

Managing Linguistic Diversity in the Church

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ABSTRACT. Data on the perceptions of language utility held by church leaders, missionaries and church members in south-western Burkina Faso illuminate a complex use of language ideology in an ongoing intra-church conflict. I suggest that the discourses used by missionaries and church leaders reflect competition over the theological resources needed to address linguistic diversity within the church. Many Western missionaries hold to 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, and to obscure unequal access to resources for ideological legitimization by re-casting missionaries as agents of cultural revitalization and dismissing alternative conceptions of church as insufficiently indigenous.

1 Introduction

Working primarily in the province of Kéné Dougou in south-western Burkina Faso, Mennonite¹ missionaries have tended to focus on Bible translation and literacy in local languages, while the national Mennonite church leadership has generally focused on attempting to expand the church using the regional lingua franca, Jula. With increased power-sharing and mutual accountability between these two groups, different ideas about the relative importance of Jula and the various local vernaculars have come into conflict. While critique of the missionary emphasis on the vernacular is not new (e.g. Meeuwis 1999), the present research constitutes the first detailed examination to my knowledge of an open discussion of this question between “brothers and sisters in Christ” who continue to work within a very similar moral framework.

In this study, I investigate perceptions of language utility held by church leaders, expatriate missionaries, and church members in Burkina Faso, 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 by research participants with other discourses and ideologies of endangerment and authenticity circulating in both academic and Christian circles.

¹ The Mennonites are a denomination of Christians inspired by the teachings of Menno Simons (1496-1561). They are historically characterized by pacifism, non-violence, and a commitment to adult baptism.

By moving beyond the simple description of language attitudes to an explanation of their relation to structures of power and interest, I hope to exemplify a “demythologiz[ed] sociolinguistics” which sees the use of language ideology and the expression of language attitudes as “a social practice in its own right” (Cameron 1997: 64). I also intentionally situate myself as a “critically engaged” researcher (Speed 2006: 67) who shares a moral framework with research participants (Fast 2007).

Methodologically, this research builds on a growing trend to tailor methods of attitude study to largely rural and illiterate contexts with non-individualist modes of interaction (e.g., Showalter 2001). I introduce or adapt various methods of language attitude study to allow both for comparison between literate and illiterate informants, and for the collection of meaningful data even in the absence of a shared language between myself and participants.

I suggest that the discourses used by missionaries and church leaders reflect differing language ideologies that lead to competing definitions of church. Many Western missionaries hold to an essentializing ideology that connects the vernacular with deep identity and spiritual authenticity, thus functioning to contain diversity within the church through the idealization of ethnically homogenous, monolingual congregations. The negative political effects of similar language ideologies have been pointed out by several scholars in recent years (Muehlmann 2007, Cameron 2007). I suggest that this ideology functions in the Burkina Faso context to obscure participants’ unequal access to resources for ideological legitimization by re-casting missionaries as agents of cultural revitalization and dismissing alternative conceptions of church as insufficiently indigenous.

2 Sample, variables and research questions

Twenty-eight interviews were conducted with a sample stratified by position vis-à-vis the church (Table 1). In villages, interviews were conducted with groups of 2-5 people, homogeneous in age and gender.

Table 1. Stratification of sample by position vis-à-vis church

Village groups	12
National church leaders	8
Missionaries	8
TOTAL	28

Various methods were used in order to address the following main research questions: (1) What languages do participants find useful in different domains (especially church)? (2) To what ideological resources do participants appeal to back up these perceptions? and (3) How do institutional linguistic practices map perceptions of the sociolinguistic situation (i.e., embodying particular language ideologies (Spitulnik 1998: 163))?

3 Method and results

An analysis of the data collected through various methods illuminates conflicting definitions of church that centre on the identity of church as inherently mono-ethnic or multi-ethnic. Moreover, the data suggest that missionaries' definition of church as mono-ethnic is underwritten by their tendency to equate mother tongues with ethnic identity.

3.1 Domains model activity: Perceived utility of different languages in different domains

Photographs of language domains and coloured rings representing languages were presented to participants. They were told to place zero, one or two rings on each photograph according to whether they thought competence in the relevant language would not be helpful, would be slightly helpful, or would be very helpful in that domain. Overall, the relative utility of the vernacular, Jula and French is perceived remarkably similarly by all three groups (Figure 1).

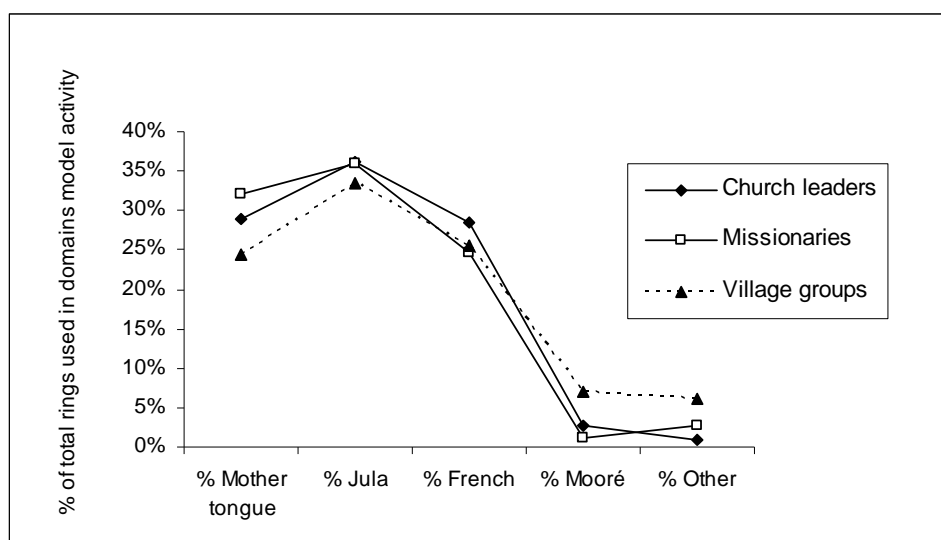


Figure 1. Perceived utility of mother tongue, Jula, French, Mooré and other languages in nine domains

In most of the nine domains, all participants agree on which language is the most useful (e.g. mother tongue at home and in the field, French at school and government office). However, the church domain is contested. Missionaries see the mother tongue as the most useful, while the church leaders and groups see Jula as the most useful (Figure 2).

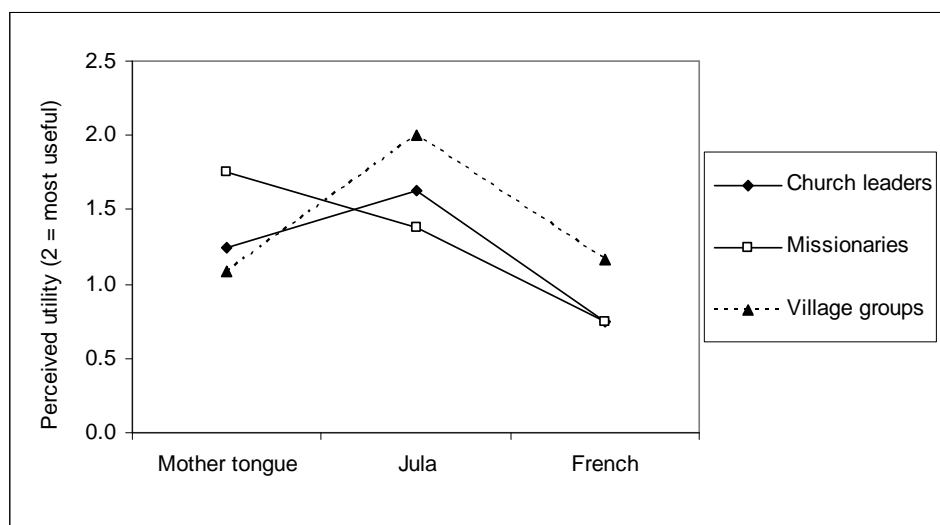


Figure 2. Perceived utility of mother tongue, Jula and French in church

3.2 Attitude statements

Participants indicated their agreement with 18 ideologically charged statements about language use in church, on a 5-point Likert scale. Ten of the original 18 attitude statements had a high discrimination value (Table 2).

	Church leaders	Missionaries	Village groups
1. Speaking Jula has made us abandon our customs and traditions.	1.6	3.9	3.8
2. Jula is the language of Islam.	2.3	3.8	2.4
3. If we use Jula in church, we build unity in the Mennonite church of Burkina Faso	3.5	2.8	4.7
4. Using the mother tongue in church is a threat to unity among the Mennonite churches.	3.5	1.4	1.4
5. If we use the mother tongue in church, we build unity within our ethnic group.	4.4	4.6	5.0
6. Children will learn to read better when they are taught in their mother tongue.	4.0	4.9	4.8
7. There are enough resources to teach children to read in their mother tongue.	4.0	2.0	4.6
8. We will always be real ____, even if we no longer speak our mother tongue.	3.3	2.1	4.0
9. The people of my ethnic group will always speak their mother tongue.	3.8	3.1	5.0
10. Islam is a threat to our mother tongue.	3.4	3.4	1.4

Table 2. Mean agreement with 10 attitude statements

(5 = strong agreement; 1 = strong disagreement)

The examination of these responses suggests a distinct attitudinal profile for church leaders, missionaries and villagers. The village groups may be characterized as relatively carefree. They do not appear overly concerned about

mother tongue preservation, but hold strong positive attitudes to both mother tongue and Jula, believing that both these languages contribute to unity of some sort within the church. In contrast, the missionaries are characterized by concern about the potential negative effects of Jula and the potential loss of the mother tongue, and by a strong belief in the superior unifying potential of the mother tongue over Jula. They also draw the strongest link between language and ethnic identity (statement 8). Finally, church leaders seem to be most concerned about the divisive potential of mother tongue use in Mennonite churches, and the least open to perspectives that connect Jula with a threat to customs or traditions.

3.3 Participant observation

I observed language use patterns in seven of the nine Mennonite churches in the region, paying special attention to language choice for (1) major functions such as teaching and announcements; (2) functions where comprehension is not essential, such as singing; and (3) the inclusion and exclusion of visitors. An examination of this data suggests a classification of churches into three types: urban churches, rural churches with ongoing vernacular translation work in progress, and rural churches with no history of involvement with mother-tongue work. In translation churches, languages of wider communication (LWCs) such as French and Jula are subordinated to the local language, thus defining “outsiders” as those who do not speak the local language, and insiders as mono-ethnic. In other churches, the choice of Jula and/or French as main language(s) functions to include attendees from all over the Julaphone region as insiders, thus implicitly defining the church as a multi-ethnic body.

3.4 Open questions

A series of open questions, asked only in individual interviews, yielded more explicitly ideological discourse regarding the perceived utility of mother tongue, Jula and French in church. Here, I draw on the extensive corpus of transcribed responses to make only two observations.

First, the missionaries show a tendency to discursively link the mother tongue to identity, authenticity and profound spiritual experience. The following statement by one of the missionary participants exemplifies this link.

[A]s a Mennonite... [I have] the strong sense that to cope with Westernization and materialism ... people need to be strongly rooted in their own identity, and you can't move backwards, but somehow mother tongue needs to be preserved, because without mother tongue, identity's lost.

Second, several church leaders draw a direct discursive link between exclusion on the basis of mother tongue, and church identity. The following quotation illustrates one church leader's belief that the continued existence of a category of

church members who feel like strangers because of language is both unacceptable and un-Christian:

[W]hen the autochthonous people speak between themselves and those who are not of that ethnic group are not taken into account, *this does not reflect the true identity of the church.* (emphasis added)

4 Analysis and discussion

4.1 Two ideological profiles

When the role of this essentializing language-identity link in the definition of church has been clarified, two main ideological profiles emerge which can be summarized as follows.

The ideology held by many missionaries and some church leaders involves an implicit definition of the church as ethnically homogenous, with the healthiest churches being those whose members are confident of their ethnic identity, and use their cultural resources, including language, to access authentic spiritual experience. LWCs embody a potential threat to this definition of church that must be carefully controlled. Individual identities and linguistic repertoires are downplayed in favour of a group-based ethnic identity associated with a single language, and a certain degree of exclusion of those who do not speak this language is considered acceptable.

The ideology held by many church leaders, on the other hand, defines church as multi-ethnic yet crucially inclusive. The healthiest churches are those whose members' ethnic identity does not cause a barrier to fellowship, and languages that index particular ethnic identities therefore pose a potential threat. LWCs can function as expressions of solidarity, equality and inclusion. Positive attitudes toward the mother tongue co-exist with a high awareness of the potential divisiveness of language and a preference to define church as made up of Jula speakers even when this might mean the exclusion of certain segments of the congregation who are not fluent in Jula.

4.2 Essentializing ideologies and their disempowering effects

Recent scholarship demonstrates the historical power of “vernacularist” ideologies linking language and identity in various contexts (Woolard 1998: 18), highlighting its role in Nazi race science (Hutton 1999), in colonial social control (Irvine & Gal 2000, Meeuwis 1999), and in current language endangerment discourses (Muehlmann 2007). For missionaries in the Burkina Faso context, essentializing ideologies are also drawn from the discourse of contemporary Bible translation organizations who use the concept of “heart language” as a keyword

that equates the first language with the language of spiritual authenticity and identity (e.g., Wycliffe International 2007).

In this context too, essentializing ideologies function to obscure real processes of disempowerment. By appealing to discourses that have wide currency in academic and Christian circles, missionaries move the debate into an international sphere to which they have privileged access. Here, the conflict can be framed in terms of indigeneity and vernacular authenticity such that missionaries become agents of cultural revitalization, while church leaders' role in theorizing the identity of the church is either rhetorically erased (Irvine & Gal 2000: 38) or recast as an obstacle to the development of the indigenous church. An essentializing language ideology thus functions to obscure from view the ways that languages other than the mother tongue are actually contributing to empowerment and inclusion, while subtly legitimizing an ongoing power imbalance between missionaries and church leaders that prevents this ideology from being contested.

4 Conclusion

Contestation over the political and moral significance of missionary support for the vernacular lies at the heart of an ongoing conflict to define what constitutes church. An essentializing ideology connecting language and identity contributes to a definition of church on ethnic terms, while an ideology of inclusion and solidarity insists on separating church from ethnic identity. However, the conflict between these ideologies does not occur on a level playing field: the missionary ideology is supported by Western linguistic scholarship and Bible translation discourse, and functions to legitimize unequal access to resources for legitimization. These themes are also highly relevant to linguists as they examine their tendency to underwrite the kind of ideologies on which missionaries draw in this conflict, and as they consider the kinds of ideological resources that they are using to justify new forms of intervention in endangered language communities.

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