

**Managing linguistic diversity in the church:
Ideological contestation within a shared moral framework in south-western Burkina Faso**

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With increased power-sharing and mutual accountability between church leaders and expatriate Christian missionaries in Burkina Faso, different ideas about the relative importance of the vernacular vs. the lingua franca, Jula, have come into conflict. In this study, I introduce or adapt various methods of language attitude study to allow for comparison between literate and illiterate informants, and to allow the collection of meaningful data even in the absence of a shared language between myself and participants. I also intentionally situate myself as a “critically engaged” researcher (Speed 2006) who shares a moral framework with research participants (Dobrin 2005). Using these methods, I investigate the similarities and differences in perceptions of language utility among church leaders, expatriate missionaries, and church members, in order to shed light on the complex use of language ideologies in a situation of ongoing intra-church conflict. I also relate the language attitudes expressed both directly and indirectly with other discourses of endangerment and purity circulating in both academic and Christian circles. By moving beyond the simple description of language attitudes to an explanation of their relation to structures of power and interest, I follow earlier theorists of language ideology in attempting to bridge the gap between linguistic and social theory (Woolard 1998).

I suggest that the discourses used by missionaries and church leaders reflect competition over the theological resources needed to address linguistic and ethnic diversity within the church. The doctrine of translatability, which has historically provided strong theological impetus for Bible translation into vernacular languages, is tightly bound up for many Western missionaries with an essentializing ideology that connects the vernacular with identity and spiritual authenticity, thus functioning to contain diversity within the church through the idealization of linguistically homogenous congregations. The power of this organic language-identity connection in mainstream endangered-language discourse has been pointed out by several scholars in recent years (Duchêne & Heller 2007). I suggest that this ideology functions in the Burkina Faso situation to prevent both missionaries and church leaders from drawing on theological resources for unity and inter-ethnic reconciliation which are an essential part of their shared tradition. I conclude that working “from within” is essential both to uncover the potency of this ideology and to suggest moral resources for reconciliation and power balancing.

References

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