourse situations. As originally formulated by Ferguson, the notion of diglossia refers to the functional differentiation of two language varieties co-existing in one speech community. Apart from the functional aspect, Ferguson's definition emphasized the stability of the language

situation and the hierarchical order of the varieties: One variety being labelled high and another low. The high is the standard, prestigious, acquired formally at school and has a literary heritage. On the other hand, the low is the non-standard, less prestigious, acquired informally and has no literary characteristics. Fishman (1967) also proposed another version of diglossia which also exists in Ghana. According to him, two whole languages are employed differently. One is used in formal situations and the other in informal circumstances. In certain social situations in Ghana, the local languages are used in informal situations while English is employed in formal ones. In an attempt to reinterpret and expand the notion of diglossia, Fishman made two important points. First, he affirmed the functional allocation of languages or language varieties by placing less emphasis on the importance of the situation with only two languages and allowed for the presence of other languages. For Fishman, diglossia refers to the functional distribution of languages in terms of hierarchy. Second, Fishman succinctly distinguished between the sociological situation where the two languages co-exist in one and the same speech community and the psychological situation where the two languages co-exist within one and the same individual (Berger, 1990).

THE HEGEMONY OF ENGLISH IN GHANA: Given the fact that in Ghana, literacy in English is acquired through formal education, and that a sizable percentage of children have no access to formal education, it is not surprising that the English-speaking population is not a large one. However, what English lacks in numbers, it makes up for in prestige, status and functionality. Hence, language policy discourse in Ghana revolves around the role of English as an official language. One consequence of making a language an official language is the status it confers on the language and its speakers. The official language becomes dominant and other languages become disadvantaged and policies affecting such official languages affect the viability and stability of other languages used (Herriman & Burnaby, 1996). As an official language in Ghana, English holds a dominant position over the indigenous languages. In practically all African countries colonized by Britain, English remains an official or co-official language. Attempts to promote the use of any other language as national or official have resulted either in failure or only limited success.

In Ghana, English is employed, consistently, in television and radio broadcasts, in the daily newspapers and magazines, in almost all the administrative and legal documents published within the country, as well as in all official transactions (Huber, 1999). In Ghana, English enjoys great prestige as it is seen as a language of power and security. Competence in English gives one the power to exercise authority; it is key to one's advancement in society. A person who wants to feel secure learns English as it is one of the requirements for employment in many areas (Saah, 1986). Educated politicians who visit their constituencies would rather speak English than use the dominant language of the area and educated chiefs would speak English to their subjects whenever they have the privilege of a visit by a minister of state or the president of the country (Sackey, 1997). Under normal circumstances, it is unlikely that a student would choose to learn a language that does not offer the prospect of a good job or social advancement.

Many parents in Ghana send their children to English-medium schools (Andoh-kumi, 1999). Some parents insist on their

children speaking English at home without regard to the indigenous language of the community. The idea is to position the children for a good education and prospects of economic advancement. Given the prevailing attitude that English-medium education is best, it is not surprising that parents opt for it in the belief that the earlier a child is exposed to instruction in English, the better will be his or her chances of success in higher cycles of education. Speakers of other languages are, to some extent, responsible for the hegemony of English, particularly in terms of their attitudes to their own languages. A family that abandons the mother tongue in favour of English as the medium of communication in the home cannot at the same time complain that its mother tongue has been marginalized in other domains.

It is worth noting that there is a section of the Ghanaian populace who disregard the importance of English in Ghana (Saah, 1986). For them, the status of English as the only official language of the country is an explicit indication of its dependence on the British administration, both culturally and economically. Another section of Ghanaians also considers the indigenous languages more apt to express traditional values and cultural issues, rather than academic matters. On the other hand, English is associated with western style of life; it is connected to the ideas of prosperity and economic development. A certain degree of competence in English is a requisite for holding important and remunerative national offices.

Among the indigenous languages in Ghana, Akan is widely spoken (Torto, 2000). Akan enjoys considerable prestige and is currently employed in television and radio programmes, religious ceremonies, in politics, within the judicial system and so forth (Guerini, 2007). Minority local language speakers in Ghana feel threatened not only by the hegemony of English but also by a vehicular language like Akan. Linguistic loyalty tends to arise from resentment against a dominant ethnic group like the Asantes', whose native language has been accorded widespread prominence and prestige since the period of colonial rule (Turchetta, 1996). The case of Akan as a nationwide vehicular language is in conformity with the domain theory in language shift (Fishman 1964, 1991): the idea that when one language gets an expanded domain of use over others there is the tendency for bilingual speakers to shift to it. Dakubu (2005) reports that there is a perception among the Ga people of Ghana that they are losing their land, culture and language. The Gas feel their language is dying. This feeling is the result of usurpation of the functionality of the Ga language by other ethnic groups which have migrated to the capital city of Ghana where the Ga language is supposed to dominate. Such conflicting attitudes by speakers of the indigenous languages tend to generate a situation in which linguistic policy reforms are executed intermittently in order to avoid ethnic tensions. In comparison with other parts of the world where English is spoken, the language still plays a prominent role. In South Africa, where nine African languages are recognized as co-official languages with English and Afrikaans, English stands out as the dominant language. Furthermore, compared with English-medium system of education elsewhere, education in an African language does not confer any significant benefits, either in terms of social mobility or better economic prospects (Alexander, 2001; Kamwangamalu, 1997).

Consequently, there is increasing rate in enrolment in English-medium schools, with the result that loyalty to the mother

tongue by the younger generation is weakening and competence in the mother tongue is decreasing (Deklerk, 1999). Although it has been suggested that neither Afrikaans nor most of the indigenous African languages are in immediate danger, the point has also been made that language shift towards English is clearly taking place at an accelerated rate, and the number of domains in which languages other than English can be used is rapidly declining (Reagan, 2001). In Japan, where English is not a central basis for deciding who has access to economic resources and political power (Tollefson, 2000); it is still the case that English is prestigious particularly in international business relations and communication. In other countries, where English is used for internal purposes, it is a major determinant of position and power. In Europe, where there are well-entrenched national languages, it is said that the popularity of English is also a looming threat (Dicker, 1996). It is reported that in Europe, English has become almost a lingua franca in, for example, Scandinavia and the Netherlands, and is the preferred first foreign language taught in schools in virtually all of Europe (Hoffman, 1988). In Switzerland, French Swiss are said to be more attracted to English than to German, while German Swiss also tend to favour English over French as a second language (Dicker, 1996). English has enormous prestige mainly because of its instrumental value. The impact of globalization has also accelerated the use of English in Europe. In Ghana, lack of familiarity with English constitutes one of the greatest impediments; it affects access to education, public services, jobs, political positions and effective functioning in society. The hegemony of English may be said to be beneficial when one considers its communicative and instrumental function, its role as lingua franca and its global attributes (Pennycook, 1994). However, the English language in Ghana poses a direct threat to the very existence of other languages (Pennycook, 1994) and to the country's linguistic and cultural diversity (Webb, 1996).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design: The research design employed in the present study is an integrated method involving both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Qualitative research design offers the researcher the chance to study naturally occurring linguistic phenomena. With this design, descriptions of observations are expressed largely in non-numerical terms. Nonetheless, quantitative research uses specific measurement of variables. This provides the connection between empirical observation and mathematical expression of quantitative relationships.

Research Instruments: The instruments used for data collection were observation and questionnaire; however, observation was the main research instrument used in the present study. It provided an empirical basis for capturing language used in its social context. The methods of observation used were participant and non-participant. The investigator interacted with the research target population and observed closely the use of language in various contexts of situation. The questionnaire research tool helped the investigator solicit information for both demographic and sociolinguistic data of the study. The researcher had a checklist in place to ensure that respondents provided accurate information. A number of follow-ups were also done in order to retrieve all the questionnaire handouts administered.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This segment of the current study deals with the analysis of data and the discussion of the research findings. A preliminary analysis was conducted to obtain quantitative information on the responses of informants. The discussion was done with reference to the objectives of study. Table 1 shows that many different languages co-exist in the University of Cape Coast. These diverse languages are employed in communication in discourse situations. The ethnicity of respondents depicts the multilingual nature of the research target population. The university community is made up of people from different ethnic backgrounds. As a result, many different indigenous languages are spoken in the university. Most of the informants could speak two or more of the Ghanaian Languages. On the other hand, in monolingual situations, a Ga and an Ewe could not communicate in view of the fact that the two languages are mutually unintelligible. The English Language, however, cuts across ethnic barriers; it functions as lingua franca. English facilitated communication between interlocutors of different ethnic backgrounds. Among the Ghanaian languages, Akan had the highest number of speakers. In fact, virtually everybody in the university community can speak some form of Akan. Speakers of other Ghanaian languages can speak it in addition to their mother tongues. The position of Akan vis-a-vis the other Ghanaian languages makes the former a potential national language. Almost all the informants spoke English and their mother tongues. There were therefore Akan-

Table 1: Languages spoken by respondents

Languages	Number of respondents
Twi	272
Fante	143
Ga	90
Dangbe	18
Ewe	36
Nzema	11
Dabgani	6
Frafra	6
Gruni	1
Dagaare	1
Wala	5
Kasem	2
Gonja	0
Konkonba	0
Hausa	27
English	276
French	78
Pidgin	90

Table 2: Mixing Ghanaian language with English

Yes or No	Number of respondents
Yes	215
No	95

Table 3. Switching from English to a Ghanaian language

Yes or No	Number of respondents
Yes	167
No	140

Table 4. Switching from a Ghanaian language to English

Yes or No	Number of respondents
Yes	229
No	84

English, Ewe-English, Dagbani-English, Dagaare-English bilinguals and so on. There were also individuals who could speak two or three Ghanaian languages in addition to the English Language. There were Akan-Ga-English, Ga-Ewe-English, Akan-Dagaare-English, Akan-Ga-Ewe-English, Dagbani-Frafra-Dagaare-English multilinguals and so on. Table 2 shows that mixing the Ghanaian languages with English is part of the linguistic behavior of the informants of the present study. Most of the informants explained that mixing the local language with English occurred because certain registers in English did not exist in the Ghanaian language and this made code mixing somehow unavoidable. Furthermore, many respondents were not very proficient in the local languages and this also brought about mixing.

The research revealed that in mixing it was the Ghanaian language that was mixed with English words, phrases and other expressions but not the other way round. People who can speak two or more languages sometimes switch from one code to another in discourse situations. Switching from one language to another is often quite subconscious; interlocutors may not be conscious that they have switched from one code to another code (Torto, 2012). In a multilingual setting, code-switching occurs naturally. Code-switching may occur as a result of a change in the topic of discourse or the presence of another person in a conversation. It is worth noting that tables 3 and 4 above shows that the majority of the informants (396) are conscious of code-switching in their speeches while the minority (220) are unaware that they code-switch. Switching from English to the Ghanaian language or vice-versa occurred in most situations in the university. For instance, the presence of a third person in a dialogue in English triggered off a situation of code switching when this new person who joined the conversation switched to a Ghana language common to one of the interlocutors.

CONCLUSION

The University of Cape Coast is a multilingual speech community. The population consists of students and workers drawn from the heterogeneous ethnic regions in Ghana. As a result, many different languages co-exist and individuals speak more than one language. The findings of the study revealed that different language choices exist in the University community of Cape Coast and this ranges from unmixed Ghanaian language or English, mixed Ghanaian language and English or vice versa to a switch from English to a Ghanaian language or vice versa. The research target population consists of monolinguals, bilinguals and multilinguals. The co-existence of English and the indigenous languages in Ghana in general and the University community of Cape Coast in particular projects English as the most prestigious and the only official language of Ghana, a privileged position that the colonial language has enjoyed since independence till the present time. Language choice and language use issues have been regarded as products of the language contact phenomenon which results from the co-existence of different languages in a speech community.

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