Language Choice in Communication in a Multilingual Setting: A Case Study of a Cross Section of First Year Students of the University of Cape Coast, Ghana

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Abstract

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. Language is the means of communicating 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 (Gregory, 1978). 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. The current study revealed that due to the multilingual nature of the University of Cape Coast various language choices are made in communication. The choice of language also involved a switch from one language to another or the mixing of languages.

Keywords: Multilingualism, language choice, indigenous languages, communication

Introduction

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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 and Tucker (1999) posits that multilingual speakers outnumber monolingual speakers globally. 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.

Multilingual speakers have acquired and maintained at least one language during childhood. This first language (L1), sometimes also referred to as the mother tongue, is acquired without formal education. In linguistics, first language acquisition is closely related to the concept of a "native speaker". 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, or the shared common language of professional and commercial communities. In lingua franca situations, most speakers of the common language are functionally multilingual. A further possibility is that a child may become naturally multilingual by having a mother and father with separate languages being brought up in a third language environment. An example of this may be an English-speaking father married to a French-speaking mother with the family living in Hong Kong, where the community language (and primary language of education) is Cantonese. If the child goes to a Cantonese medium school from a young age, it is probable that the child could become multilingual.

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In early times, when most people were members of small language communities, it was necessary to know two or more languages for trade or any other dealings outside one's own town or village, and this holds good today in places of high linguistic diversity such as Sub-Saharan Africa and India. Some linguists have estimated that 50% of the population of Africa is multilingual. In Ghana, there exist some advances in an attempt to take stock of its repertoire of languages. Kropp-Dakubu (1988) and Dolphyne (1988) have undertaken quite detailed analyses of the language situation in Ghana. However, most of these were concentrated in the southern parts of the country. Later, 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. *Ethnologue* (2009), for example, lists a total of 67 languages (Lewis, 2009). Like many ex-colonies in Africa, the official language of Ghana is the English language. Eleven languages have the status of government sponsored languages; these are: Ewe, Dagomba, Dagaaare, Ga, Nzema, Dangme, Gonja and Kasem, Fante, Twi and Guruni. These government sponsored languages are 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

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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 known as and spoken in Lebanese communities.

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 a multilingual community like Ghana where some people can speak more than one language, sometimes the situation determines the choice of code. 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).

In another way, 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

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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 LINGUISTIC SITUATION IN GHANA

Among the indigenous languages in Ghana, the most widely spoken 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

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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 English 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. The use of pidgin signals informality and solidarity. The following figure is a linguistic map of Ghana from ethnoloque (2009) showing the languages of Ghana.

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1 Abron
2 Adangbe
3 Adele
4 Ahanta
5 Akan (4)
6 Akposo
7 Animere
8 Anufo
9 Anyin
10 Avatime
11 Awutu
12 Bimoba
13 Bissa
14 Bondoukou
    Kulango
15 Buli
16 Chakali
17 Chala (2)
18 Cherepon
19 Chumburung (3)
20 Dagbani
21 Dangme (2)
22 Deg (2)
23 Delo
24 Dwang
25 Éwé
26 Farefare
27 Ga
28 Gikyode
29 Gonja (4)
30 Gua
31 Hanga
32 Jwira-Pepesa
33 Kamara
34 Kantosi (3)
35 Kasem
36 Konkomba (2)
37 Konni
38 Kplang
39 Krache
40 Kusaal
41 Larteh
42 Lelemi
43 Ligbi
44 Logba
45 Mampruli
46 Nafaanra
47 Nawuri
48 Nkonya
49 Ntcham
50 Nyangbo
51 Nzema
52 Paasaal (2)
53 Safaliba
54 Sehwi
55 Sekpele
56 Selee
57 Siwu
58 Southern
    Birifor
59 Southern
    Dagaare
60 Tafi
61 Tampulma (2)
62 Tumulung
    Sisaala
63 Tuwuli
64 Vagla
65 Wali
66 Wasa
67 Western Sisaala

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GHANA

BURKINA FASO

BENIN

CÔTE DIVOIRE

TOGO

Accra

Lake Volta

Atlantic Ocean

WIDESPREAD LANGUAGES
Akan
Éwé
Ghanaian Sign Language
Hausa
Maasina Fulfulde

OFFICIAL LANGUAGE
English

Language Families
Gur   Mande
Kwa

Notes:
1. White areas are sparsely populated or uninhabited.
2. Brackets show the number of times a language's
   number appears on map, if more than once.

0   25   50   75   100 km

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Language Choice in Ghana

There are three types of language choice in Ghana: unmixed Ghanaian language, mixed English and Ghanaian language and unimixed English (Owusu-Ansah, 1997). Ure and Ellis (1982) describe the framework of language 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 languages and Pidgin are used as the level of formality declines. In language mixing (code-mixing), English items are introduced into the local languages. It is worth noting that in Ghana some people are 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. Another group of Ghanaians are multilingual; they 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

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words, phrases, clauses and sentences. Forson 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 include the following: 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 free discussions and other informal discourses, irrespective of the difference in social status of the interlocutors. Forson concludes that mixing languages in communication in discourse situations is part of the linguistic life 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

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language in contact and he establishes 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.

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.

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 consistently employed in television and radio broadcasts, in 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 a 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

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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 its 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).

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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 that have migrated to the capital city of Ghana where the Ga language is suppose 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 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

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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. Observation 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 helped the investigator solicit information for both demographic and sociolinguistic data of the research. 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.

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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
Guruni	1
Dagaare	1
Wala	5
Kasem	2
Gonja	0
Konkonba	0
Hausa	27
English	276
French	78
Pidgin	90

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,

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however, cuts across ethnic barriers; it functions as lingua franca. English facilitated communication between interlocutors of different ethnic backgrounds.

Among the Ghanaian languages, Twi and Fante (variants of the Akan language) 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-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: Mixing Ghanaian language with English

Yes or No	Number of respondents
Yes	215
No	95

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

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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.

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

People who can speak two or more languages sometimes switch from one language to another in discourse situations. Switching from one language to another is often quite

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subconscious; interlocutors may not be conscious that they have switched from one code to another code (Torto, 2011). 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 current research 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 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. As an official language in Ghana, English holds a dominant position over the indigenous languages. Attempts to promote the use of any other language as national or official have resulted either in failure or only limited success. Speakers of

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Ghanaian languages are, to some extent, responsible for the hegemony of English, particularly in terms of their attitudes to their own languages.

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