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Language Contact And Language Choice Among The Frafra People In Damongo In The Savannah Region Of Ghana

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Abstract

This study explored language choice for informal interactions of the Frafra people of the Upper East Region of Ghana, who migrated in the early 1960s to settle in Damongo in the then West Gonja District in the Northern region of Ghana for farming among the Gonja of the migration destination. As is often the case in multilingual communities, a speaker needs to make the right language choice to be able to communicate with others. This study therefore investigated the language use of the migrant settlers in their new environment. The main objective of this study was first to determine the survival or otherwise of Grune and to account for the choice of a particular language for informal interactions between migrant settlers (the Frafra) and native people of Damongo. Analysis of the data was done within the general framework of communication accommodation theory and the constructivist paradigm. A questionnaire was used to collect data from 263 participants in 6 Frafra communities around Damongo in the West Gonja Municipality. The main findings of the study are that among the Frafra, Grune has been maintained and is widely spoken regardless of generation, Hausa and Grune by older generation of settlers and English, Gonja and Hausa by younger generations. There is no one dominant language for informal interactions between migrant settlers and the Gonjas. At the same time, the younger generation code-switches or code-mixes English, Hausa, Grune and Gonja. In spite of this, Hausa remains the most preferred language for informal interactions by the older settler generation with Gonjas for informal interactions.

Keywords: language contact, settler, informal interaction, Gonja, Frafra.

1.0 Introduction

In sociolinguistics, language contact is one of the most studied areas, especially between migrant group languages and native ones. Dominant languages in specific areas are sometimes not only as a result of native speakers but the acceptance and adoption of that language by migrants too. Social context of

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language use is organised into a variety of domains that depict the social life of the people and usually requiring the choice of a language(s) for a particular domain. According to Holmes (2013), there is a mapping of one language to one domain but in highly multilingual communities, more than one language may be used in a particular domain. This is done by code-switching and/or code-mixing. This means that people's choice of language may differ even in the same domain. However, a number of social factors such as family, friendship, education, religion, identity, people of the same ethnicity, age and employment play a crucial role in the choice of a particular language in a particular domain (Mahama, 2015; Batibo, 2005). Fishman (1972) is of the view that topic, role relation and locality are influential in the domain of language choice of the speaker. Some studies (Labov, 1972; Fasold, 1987) show that there is a relationship between domains of language use and language distribution in multilingual speech communities.

There have also been attempts to categorise domains of language use. As a result, Fasold (1987) classifies them as official and unofficial domains whereas Batibo (2005) describes the domains as high public space, middle public space and low public space in triglossic speech communities. Others have simply used the domains themselves. Parasher (1980) in his study of language choice in two Indian cities used seven domains (family, friendship, neighbourhood, transactions, education, government and employment). Of these some were made up of clusters. Similarly, Omoniyi (1994) in his examination of language selection of subjects in Idiriko and Igolo at the Nigeria/Benin border used four domains with thirteen different situational contexts. Amuzu (2010) like other scholars (e.g Myers Scotton 1993) claim that language distribution is influenced by contact variables such as status of language and by this is meant whether the language is prestigious or not, its economic value, attitude of speakers, and status for formal education .

It is only natural for people to interact when they come together, whether of the same or different linguistic backgrounds. In the case where there is a common language, it becomes the medium of interaction. Where there is none to immediately fall on, the most commonly and dominant language or one with some socio-economic benefits is more likely to be the one to be learnt. While in some cases, it might be a complete language shift, in other cases, it could simply be language choice. The inability to choose one language for informal interaction in this study offers an opportunity to understand the choice of more than one language in one domain.

1.1 Linguistic characteristics of Damongo Municipality and Mobility of the Frafra people

Historically, Damongo is a Gonja town situated about 140 km west of Tamale. Damongo is the capital of the current West Gonja Municipal District Assembly of the Savannah region but before, was the capital of the West Gonja District of Northern Region. Gonjas are the natives of the area.

Damongo has been chosen for this study because it provides an ideal scenario for analysing interactions between and amongst several ethnic groups co-existing under various policy regimes, mainly because many of the other ethnic groups came voluntarily or forcefully to settle in the area for farming purposes. While a few settled among the Gonjas, the majority settled out of town in places they felt they could do their farming activities. The Gonjas, in terms of population distribution, are in the majority. The population of the Municipality stands at 4,1180 and 19.8% of this population are not native born Ghanaians. Many of the young people from these groups were born in Damongo (Ghana Statistical Service, 2010 Population and Housing Census.)

The Frafras were the first migrant group that came to settle in Damongo as a result of forced migration (Millar, 1996). Millar also said that, after the departure of the British Gonja Company, around 1955 - 1956, Frafra families were brought to Damongo by Government from the now Upper East Region to settle on already cleared land. This was necessitated by the fact that the Frafra area was under extreme land pressure. The Frafra were not the only people who migrated to settle in Damongo for farming purposes. Many others did, including the Dagaaba of the Upper West Region and some ethnic groups even from northern region. However, and unlike the Frafra, these other groups came on their own because of the good and productive farming lands of Damongo and its environs. Given that there are many other ethnic groups, the municipality could be described as heterogeneous. Many of these language groups speak languages that are mutually unintelligible. However, the common language in the municipality is Gonja, which is not in the language family of these migrants. It is in line with this situation that this study seeks to explore the language contact and language choice of the migrant Frafras for informal interactions in the municipality.

2.0 Related Literature on Language Distribution and choice

Ghana is a multilingual country and besides the use of the Ghanaian languages, there are non-Ghanaian ones such as Hausa and English that are used on daily basis alongside the Ghanaian languages. The official language which is English is used for formal education, government matters and trade. Because of the several linguistic groups, there are different language preferences for different domains. The area of domain and language choice is one that has been extensively researched into. Greenfield (1972) in his study among the Puerto Rican people in New York found that Spanish, which is a low language is preferred for intimate domain while English, a high language is preferred for job and education. Parisher (1963) found out that Indians used their mother-tongue and another language other than English, the official language in family domain.

The findings of Awoonor-Aziaku (2015) also show that regardless of the effect of English on the Ewe people of the Volta region of Ghana, English and Ewe were the languages used in his study among the Ewes in the Volta region. Mahama (2005) also states the influence of domain, interlocutor and topic as important in language choice. It is clear from this brief review that language choice depends on different linguistic and social factors.

3.0 Domain Analysis as a Framework for language Choice

This study fits well into the communication accommodation theory in spite of the use of domain analysis as the framework. The theory explains that one of the communicators adjusts or accommodates the other in terms of variety of a particular language or an adjustment in the use of a completely different language. Given that Grune and Gonja are not mutually intelligible, and also that they are not the only language groups in the municipality, speakers must choose the appropriate language and interaction strategy to be used in specific contexts. Therefore, this study looked at the choice of language by the Frafras for informal interaction with the Gonjas. In relation to this, the study investigated language(s) used for informal interactions and what accounted for their choice(s).

It attempted to account for some of the reasons for the choice of any specific language for this domain. Therefore, the theoretical concept that seems most appropriate here is that of domain as developed by Fishman (1972). The choice of language by the Frafras for informal interaction with the Gonjas could also be impacted by their upbringing or cultural construction. In line with this, the study also employed the constructivist paradigm of culture to help explain how the Frafras' cultural or social construction could have influenced their decision to use a certain language in casual interactions with the Gonjas in Damongo. Though a number of factors such as gender, social status of language, economic value of language, and others are associated with

choosing a particular language, three factors seem to always be associated with the discussion of domains. These are topic, which simply implies the subject under discussion (e.g. family, religion), the participants and their relationships (e.g. father-child, brother-sister, employer-employee), and the setting (in the office, on the street or in the home). Saville-Troike (1989), in discussing the factors, writes that topic is often a primary determinant of language choice in multilingual contexts; bilinguals have often learned about some topics through the medium of one language and other topics through the medium of the second or other, and thus know the vocabulary to discuss a topic in one of their languages, or feel it is more natural to use one language for a particular topic.

Although this study is based on this concept and uses the tools associated with it for the gathering and analysis of the data, the domain chosen here does not relate to specific topics but informal interactions that can get any topic on board as long as the context is not a formal one. Herman (1968) talks about the overlapping nature of domains. According to him they are not independent of other contexts. Therefore, a language selected for a particular language can also be assigned different contexts at different times. This has been considered in this study.

A complementary concept to Fishman's concept of domains is Myers-Scotton (1993) concept of social motivations for code switching, which is also about language choice, and which involves the use of one language, a mixture of different languages or variations of a particular language of varying proportions. Such an approach could also be used to account for the choice of one or the other language for specific domains. In spite of this inclusion, domain analysis is still the main framework on which this study has been hinged. The approach has been to get oral reports from study participants about their self-reported language behaviour in dealing with each other in the context or domain of informal interactions.

4.0 Data collection

Following the nature of the study, a survey approach was used. This approach was adopted because the Frafra Community is quite large and to collect data from all individuals will require a lot of time and more resources. Therefore, the survey method was employed to choose a sample from the Frafra community to solicit information about their language behaviour. Respondents were selected from different backgrounds with consideration for sex and age since all people are more likely to interact informally than formally. The oldest male and female of each household responded to the questionnaire.

Participants in this study were Frafra adults in Damongo from Frafra Settlements number one, four and six. These were randomly selected from a total of six Frafra communities. In all, three hundred (300) participants were targeted from a total of one hundred and fifty household in these three Frafra communities. This means that two people were selected from each household. These two people were the oldest male and female in the household. Unfortunately, at the time of this study, many of the first Frafra settlers had returned to their hometowns in the Upper East Region when they realized they were old or have passed on. A few still stayed in the municipality. Therefore, a majority of the group who participated in this study are the children and grandchildren of the first settlers, which is a new generation of Frafra settlers. Their settlements are now nearly part of main town Damongo because more buildings are built along the road to these Frafra settlements.

A questionnaire was developed and used to collect the data. Some of the questions were open ended and others closed. As it is about behaviour, the open-ended were to give more access to respondents to describe or narrate issues and events. Data were collected physically in the homes of the Frafra people. Analysis of the data was based on the themes that emerged from respondents' responses.

5.0 Results and Discussions

This section presents and analyses the data collected from study participants. There are three sections; languages spoken by respondents, widely spoken or dominant languages used in the municipality, language repertoire of respondents and language choice for informal interactions between the Frafras and Gonja in the municipality in informal interactions.

5.1 Dominant languages spoken in the municipality

A total of 300 interviews were targeted, from 150 households. This means two people from each household but 263 people responded to the questionnaires, 113 females and 150 males. The target was to get both younger and older generations. So, the oldest male and female that were met in a household were helped to answer the questionnaires. In some cases, only males were available so only the males answered the questionnaires. This accounts for the lower number of female participants.

Participants, as mentioned earlier are from the Frafra settlements in the Damongo Municipality but because other ethnic groups have joined them in their settlements, the first question was to confirm they are Frafras. All participants confirmed they are. They were then asked to list languages commonly spoken in and around Damongo. Nearly all respondents said that there are several language groups and so several languages are spoken. Probing to find these languages, respondents mentioned Gonja, Dagaare, Grune (Frafra), Hausa, English, Dagbani and Twi. Twi, according to them is mostly spoken by Southern traders. Except Gonja, all the other languages mentioned are languages of migrants who have come to Damongo Municipality mainly for trading, farming or other businesses such as employed jobs. According to them, there are no native Hausas in Damongo but it has become a common language because it is a widely used trade language. In fact, this is true even for West Africa. Observations during the study showed that there are many more languages spoken in and around Damongo than mentioned. Some of these include Dagbani, Kasem, Hanga, Laribansi, Vagla and Tampulma. Finding out why these languages were not mentioned, some respondents said that speakers of those languages are not many and they do not speak them. Others said they are not aware of them. Clearly, their responses suggest the second group of languages are minority languages.

5.2 Linguistic repertoire of respondents

The Frafra people came purposely to farm and so were settled out of town, where they would have land to farm. According to them, they are not from the same place in the “Frafraland” but do understand each other to a large extent. They speak their dialects, which are mutually intelligible.

The data collected showed that 100% of respondents said they speak Hausa, 64% speak Gonja, 61% for English and 31% for other languages. In response to other languages that they speak, all the literates (77%) mentioned English, Gonja and Hausa, although they said that they speak them at different fluency levels while the non-literate respondents (23%) mentioned either only Grune or Grune and Hausa. A probe on why they did not speak Gonja showed that they did not interact directly with Gonjas and if they needed anything from them, their children and other Frafras were available to help. This is where the constructivist paradigm comes in. From a constructivist perspective, their reality on social interactions that could have motivated the learning of Gonja was resolved by the use of others, which is culturally accepted by both the Frafras and the Gonjas. Related to this, all educated respondents said that they spoke Grune to keep their culture and sometimes mixed it with English in their families and amongst themselves. Those who speak English are the same ones who said they speak Gonja. They all alluded to their

interactions with school mates as being how they learnt Gonja. In school, Gonja was not spoken only by Gonjas but also by others as learning another language is one of the ways of getting integrated into another community or culture.

5.3 How participants learnt the language(s) used in the informal domain

Only two ways were mentioned by respondents when asked how they learnt the languages they use for informal interactions. For use in the house, both Grune and Hausa were learnt from the house and their immediate surroundings simply as members of their community. Grune was spoken in the house and sometimes a few words in Hausa but Hausa was spoken outside the home in the same neighbourhood. One of the young respondents said “It was a natural process for me so I am actually not aware of how I grew up speaking these two languages”. The second way was by being together in school. Except the old females in the study, all the other respondents said they learnt the other languages from school. One of them said “We interact always in school in different languages. Sometimes, even if you don’t understand or speak another language your colleagues will still speak it to you” Another respondent said “I was repeating things when my friends said them in school, especially when we were playing and sometimes asking for the meaning and before I realised, I was speaking all these languages”. The study has clearly shown that not only English is learnt in school. Other languages were learnt in school but not in the classroom. According to them, this is the same approach to be able to use different languages with their friends and at traditional and entertaining events. Friendship and work according to the respondents created an opportunity to learn different languages including Gonja the dominant native language of Damongo. This in one sense could be described as language accommodation since in all the contexts involved in this study the language choice depends on the person to whom the Frafras speak, the topic for interaction and the setting in which the speech event takes place.

There is simply a need to communicate and one or some languages at a point were dominant, so the respondents were obliged to learn it or them, not because of their prestigious statuses but the need for interaction. Hausa seems to have a strong validity among both the youth and old forcing both categories to use Hausa instead of Gonja, the language of the natives. Even the Gonjas have to learn Hausa for interactions in the informal domain. English was mainly learnt from school.

5.4 Language choice for informal interactions

It is obvious from above that respondents do not speak only one language. For their language use or language behaviour, respondents were restricted to choose language(s) that they use in informal interactions. This is because by the definition of formal contexts, there is already an expected language with predetermined formalities and perhaps language. Informal interactions were explained to them to mean communicating with family members, friends or colleagues, communicating with younger people (in traditional settings) and during entertaining functions.

Respondents were made to indicate which languages they used for the different contexts clustered as informal interactions. This was meant to investigate the distribution of dominant languages in the informal interactions with consideration to sex and age. For age, anyone beyond 50 was considered old and 49 or below considered young in this study. These age limits were actually their suggestions of who is old and who is not.

For language use with friends, entertainment events and interacting with younger generations, Hausa, Gonja and English were the most frequently languages used for these domains. Although none of these

respondents were in school at the time of this study, they mentioned that the school was also a place where they learnt and used these languages. The languages mentioned by respondents present the language distribution in the informal interactions among the Frafra settlers themselves and with natives and other migrants in the Municipality. The language situation is triglossic but Hausa and Gonja, are strongly competing for dominance in informal interactions. English was mentioned as a fourth language but clearly by literates. This is so because English Language is the official language of Ghana, and used in both official and informal settings. Respondents found it a prestige to speak English.

Out of the 263 respondents, 61.2% (161) of the literate respondents said they use Gonja, Hausa and English for informal interactions with Gonjas who speak Gonja and any of the other two. They use Grune among themselves. This means they pick and choose or mix as they deem necessary. The non-literates use Grune among the frafras and Hausa with non-Frafras so they still are unable to interact with Gonjas who do not speak Hausa. Although there are usually some people who speak some English even if they have not attended formal school in Ghana, none of the non-literates respondents mentioned English. In all of this, there were two observations; the use of Gonja has gone beyond use among only Gonjas and secondly Hausa, a non-Ghanaian language is presented as the most dominant language used by most people living in the Municipality. An age variable was also considered in this study to investigate whether there is a difference in language choice between the young and the aged in the domain of informal interaction. It was found that the use of Hausa, Gonja and English is mainly by the younger group. A hundred percent of the young group said they use Gonja, Hausa and English, whilst 22% of the older generation used only Hausa with the Gonjas.

It is clear that the youth are literate and have a greater number of people with more different language backgrounds to interact with and consequently needed more languages so as to be able to interact with them, especially in informal contexts.

The different interlocutors of the Grune speakers are from different ethnic groups. What this implies is that the young Frafra respondents accommodate all other languages around them, especially the dominant ones used in the areas whilst the older respondents have not as they have stuck to Grune, or Grune and Hausa. Generally, there is a correlation between the number of years a person has stayed in a place different from his original linguistic community and the languages spoken. The longer a person stays in multi-ethnic environment, the more sophisticated his or her language repertoire will be. It gives speakers the flexibility to choose from the several languages available the appropriate language to be used in a particular domain. Unfortunately, this is not the case with the Frafra older respondents but the reasons are clear. This is because the Frafras did not settle among the Gonjas and did not interact with them on regular basis and also because they have not had the school environment that the younger ones have had for other informal interactions. The study also found that formal education plays a role in this context. The education of respondents has had some effect on the language distribution and choice of the Frafra settlers. English is listed by the educated respondents as one of the languages they use for informal interactions. This finding supports Owusu-Ansah (1997) assertion that English is also used and that the choice of any language depends on the domain and some other social factors. The difference is the extent to which English is used and the category of people concerned. However, this is contrary to Amidu (2019) whose study found out that that English is not used in the domain of informal public space.

6.0 Conclusion

The study has highlighted that apart from being a member of an ethnic group and formal settings, language can be learnt through different linguistic contact variables. Responses of study participants have shown that when a person is exposed to a new linguistic environment and he or she finds it important and necessary to interact informally, he or she can be obliged to learn the new language in order to be part of the linguistic group. The study has also identified Grune (in a restricted domain of informal interactions among the frafras), Hausa, Gonja and English as the dominant languages used by the frafra settlers. Hausa and Gonja are competing in the informal space with Gonjas. Given this situation, Gonja and Hausa are the main lingua franca among non-literates and an addition of English with literates in Damongo and around. More It has also confirmed some earlier studies as it was found out that it is possible to use more than one language in one domain. It is also clear that English may eventually be used with other languages as the main languages because of its prestigious place as a national language and also as an international language.

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