



GOMBE SAVANNAH

**JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND
COMMUNICATION STUDIES (GOSAJOLLCOS)**

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
GOMBE STATE UNIVERSITY
NIGERIA**

Volume 3 No. 1
October, 2022

LANGUAGE

Language Choice in a Multilingual Obudu Community

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating language choice among Bette native speakers in Obudu Local Government Area of Cross River State. It focused and explored factors such as social status, educational attainment, ethnicity, occupation, topic, purpose, place, preference, and formality of situation, involved in using Bette, Pidgin and English languages among Bette people. In order to achieve the objectives of the study, the researchers selected a sample that consisted of (100) Bette respondents who reside in Obudu, covering different age ranges, gender, and educational backgrounds. The instrument of the study was a sociolinguistic questionnaire. Results showed that Bette speakers have positive attitudes towards Bette above Pidgin and English. They freely use their Bette language in the domain of home with family members, and when interacting in club houses and beer parlours because it is the language of wider acceptance and foster inter-personal relationship. Also, both Bette and English dominate in most worship centers as interpretations from English to Bette go on concurrently. In addition, they use English in formal situations and in educational institutions as it is the prestigious language usually more favoured in formal settings. Pidgin is more preferred in Governmental offices and when people network socially. Results also showed that Bette native speakers mix English and Pidgin languages in the domain of neighborhood, with friends, and while chatting on social media.

Keywords: Language choice, Multilingualism, Language domain, Bette people

Introduction

Language is an important factor in human communication. The ability to communicate accurately and effectively in one's mother tongue will ensure correct communication of the intended message to one's interlocutor. Languages, with their complex implications for identity, communication, social integration, education and development, are of great importance for sociolinguists. Human languages have changed in the age of Globalization; no longer tied to stable communities, they move across the globe, and change in the process. Most nations in the world are multilingual; speaking more than

two languages. They contain ethnic groups in contact and frequently in competition. It is well known that there are basically three possible linguistic outcomes of prolonged contact of ethnic groups: language maintenance, bilingualism or multilingualism, or language shift. Languages influence each other; they expand, contract or die. It is against this backdrop that this work seeks to identify factors such as social status, educational attainment, ethnicity, occupation, place, topic, purpose, preference, and formality of situation (Dweik and Qawar, 2015), supporting language choice among Bette native speakers in Obudu Local Government Area of Cross River State.

Literature Review

According to Remysen, Wim, Reinke & Kristin (2012), the impact of one language on the lexicon, phonology, and syntax of another has long been considered vitally important for the understanding of language change, choice, and use. It is very rare that contact is between equals and more or less symmetrical. The characterized differences between communities such as power, size, wealth, prestige, and vitality are significant factors which often make speakers adjust their language- choice patterns during their life time and/ or from one generation to the next, along with the speakers' attitudes towards their languages.

Most areas, in several parts of the world, are inhabited by diverse linguistic families and groups. This diversity of language within a given area or locality also means that a people's social and economic structures are also varied. Dorian (1981), as cited in Dweik & Qawar (2015), states that the diversity of languages leads to the unavoidable concept of bilingualism among the local speakers. It is then expected that instances of partial and complete language shift shall occur and even diglossia may set in at some point in time. There is a well-documented tendency for some speech communities to change over time from one's first language to another (Gal, 1979) as referenced by Dweik & Qawar (2015). Fasold (1984), states that language use has been extensively studied in three disciplines, namely; sociology, social psychology and anthropology. From the perspective of a sociologist who is interested in searching for language use through the study of social structure, Fishman (1968) as seen in Dweik & Qawar (2015), posits domain analysis.

Under domain analysis, 'domains' are regarded as institutional contexts in which one language is more likely to be appropriate than another and are to

be seen as constellations of other factors such as topic, location and participants. In other words, what language an individual chooses to use may depend on whom he/she is speaking with, what he/she is discussing, and where the conversation is taking place. Fasold (1990) suggests that multilingualism serves as an interactional resource for the multilingual speaker. This means that one particular language may normally be used at home or with close friends, whereas another language may be used for commerce and trade, and even a third one for dealing with government agencies. Baker and Prys-Jones (1998), state that the concept of domain may include such notions as formality and informality. They also add that minority languages are linked with informal situations while majority languages are connected with formal situations. Although different studies employ different domains, common domains include home and family, neighborhood, schooling, mass media, business and commerce, and so on. Data concerning domains of language use are generally obtained through questionnaires and interviews and studied by means of statistical analysis (Fasold, 1984).

According to Gal (1987, p. 287), cited by Dweik & Qawar (2015), the analysis of language choice in bilingual and multilingual settings remains a crucial endeavor in sociolinguistic research. Early attempts by linguists and sociologists at describing language use in general quantitative terms have failed to account for the evident heterogeneity across communities, individuals and occasions. Theoretically refined tools are needed to explain why language X is used in situation x, and why language Y is used in situation y. Contrary to the widely assumed belief that language use is unsystematic, sociolinguistics has held an axiom that "a speaker's choice between varieties is also structured. It is systematically linked to social relationships, events or situations". Therefore, one of the fundamental issues in socially oriented linguistic disciplines is why a given linguistic variety is chosen to be used in a particular array of situations, while another variety is preferred in other circumstances.

Any speaker of any language has at his or her disposition a range of language varieties; Gumperz (1964), as seen in Dweik & Qawar (2015), uses the term 'linguistic repertoire' to describe the range of styles which an individual needs to fulfill all his or her communicative needs in the most appropriate way. The speaker's ability to choose the appropriate variety for any particular purpose is part of his or her communicative competence; the

choice is not random, but has been shown to be determined by aspects of the social organization of the community and the social situation where the discourse takes place. In this case the bilingual or the multilingual is not strikingly different from the monolingual; it is simply that a speaker has to choose not only between different varieties of the same language, but also between two or more different languages.

Furthermore, David (2006) argues that language choice is triggered by factors such as social status, gender, educational attainment, ethnicity, age, occupation, rural and urban origin, speakers, topic, place, media and formality of the situation. These findings are supported by Fasold (1990). Coulmas (1997) explains that people make linguistic choices for various purposes. Individuals and groups choose words, registers, styles, and languages to suit their various needs concerning the communication of ideas, the association with and separation from others, the establishment or defense of dominance. People are endowed with the ability to adjust their linguistic repertoires to ever new circumstances and construct their languages for certain purposes. Ferrer and Sankoff (2004) find that the language preference of a speaker is influenced by dominant languages. Therefore, most bilinguals and multilinguals may choose a dominant language as a medium of communication because it provides them greater advantage, economic benefits, social networks expansion and better opportunities. The choice of a dominant language can be triggered by the wider acceptance and functions of that language. Dominant language influences the language choice of a speaker. More prestigious language is usually favored as the medium of communication in various domains because of its wider social functions. Pillai (2006) shares the same point of view; dominant languages can be used in formal and informal domains of communication and it helps to gain prestige, better economic access in the community, authority and power.

From the review above, it is established that the speaker's ability to choose the appropriate variety for any particular purpose is part of his or her communicative competence; the choice is not random, but has been shown to be determined by aspects of the social organization of the community and the social situation where the discourse takes place. However, Obudu is a multilingual community with majority of its Bette speakers being bilinguals having preference for English, Pidgin, and Bette languages. The people are endowed with the ability to adjust their linguistic repertoires to suit different

domain of conversation. But no formal study has been found to have explained factors responsible for this linguistic behavior among the Bette speakers. It is against this backdrop that this study aimed to discover factors supporting language preference among Bette speakers of Obudu Local Government Area of Cross River State.

The Origin and Identity of Bette People

Obudu is located in the Northern part of Cross River State, Nigeria. The Obudu people historically originated from northern senatorial district of Central Africa during the pre-history period, known as the “great Trek”. The Obudu moved and settled in Western Cameroon, where the remnants of the Obudu people are still under the Cameroonian government. The Obudu town is downstream from the Obudu Dam, which also provides recreational facilities. The Community comprises several sub-communities that speak different dialects. Bette is the dialect that is spoken by majority of the inhabitants of the area. Bette is widely understood and spoken across the spectrum of other sub-communities in the region. English is the official language of communication in the region and Nigeria as a whole, the literacy rate among the young ranks very high in the state and remains on the increase.

The migration from Western Cameroon to Eastern Obudu took place around the 19th Century as a result of increase in population and desire to acquire fertile lands. The early settlements were in families. They are the people of Obanliku, Ubang, Bedia, Ohong, Betukwel, Kutia and Ogborogbod Hills. In 1974 Obudu was given a local government on May 13th during the administration of General Olusegun Obasanjo. The aim was mainly to unify the hitherto multiple system of local government, and in practical terms, to correct the problems. The people that make up Obudu local government area as mentioned earlier since pre-historical time, having been regarded as one community sharing the same common feature like linguistics, land, socio-political, culture and most importantly, the same historical background.

Based on existing sources which point to Central Africa as the origin home from which the Bette group migrated, it appears safe to conclude that the present Bette language must have picked many lexical items from the various communities in which they sojourned. Although the specific communities and languages cannot be identified, if the east-to-west migratory route is correct, then most of the words into Bette must have been from the

Bantu family. However, it is necessary to stress Faraclos's (2001:378) observation is that "the Bette-Bendi languages remain almost completely unstudied". The pioneering efforts of the Assemblies of God Missionaries which resulted in the Bette New Testament Bible and a premier, "*Ma li bo ushia*" are commendable.

Theoretical Framework

This study is done within the framework of Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model (1993, 1998). Markedness, according to Myers-Scotton (1998, p. 4), relates to the choice of one linguistic variety over other possible varieties. Myers-Scotton (1993, p. 84) further posits that each language in a multilingual community is associated with particular social roles, which she calls rights-and-obligations (RO) sets. The speaker-hearer signals her understanding of the current situation by deciding to speak a particular language. The choice of a particular language is also an indication of her relevant role within the context.

The Markedness Model is stated in the form of a principle, the negotiation principle, and three maxims. The negotiation principle presents the theory's central idea. Hence Myers-Scotton's assertion: "Choose the form of your conversational contribution such that it indexes the set of rights and obligations which you wish to be in force between the speaker and addressee for the current exchange" (1993, p. 113).

Three maxims emerge from this principle: the unmarked choice maxim; the marked choice maxim; and the exploratory choice maxim. The unmarked choice maxim states, "Make your code choice the unmarked index of the unmarked RO set in talk exchanges when you wish to establish or affirm that RO set" (Myers-Scotton, 1993, p. 114). The marked choice maxim directs, "Make a marked code choice...when you wish to establish a new RO set as unmarked for the current exchange" (Myers-Scotton, 1993, p. 131). Finally, the exploratory choice maxim states, "When an unmarked choice is not clear, use CS (codeswitching) to make alternate exploratory choices as candidates for an unmarked choice and thereby as an index of a RO set which you favor" (Myers-Scotton, 1993, p. 142). In this sense, social meanings of language choice, as well as the causes of alternation, are defined completely in terms of participant rights and obligations.

The Markedness Model uses the marked versus unmarked distinction to explain the social and psychological motivations for making one language choice over another. What community norms would predict is unmarked; what the community norms would not predict is marked (Myers-Scotton, 1998:5). As Kieswetter (1997, p. 15) explains, the unmarked choice is considered as the expected choice within that particular context, whereas making a marked choice often carries extra social meaning. The Markedness Model (1993, 1998) is appropriate for the present study as it relates to the choice of one linguistic variety over other possible varieties in a speech context.

Methodology

The targeted population of this study consisted of all Bette indigenes who reside in Obudu. All participants were Bette speakers from different villages in Obudu Local Government Area in Cross River State, and have Nigerian nationality. The participants were chosen on grounds of convenience and on the basis of availability. Two assistants who belong to the community helped the researcher to distribute and collect the language questionnaire. They distributed the questionnaire among their friends, people who worked with them, some of their neighbours, and their acquaintances who belong to the selected community.

A sample of 100 participants was selected to be the focus of this study. The sample showed a wide range of several important demographic variables i.e. age, gender, place of birth, occupation, marital status, religion...etc. It consisted of 66 males and 34 females of which 86 were married, 7 were engaged, 5 were single and 2 were widowed.

The sample also covered a wide range of educational levels. In fact, 26% hold Bachelor's degree or HND, 35% hold Master's degree, 8% hold PhD degree, 10% hold OND, 6% hold NCE, and 15% hold SSCE. Regarding the respondents' work background, 9% have a business- related profession, 32% work in civil services field, 4% work as craftsmen, 7% work in the medical field and 48% work in the educational field.

The researchers designed a questionnaire which was created specifically to fulfill the needs of the current study. The questionnaire was piloted and pretested before it was administered to the sample in Obudu. It was written in English with a covering letter that explained the objectives of the questionnaire and how to fill it out. The questionnaire was adapted from

Dweik (2000), Al-Rifa'i (2012), Nofal (2011), Al-Nahar (2009) and Dweik & Qawar (2015). Some items were added, and others were modified to meet the needs of the current study. The questionnaire dealt with language choice which aimed to find information about the respondents' choice of language in different domains. The goal was to identify factors that determine the linguistic choice among Bette native speakers in Obudu.

Results

What are the factors that determine the linguistic choice among the Bette native speakers in Obudu?

Statements	Bette (Freq)	Pidgin (Freq)	English (Freq)
Family and home play an important role in using...	100	-	-
Social interactions strengthen the use of...	100	81	-
Religion strengthens the use of...	68	-	72
Work requires using...	-	36	64
Ethnic identity is expressed in...	100	-	-
School, college and university education is in...	-	52	90
Discussion in club, beer parlour etc in...	52	48	-
Social network sites are in...	-	48	67

Results reported in the Table above showed the respondents' responses to the factors that support their choice of Bette, Pidgin and English respectively in Obudu. In answering this question, the respondents tended to provide more than one answer. In other words, they chose more than one language for certain questions. For example, when respondents were asked which language strengthens the social interactions, they unanimously chose Bette and Pidgin. 52 chose Bette and 48 chose Pidgin. A positive correlation was found between the role of home and family on the one hand, and ethnic identity on the other, as being supporting factors for the choice of Bette. All the 100 respondents confirmed that home and family played an important role in using Bette, and that religion strengthened the use of English along with the ethnic identity that could be fully expressed in Bette. 52 respondents reported that they interact in Bette while 48 respondents socialize with Pidgin in the same domain of club house or beer parlour.

Regarding Pidgin and English; Work, educational institutions, and social networking were clearly supporting factors for the choice and use of these languages. As for work, most respondents' answers indicated that both Pidgin and English are crucial work requirements. Furthermore, chatting on the social media was another strong factor for the choice of Pidgin and English; 48 chose Pidgin while 67 chose English. 52 and 90 respondents expressed that the educational institutions used Pidgin and English respectively.

Discussion of Findings

Based on the analysis of data obtained from the questionnaire, a number of factors such as social status, educational attainment, ethnicity, occupation, place, media, formality of situation, etc, were identified that contributed to the choice and use of one language or more. Results shown in the above Table indicated that 100% believed that home and family played a significant role in choosing and using Bette language. Data from the table also indicated that Obudu indigenes believed that Bette identified them, and help them attaining their ethnic identity. The overall responses concerning using English in educational institutions, work places and formal interactions were very positive. When the respondents were asked when they chose English, the majority commented that English are important for their educational advancement, good jobs and formal interactions. Moreover, the respondents believed Pidgin helps perform social function in places like clubs, beer parlours, etc and enhances their social interaction in the neighborhood.

These findings agreed with Fasold (1990) and Gumperz (1964) who pointed out that being multilingual, speakers are able to choose particular language for particular purpose. The findings also agree with David (2006) and Coulmas (1997) who gave the notion that language choice is determined by the milieu in which the speaker find themselves; by the language that co-exist in this niche and then by their needs and the typological situation of the co-existing languages and that language choice is triggered by several factors like social status, gender, education, age, ethnicity, topic, place, etc. Moreover, the results agree with Thomason (2001) who pointed out that language choice depends on several factors like the topic, the relative status of speakers and identity. Furthermore, these findings agree with Managam (2004), Ferrer and Sankoff (2004), Pillai (2006), Holmes (2008) and Piller (2004) who

demonstrated that dominant languages, prestigious languages and language preference determine language choice in multilingual communities.

Conclusion

The Bette native speakers of Obudu Local Government Area of Cross River State live in a multilingual community, and are able to choose Bette, Pidgin and English according to the situation they find themselves. Their choice is triggered by factors such as social status, educational attainment, ethnicity, occupation, purpose, topic, place, and preference. Bette speakers have positive attitudes towards Bette above Pidgin and English. They freely use their Bette language in the domain of home with family members, and when interacting in club houses and beer parlours because it is the language of wider acceptance and foster inter-personal relationship. Also, both Bette and English dominate in most worship centers as interpretations from English to Bette go on concurrently. In addition, they use English in formal situations and in educational institutions as it is the prestigious language usually more favoured in formal settings. Pidgin is more preferred in Governmental offices and when people network socially. Results also showed that Bette native speakers mix English and Pidgin languages in the domain of neighborhood, with friends, and while chatting on social media.

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Appendix

The Questionnaire

Dear Respondents,

I am a postgraduate student of Linguistics in the Benue State University, Makurdi. I would like to express my gratitude in advance for taking time in filling out the attached questionnaire which investigates the factors that support language choice of Bette native speakers in Obudu Local Government Area of Cross River State.

You have been selected because you are a member of the investigated community. I am interested only in obtaining the needed information that helps me find valid answers for this study.

Please note that all information provided will be used by the researcher for only scientific research purposes. Thank you very much for your cooperation. Thank you.

The Researcher.

Statements	Bette	Pidgin	English
Family and home play an important role in using...			
Social interactions strengthen the use of...			
Religion strengthens the use of...			
Work requires using...			
Ethnic identity is expressed in...			

School, college and university education is in...			
Discussion in club, beer parlour etc in...			
Social network sites are in...			

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