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Ethnicity, conflict and language choice
An example from northern Ghana

Paul Kerswill and Edward Salifu Mahama

18.1 Introduction

This chapter takes as its premise the idea that language distinctions are rarely neutral, in the sense of not symbolising different identities or sets of identities. The choice of particular languages, as well as of particular phonological and grammatical features of a language, almost always indexes a range of social parameters, including social status, ethnicity and gender, as well as place (Auer, 2007, Llamas and Watt, 2009). Inherent in parameters such as these are unequal power relations, which may be political, economic or social in nature. Sometimes, power relations are structural and overt, involving factors that lead to gross economic differences, especially ownership of means of production, land ownership and a person’s access to patronage. Other kinds of inequality, such as those relating to gender and ethnicity, are not clearly economic in origin, but routinely lead to economic differentials.

The question we address in this chapter is: do language differences in and of themselves have the capacity to cause conflict between different social groups in a society?

In addressing this question, we will focus on the political history of a particular region and the conflicts that may arise as a consequence of that history. This includes, in our case, invasion and occupation taking place within the region perpetrated by one group or another, followed by the emergence of new power structures over time. It also includes the aftermath of political and economic domination by forces external to the country – colonialism. We will take as a case study a geographically compact, multilingual region of northern Ghana, in which languages are strongly associated with the ethnic groups living there. Although the language–ethnicity relationship in this region is highly salient, it is not identical for each group, a fact that has consequences for attitudes towards the languages, and hence, for language use in potentially conflictual communication between groups. Conflict has been real in the region: political tensions have been spilling over into violence and war for some decades, with many deaths and large-scale displacements (Debrah et al., 2016).

Given the fact that languages and ethnic groups are generally aligned in this region, the question arises as to whether language itself has ever been a direct cause of conflict. Or does language, as an overt marker of group identity, have the potential to be mobilised as a proxy
for underlying conflictual relations – and hence a *casus belli*? We will consider how these questions play themselves out elsewhere in the world before moving on to the case study.

18.2 Involvement of language in political struggles

Laitin (2000, p.533) suggests that language is often no more than an incidental matter in inter-group conflict and is rarely, if ever, an underlying cause of conflict – at least not in the sense of directly generating violence. Usually, any struggles are fought out in debates at the “discursive level” (Darquennes, 2015, p.14). Darquennes (2015, p.15) gives the example of the so-called “language conflict” in 19th and 20th century Norway, where the ostensible argument was over the direction that standardisation should take, but where the underlying conflict lay in differing ideologies of authenticity and purism. These ideologies reflected the powerful nationalist sentiments among some sectors of the population following home rule in 1814 and independence from Sweden in 1905.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, there have been numerous intercommunal struggles where violence has been accompanied by linguistic disputes. These struggles have a range of causes and manifestations, as well as consequences for the populations affected. They also vary in the extent to which language is a central component. In order to explore the limits of the involvement of language, we will briefly present a number of contrasting instances. The first three took place in North America or Europe; following these, we present a language-centred conflict in postcolonial Africa, in order to better contextualise the Ghanaian case study.

18.2.1 From Quebec to Yugoslavia – language as a catalyst for violence in ongoing inter-group disputes

During the 1960s, the Canadian province of Quebec found itself exposed to a violent separatist movement, the *Front de libération du Québec*, which stated, among other things, that it targeted “all enterprises […] which do not use French as their primary language” (*Front de Libération du Québec*, n.d., Levine, 1990). Language was a critical element in this dispute, which led to a number of deaths. Today, it appears that the French language is the main (but not exclusive) carrier of the *québécois* identity (Langlois, 1999).

In an ostensibly parallel case, in the 1970s and 1980s, Wales saw similar activity on the part of a separatist movement, *Meibion Glyndŵr*, one of whose aims was to enforce the use of Welsh in all domains of Welsh life. This organisation was responsible for a series of attacks, including the burning of holiday homes owned by people from England, in protest at the housing crisis that they believed was being caused by the non-Welsh ownership of these properties (Ireland, 2015, p.96). However, compared to Quebec, language and national identification seem to be less clearly aligned in Wales, with *Meibion Glyndŵr’s* purist and essentialist view that Welsh identity is intrinsically tied to the Welsh language being at odds with research findings. Lee (2016, pp.44–8) discusses a number of studies of language and identity in Wales, including Coupland et al. (2005), who found that teenagers across the country felt very “Welsh”, but that their engagement with the language varied greatly. Lee (2016, p.46) concludes that this and related research “problematise[s] the presumed connection between the Welsh language and Welshness and highlight[s] the complex role of attitude in language revitalisation”. Welsh, then, is not a condition of Welsh identity, though the language issue is strongly linked to political and regional cleavages within the country. The situation can be seen as postcolonial, in the sense that it flows from
the annexation of Wales by English kings in the Middle Ages. As we will see, in Ghana, the relationship between English and indigenous languages is also not straightforward, even after the departure of the English-speaking colonisers in 1957.

A different type of conflict involving language has its origins in the new nationalism in the former Yugoslavia, where national bodies have been tasked with distinguishing the “new” languages of Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia from each other (Greenberg, 2004, p.378, 2010, p.382; Trudgill, 2004). What is still a dialect continuum has been “roofed” (Kloss, 1967) by four discrete standard languages following national boundaries, with new, minimally different varieties being imposed within each new polity. This move has served to maintain the inter-group distinctions (and, to a large extent, the animosity) that came to a head in the 1990s, leading to the Yugoslav wars. This still dynamic and bitter inter-group conflict was caused by the resurgence of nationalist political aspirations in a state (the former Yugoslavia) that had sought to suppress, or at least minimise, these. It is an early manifestation of a populist discourse across Europe that sees a benefit in smaller, more homogeneous (or “pure”) entities, with a national identity mirrored by a national language. This, too, is a phenomenon that manifests itself in Africa – though rarely at state level – and in our case study we will see its operation at the inter-group level.

18.2.2 Aftermath of colonialism – new social structures and inequalities

Our final example is part of the long-term fallout from European colonialism in Africa. South Africa is exceptional in this context because, unlike countries like Ghana, independence was not won by the indigenous population, but by the descendants of the European settlers. By instituting the apartheid system, they were able to maintain power by dividing the population along racial lines, allocating most resources to white people and introducing extremely restrictive residential laws. We discuss the South African situation here, because a violent conflict was directly caused by the imposition of an ex-colonial language on an indigenous population. In 1975, the government decreed that Afrikaans (also an ex-colonial language) should be used alongside English in schools for Black children (Phaswana, 2003, p.120). In June 1976, this led to Soweto township school students rising up in protest against the policy, which they saw as the imposition of an oppressive regime’s language on the population at large. Dozens of children were killed or injured by the police and army. As Phaswana (2003, p.120) comments, “The Soweto rebellion marked the first time in the history of South Africa that the people had resisted the apartheid government’s language policy”, with the result that the policy of making Afrikaans and English co-equal in Black schools was abandoned. Ninety-six per cent of schools subsequently chose English as the medium of instruction. A significant corollary of this victory was that the indigenous languages were almost completely sidelined: as Phaswana (2003, p.120) puts it, “Education in African languages was perceived as a governmental ploy to promote ethnicity and prevent Black unity” – in other words, any promotion of African languages under apartheid was seen as a divide-and-rule policy (Phaswana, 2003, p.120; see also Mazrui, 1975, who shows that this was common elsewhere on the continent). The Afrikaans-and-English policy of the 1970s attempted to impose a hierarchy of prestige with English and Afrikaans at the top and indigenous languages at the bottom. What the policy unintentionally achieved was to bolster solidarity among the Black population, with the result that ethnic and linguistic differences became de-emphasised. The current, post-apartheid policy is that the pupils’ L1 (first language) should be the medium of instruction in Grades 1–3, and English thereafter; this is also the practice, with English introduced as an additional language at an early stage.
Afrikaans is the medium of instruction in some schools (Trudell, 2016). As such, South Africa follows the same pattern as much of the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa, with the ex-colonial language being the sole medium of instruction, usually from the fourth year of primary school. Also, as in the rest of “Anglophone” Africa, because of parental and other pressure, there is a push towards English as medium of instruction at the outset, despite extensive research showing that this leads to poor educational outcomes across the board (Trudell, 2016). Although implementation of mother-tongue policies remains variable and lacking in acceptance, it is nevertheless on the increase (Heugh, 2017).

South Africa under apartheid shows how an externally imposed, originally colonial, system of authority interacted with existing ethnolinguistic realities “on the ground”. For much of Sub-Saharan Africa, colonialism led to major changes in the local and regional language ecologies, and these essentially remained in place when the new African states were created from the 1950s onwards. At the very least, colonialism created indigenous elites with a Western education and a high degree of proficiency in the colonial language, which maintained the official status it had had under colonial rule. The consequences of this history played out differently in different countries, depending on the relations – economic, cultural, religious and historical – between the groups contained within them. Many conflicts, largely between ethnic groups, have arisen – often crossing the new national borders. Only rarely is language directly implicated; however, the postcolonial settlements within each country changed the relationships between the different groups. Later, we will see how this affected Ghana. Although the history of struggle in South Africa differs from almost all the other countries, in that the colonisers became indigenised while still retaining political and economic control, the sociolinguistic outcomes in post-apartheid South Africa are broadly in line with those elsewhere.

There is, then, rather sparse evidence that language is an explicit or central cause of conflict: of the cases we have cited, only Quebec and Soweto stand out in that language was the direct object of conflict. Even there, there were prior social cleavages, with disagreements about language policy becoming the trigger for conflict.

18.2.3 Language contact and multilingualism do not always lead to conflict

The potential for language-based conflict (non-violent and violent) in present-day Sub-Saharan Africa remains, but has been fundamentally changed by the colonial and postcolonial experience. With the greatly increased mobility of African people in the decades since independence, leading to rapid urbanisation across the continent, conflicts with a linguistic component may well be on the rise as multilingualism increases; however, there is also a force for integration expressed in the numerous urban contact languages, or youth languages, which have emerged in metropolises across the continent, from Abidjan to Johannesburg, via Kinshasa and Nairobi, for example, Nouchi, Tsotsitaal, Indoubil and Sheng (Kießling and Mous, 2004, McLaughlin, 2009, Wiese, 2017; see Cheshire et al., 2011 for a European example). We should therefore be wary of claims that conflict is an inevitable outcome of ethnic, social and linguistic differences (see Rampton, 2005 for an account of how multilingual practices can be non-conflictual, without minimising ethnic difference). Moreover, in many parts of Africa (and other multilingual regions of the world), even small communities are multilingual, with between three and ten (or even more) indigenous languages being used. Individuals routinely acquire most or all of these languages and use them – plus languages of wider communication – on a daily basis. As Stroud (2003, p.17) points out in the context of the use of local languages as media of instruction, “the educational use of
indigenous languages is caught up in a veritable cross-swirl of local and global currents”, and, referring to informal economies, “[these] work through practices of multilingualism in vernaculars and metropolitan languages, and use various forms of hybrid language, such as code switching, blends, transfer, and the like” (Stroud, 2003, p.25). In such cases, multilingual repertoires are the norm and, while speakers can ascribe linguistic items to named varieties, their repertoires may be highly “fluid”. Such repertoires have been characterised as instances of “translanguaging”, which is “a theoretical lens that […] posits that rather than possessing two or more autonomous language systems […] bilinguals, multilinguals, and indeed, all users of language, select and deploy particular features from a unitary linguistic repertoire to make meaning and to negotiate particular communicative contexts” (Vogel and García, 2017). Lüpke (2016, p.48) expands on this approach in a study of the Casamance region of Senegal:

In the Baïnounk language areas, languages do not express identity in essentialist fashion, as in Western language ideologies. Rather, languages are used in indexical fashion and multilingualism is a social strategy that enables speakers to index different identities to different stakeholders.

As we will see, language use in northern Ghana is also highly multilingual.

Use of language can also help heal old wounds. The joking relationship is a custom found across West Africa and wider afield (Davidheiser, 2006, Goody, 1973, Lüpke and Storch, 2013, pp.45–7, Mahama, 2004, p.171). These relationships involve an obligation, or an expectation, that members of particular ethnic groups should engage in teasing behaviour with members of specified other groups. This has several functions, but it is a way of mitigating old enmities; for example, when it is known that, during the slave trade, a particular group captured members of another and led them to the coast to be transported. Joking relationships are not inherently cross-linguistic, but they are common in multilingual societies, as Lüpke and Storch (2013, p.47) attest.

18.2.4 Monolingualism does not always preserve the peace

If African urban contact languages and translanguaging appear to portray relative peace and stability, we should not see an absence of linguistic differences as similarly guaranteeing the absence of conflict: the 1994 genocide committed by the Hutus against the Tutsis in Rwanda did not have a linguistic element, as both groups speak Kinyarwanda. Hutu propaganda against Tutsis did use linguistic means, but it did not play on linguistic difference: the propaganda included using labels for Tutsis such as inzoka (“snake”) and abanyamahanga (“foreigners”) (Ngabonziza, 2013).

18.3 Identity and language use in the Northern Region of Ghana

By way of background to the case study (Section 18.4), we provide an outline of the linguistic, historical and political situation in northern Ghana. There is a close relationship there between language and ethnicity, and the fact that there is competition and sometimes conflict between ethnic groups means that there may be sensitivity surrounding language choice. There are parallel systems of administration – one traditional and essentially pre-colonial, the other representing the postcolonial nation state. This leads to a complex hierarchy of languages, reflecting the pre-colonial and postcolonial situations.
18.3.1 Language use in Ghana – domains

Our choice of Ghana’s Northern Region was initially predicated on the fact that it has seen the involvement of a large number of development agencies, both local and international, over many years. Crucial to the success of these NGOs is their ability to communicate with stakeholders at all levels, including officials, traditional authorities and local people in many walks of life. Since those involved in delivering development programmes almost invariably come from outside the region, the issue of language choice becomes critical. However, agencies do not always reflect on the consequences of their language choices (Wolff, 2016, p.242), even though many may follow the practice recommended in recent handbooks of using languages which are understood and accepted (FAO, 2014, p.52), rather than insisting on an ex-colonial language, like French (Robinson, 1996). We will see how even the selection of a local language may be fraught with difficulties, since an injudicious choice may evoke resentment.

As the focus of this chapter is language and conflict, language and development communication is a particularly advantageous domain to investigate, since it may open latent social fissures, rivalries and tensions, many of which have a linguistic component. This will become clear in the following outline of Ghana’s linguistic situation.

Ghana, like many African countries, is multilingual, having around eighty languages (Ethnologue, n.d. a). Some are closely related and mutually intelligible, while others are not. Akan is by far the largest language, composed of largely mutually intelligible varieties such as Twi and Fante. Akan is spoken natively by between 30–45 percent (Ethnologue, n.d. b, Osam, 2003) of the population of 27.6 million. Beyond that, an estimated one million speak it as an additional language. These figures reflect the fact that Akan has emerged as the pre-eminent lingua franca of the country – particularly in the south, though it is also understood by many in the north. It thus holds a special status in the nation’s “language ecology” (Haugen, 1972), a fact that is relevant to our discussion. The extent of use of Akan will depend on degree of urbanisation and hence contact with a wider range of people; in the regional capital, Tamale, Akan is used by many business people and officials from the south, and is otherwise widely understood.

The study is located in the Northern Region, one of the ten administrative regions of Ghana (There are a further two regions to the north of the Northern Region, Upper West and Upper East). In the north of the country generally, most languages are related, many belonging to the Mole-Dagbani group. Dagbani (also spelt “Dagbanli”), one of the two main languages we will be dealing with in this chapter, belongs to this group, and is spoken by over one million people. The other language, Gonja, belongs to the Guang family and has 3–400,000 speakers. Of particular interest to us is the status of a non-Ghanaian language, Hausa, widely used as a lingua franca. Because of its special position, we will discuss it in some detail.

Hausa is spoken natively in Nigeria, but is used (in various forms, including a pidgin) in other countries of West Africa, particularly Ghana, as a lingua franca among migrants from neighbouring countries and other parts of the same country, and also as a community language in the zongos (Muslim migrant neighbourhoods in towns and cities throughout Ghana). Although it can be heard on local radio and television stations, it is not a language of literacy in Ghana (Kropp Dakubu, 1988, Mahama, 2004, p.75). It is also widely used for trade at a local level. In Tamale, it may also be used within families where there are different first languages. We will see that the use versus non-use of Hausa is an important distinction between the two villages to be discussed here.
As in much of West Africa, individual multilingualism is common. This is particularly true of speakers from the smaller ethnolinguistic groups, many of whom speak more than three languages, with code mixing and code-switching being widespread (Kropp Dakubu, 2000; Mahama, 2013); in some communities, this could be characterised as translanguaging. Although research taking this approach to non-institutional face-to-face conversation is lacking, it is a common practice in Ghanaian classrooms (Agbozo and Yevudey, forthcoming). There have been several attempts to implement a policy of using a local language as the medium of instruction in the first three years of school, switching to English from primary four. This policy has never been stable, since (as we saw for other countries) parents, and politicians who count on their support, may prefer schools to teach only in English. A major barrier to implementing literacy in all languages is the lack of materials and teachers competent in many of the languages. Only nine languages receive government sponsorship, and these may be used as the medium of instruction in kindergarten and the first three years of primary school. They are also used for the teaching of initial literacy, using (often limited) printed materials (cf. Ansah, 2014 and Agbozo and Yevudey, forthcoming, on the limitations of this policy and the highly variable, pragmatically driven practices in the classroom; see also Agbedor, 2018 for a critique of current policy and practice). This means that a large majority of the local languages are either not used as a vehicle for literacy, or else they do not have a written form at all (though there are local efforts to alleviate this situation; see Sherris, 2017).

English and Ghanaian languages have largely mutually exclusive domains of use. English is the only official language of the country, permeating all national and regional institutions. In addition to education, English is used at all levels of official administration, as well as in the judiciary, printed newspapers and online news channels and fora. English, too, dominates business, banking and the formal economy. However, major Ghanaian languages are used on a range of radio and TV stations, as are local languages on local stations (Akpojivi and Fosu, 2016). In the public domain, Ghanaian languages are only seen in written form on some local shop signs and slogans on the back of cars, minibuses and lorries. They are used, too, in social media, where there is code-switching between them and English (Yevudey, 2018). Spoken Ghanaian languages dominate in the home, in markets and, importantly, the informal economy (economic activities that are not regulated and protected by the state). The significance of the informal economy, and hence of local languages, is pointed up by the fact that 76 percent of economic activity in West Africa is estimated to be in this sector (Igboanusi, 2014, pp.81–2). Omoniyi (2014, pp.11–12) sees local languages as constituting “capital” – or value – on a “linguistic market” (in Bourdieu’s (1991) sense) at the local level, made palpable by the fact that “Farmers, traders, artisans, etc. conduct their business in the indigenous language and expect venturing guests to converge” (Omoniyi, 2014, p.11; our emphasis). However, Ghanaian languages, especially those with large numbers of speakers, are used alongside English in informal conversation in white-collar workplaces, such as offices and educational establishments. In stark contrast, in the increasingly multilingual capital, Accra, English is becoming the lingua franca of school children, as well as being encouraged in the home. In many boarding schools, English is enforced at all times. As a result, there are now children and young people for whom English is the dominant or even only language (Afrifa, 2016), especially in Accra, and this interacts with official language policy; the fact that many urban schools are highly multilingual, as well as containing more or less monolingual Anglophone pupils, means that English is used as the medium of instruction throughout – despite official policy. This is especially true of private schools, which are not regulated by the Ghana Education
This use of English at all levels is less true in the north and in rural areas, though rapidly improving literacy (now standing at 86 percent for 15–24 year olds [UNESCO 2017]) implies an increasing ability to use English – even if the medium of instruction is a local language. The use of English is likely to be correlated with urbanisation, (young) age and level of education.

Despite these rapid changes, there are still traditional formal contexts where the use of local languages is assured. These are in the oral medium and include communication with chiefs and language use in traditional courts and at durbars (gatherings) of chiefs. We will return to this point in the discussion of linguistic and social hierarchies that follows.

18.3.2 Choice of location – hierarchies and tensions

The choice of northern Ghana for the case study is motivated by the three main features of language ecology that we have just outlined. First, multilingualism is widespread and exists even within small communities (Kropp Dakubu, 2000); second, languages are strongly associated with particular ethnolinguistic groups, though to varying degrees; and third, northern Ghana has a set of linguistic oppositions that are multi-layered and reflect different kinds of relationships between ethnic groups and between local and (more) cosmopolitan, non-local groups. Because of the tight association between language, place and ethnicity, each of these three features of language ecology embodies within it the potential for conflict, and indeed there have been several recent violent conflicts in the region. Examining language use in this area allows us to judge the extent to which “language” can itself cause or at least contribute directly to conflict, or whether, because of its symbolic value, it is an ethnic marker that can be exploited in situations where there is tension. In our discussion, we see language behaviour as dynamic and contested, rather than (as in the section above) a series of rational responses to societal norms.

While the social and linguistic characteristics of northern Ghana are similar in outline to the rest of the country (see accounts in Ansah, 2014 and Agbozo and Yevudey, forthcoming), there will be factors specific to each location. In the Northern Region, languages can be arranged hierarchically from the most local to the national and global as follows:

- local languages, usually acquired in childhood in the home
- other local languages, acquired by children in the community
- regional lingua francas, comprising Dagbani and Gonja (and a number of others)
- the non-ethnic lingua francas, Hausa and (to a limited extent) Ghanaian Pidgin English
- the national lingua franca, Akan
- the official language and the main vehicle of literacy, the former colonial language, English.

For many people, some of the positions in this hierarchy may well be occupied by the same language, as will become clear. What is likely to be specific to the area under discussion is the particular, local, set of historical and social relationships between ethnic groups, including conflicts (Awedoba, 2009, Debrah et al., 2016, Mahama and Longi, 2013); we outline some of these conflicts in Section 18.3.3. First, we consider how the hierarchy leads to sometimes incompatible choices.

Which languages are initially acquired depends on the languages used by parents and other adults, children and adolescents in the child’s immediate environment. In rural areas, it may not be meaningful to distinguish between the home and the community. While these local
languages are primarily associated with ethnic groups, such as the Hangas and Tampulmas, some of them are also lingua francas, which therefore have a wider currency. Because they are also associated with particular groups, their use might be resisted by members of less powerful groups. In our case, the lingua francas comprise Gonja and Dagbani, whose speakers belong to the two main ethnic groups in the area, the Gonja and the Dagomba. They occupy the traditionally-held territories of Gonjaland and Dagbon, respectively. A village in each of these traditional areas is the focus of our case study.

As in most of Sub-Saharan Africa, the linguistic situation is postcolonial in the sense that the former colonial language has remained the only official language – as we have seen. The fact that indigenous languages retain a range of formal functions is highly symbolic of the continuation of the pre-colonial order. This order, which remains politically and locally influential, is frequently at odds with the postcolonial state, despite the fact that traditional rulers have only a limited and often disputed official status. This is exactly parallel to the way in which the traditional languages are afforded only limited official recognition. Many of the ethnic groups, through their chiefs and kings, nevertheless have the power not only of tradition but also of land tenure; for example, because the official, originally British, notion of freehold conflicts with traditional land rights, establishing title to land in Ghana is often difficult.

The Ghanaian polity, therefore, embodies both a Western (partly British) system of government and a traditional one. The Western-style government comprises a democratically elected parliament headed by a directly elected executive president. The ten administrative regions have some autonomy, as do local city and town authorities. There is separation of state and judiciary and a high degree of press freedom (the country ranks 26th out of 180 [Reporters without Borders, 2018]). The traditional systems of authority are local and territorially based. As we have seen, they are often reflected in ethnic group names. Because of the three-way alignment between ethnonym, language name and name of territory, language is a powerful marker of both ethnicity and place. The importance of the traditional structures for the modern state becomes clear during election campaigns, when the support of paramount chiefs and kings, such as the Asantehene (king of the Ashanti, who resides in the Twi-speaking central-southern city of Kumasi), is often crucial to the outcome, because traditional (tribal) allegiances are still strongly maintained. Even today, there is a powerful (and hotly disputed, but peaceful) campaign to carve out a new administrative region based on Gonjaland, led by the Gonja king (Ghanaweb.com, 2018a). This is another example of how traditional structures continue to have a profound influence not only on people’s identities, but also on government policy.

We see, then, two parallel social and political hierarchies of prestige and influence. The first represents a continuation of the pre-colonial situation and consists of the traditional kingdoms with a hereditary king or chief (in many Ghanaian groups, this man is chosen by a senior female family member). These are known as “chiefly” or “cephalous” groups. Below these in prestige come the “non-chiefly” or “acephalous” groups, who do not recognise the authority of a paramount chief. Often, these find themselves as client tribes under a chiefly group. It has been argued that the British colonial powers exploited the chiefly/non-chiefly distinction by imposing a system of indirect rule that invested authority in the chiefly groups only, thereby causing tension with the non-chiefly groups; it remains a source of hostility to this day, as we shall see (Debrah et al., 2016, p.10). For the most part today, languages with a large number of speakers, such as Gonja and Dagbani, are spoken by chiefly groups, while those with small numbers of speakers belong to the non-chiefly groups, such as the Hanga and Tampulma.
The second, Western-influenced, official hierarchy is perhaps easier to observe, since, enforced as it is by the paraphernalia of state, such as ministries, schools, the police and the army, it is overt.

Batibo (2005) models the double hierarchy we have described for Ghana by means of a “triglossic structure”, as shown in Table 18.1. The labels “H” and “L” refer to the “high” versus “low” functions associated with particular language varieties in the classical diglossia model (Ferguson, 1959). “High” and “low” are terms used here to refer to the context in which these languages are used. “High” refers to languages used in a more official capacity, usually with a written form, as in the case of English in Ghana. It is used for education and all official communication. “Low” refers to the language of the home, street and everyday interactions. In Table 18.1, English is the first “H” language. Dominant indigenous languages such as Akan are “L” because, compared to English, they serve “low” functions. However, in situations where the use of an official language is not expected, Akan becomes the “H”, because of the role it plays as a language of wider communication. In this case, the minority languages alone (when these are not also dominant languages) assume the “low” functions. The term “triglossia” refers to the fact that there are two interlinked hierarchies yielding three levels, not a single hierarchy. Agbozo and Yevudey (forthcoming) adapt this diagram for Ghana by adding languages, as shown in Table 18.2.

The tension between the postcolonial, official structures and the traditional ones is made salient when English is chosen over a Ghanaian language or vice versa. Competition between a dominant and a minority Ghanaian language will evoke more local oppositions. This does not imply that the linguistic contrasts are the causes of conflict, but rather that their use may symbolise difference in a way that can be used strategically. In these cases, language choice may actually be the only sign of the tension.

We will examine one further model since it represents both a summary of contemporary language alignments as well as a proposal for the development of African countries taking account of these alignments. Bodomo’s (1996, p.44) “localised trilingualism”

Table 18.1 Typical triglossic structure of language use in an African country

| H | Ex-colonial language |
| L | Dominant indigenous language |
|   | Minority language |

(from Batibo, 2005, p.18, Table 2)

Table 18.2 A triglossic structure of language use in Ghana

| H | Ex-colonial language |
|   | English |
| L | Dominant indigenous language |
|   | Nine government-sponsored languages: Akan (three varieties), Daqaare, Ga-Dangbe, Dagbani, Ewe, Ga, Gonja, Kasem, Nzema |
|   | Minority language |
|   | Other Ghanaian indigenous varieties |

(from Agbozo and Yevudey, forthcoming, p.6, Table 4)
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Figure 18.1  Localised trilingualism – a model of development communication
(Bodomo, 1996, p. 44)
Key: LWC (ENG.FRE) = Language of Wider Communication (English, French).

(see Figure 18.1) closely corresponds to Batibo’s (2005) model. It also shows two key domains of activity (political administration and education), matching these with language use. Simultaneously, it shows what Bodomo considers the optimal language choice in development communication at the local level – the mother tongue. This is a satisfying model, although when it comes to the choice of language for primary school instruction, it does not fully take into account the fact that there may be hidden animosities that may be brought to the fore by a particular language choice. This is a point we return to repeatedly in this chapter in the context of development communication.

18.4 The Daboya and Pong-Tamale project

In this section, we argue, first, that rural development is an ideal context to investigate the relationship between language, identity and conflict. After discussing the causes of conflicts in the north of Ghana, we then present a sociolinguistic study of language choice and
development communication in two villages there. We argue that, in order to reduce the potential for conflict, development communication should take into account not only local languages but also local inter-ethnic and linguistic sensitivities.

18.4.1 Development, conflict and communication

Daboya and Pong-Tamale are multilingual villages situated in the Gonja and Dagbon traditional areas, respectively, and form the core of our case study. Their location is shown in Figure 18.2. Both have been the sites of development programmes over a number of years. The United Nations Development Programme (2018) defines its approach to (sustainable) development as “tackl[ing] the connected issues of multidimensional poverty, inequality and exclusion, and sustainability, while enhancing knowledge, skills and production technologies to enlarge peoples’ choices, reduce risks and sustain development gains”. For present purposes, one of the key risks is conflict, the mitigation of which is the concern of conflict resolution initiatives (e.g. Uwazie, 2018). However, successful development depends on communication, and in this regard FAO (n.d.) provides the following definition:

Communication for Development (ComDev) is a key driver in agriculture and rural development. It is a results-oriented communication process based on dialogue and participation, that allows rural people to voice their opinions, share knowledge and actively engage in their own development.

By looking closely at language choices in development communication in situations of potential conflict, this chapter can be seen as a contribution to this agenda.

![Figure 18.2 Location map of northern Ghana, showing Daboya, Pong-Tamale and the city of Tamale (Google Maps)](image-url)
18.4.2 Conflicts in the Dagbon and Gonja traditional areas

Although the initial focus of our study was not on whether language could be a source of conflict, this chapter makes use of data collected to find out if this could be the case (Mahama, 2004, 2013). We begin with a brief review of conflicts in northern Ghana, where our study was conducted, in order to understand the drivers of these conflicts.

Although Ghana is less prone to internal conflict than many other countries in West Africa, there are reports of sporadic attacks by some ethnic groups on others, particularly in the north. Mahama (2010) made a list of such conflicts, including the Konkomba–Bimoba wars in 1984, 1986 and 1989 and the Mamprusi–Kusasi conflict in 2001 and 2002. The latter arose as a result of a dispute following local elections and the appointment of a District Chief Executive. Many other such conflicts have taken place in this part of the country. Debrah et al. (2016, p.1) state that “of the estimated over one hundred chieftaincy and ethnic disputes across the country, the Northern Region alone accounts for 70 percent of them”. Most of the conflicts in Ghana are either inter-ethnic or intra-ethnic, the latter largely being caused by chieftaincy disputes. Many of the leaders of such conflicts first mobilise people from their own ethno-linguistic groups (Tonah, 2007). Conflict is frequent in northern Ghana.

A recent, violent, conflict is noteworthy because it involved two of the ethnic groups under discussion. This occurred between the Tampulmas and Gonjas around Mankaragu, near Daboya (Tampulmas represent one of the minority groups, or client tribes, in Daboya). The conflict took place in January 2018 and as with many of the ethnic conflicts in the north, the main cause was claims for political supremacy (Mahama and Longi, 2013, p.122). In a communiqué, an individual claimed to be the chief of the Tampulmas and therefore of the same status as the Gonja paramount chief of the area, where Tampulmas are politically his subjects. A village was burnt down and there were two fatalities (Ghanaweb.com, 2018b). This conflict, which has precedents, was to do with ethnic identity and power, and (for reasons we will explain with respect to Tampulma–Gonja relations) not primarily linguistic. Meanwhile, as noted above, a number of Gonja chiefs have proposed the creation of a new region, to be carved out of the Northern Region, bearing the Gonja name.

Another key cause of conflicts in the north is the claim of ownership and use of natural resources, including land (Kirby, 2006). Mahama and Longi (2013) conclude that conflicts were due to long-standing issues of succession, abuse of power by some chiefly groups, access to the means of livelihood and threats to culture and identity. Of this group of researchers, it appears to be only Awedoba (2009) who suggests that language and dialect differences might be the bases for conflicts in northern Ghana – though he does not follow up the idea.

18.4.3 History, ethnic alignment and language in Daboya and Pong-Tamale

Daboya and Pong-Tamale share many cultural traits, including traditional courts where judgments on common crimes are passed, relating, for instance, to adultery, witchcraft, chieftaincy and land disputes. In the judgments of such cases, Gonja and Dagbani are used, respectively. In common with most of the north, the population is Muslim, though many beliefs and practices from traditional religions are maintained (Owusu-Ansah, 1994, pp.107–8). Both villages are highly multilingual, with between eight and 12 African languages spoken in each (Mahama, 2004, p.149). Individuals tend to have some proficiency in four to six of these, and many have some knowledge of English, which is the main language of literacy, and Akan, the de facto lingua franca of the south. Although we have not investigated it, the conditions are right for translanguaging to occur. In spite of these strong...
similarities, ethnic groups in northern Ghana differ significantly when it comes to both language and traditional leadership; we turn to this now.

Daboya is a village (or small town) with a population of around 4,000. It is located 67 km west of Tamale (pop. 360,000), the capital of the Northern Region. The area is said to have been conquered by the Gonja warrior Jakpa, who was despatched there from the court of Mali in the late 17th century (Iddrisu, 2015a). An important feature of the early Gonja kingdom was the division into estates, the first two being the ruling class and the imams, while the third and largest was composed of the “indigenous peoples, such as […] the Tampluma [=Tampulma – PK/ESM] […], all of whom were assimilated into the Gonja state” (Iddrisu, 2015a, p.34). This situation pertains today, with several groups, including the Tampulmas and the Hangas, being apparently “assimilated”, but still linguistically and culturally distinct, while still having to accept Gonja hegemony. As we have seen, these groups are non-chiefly, a fact exploited by the British colonial administration, exacerbating ill-feeling. Because of the assimilationist policy, many (but not all) non-Gonja residents have undergone a language shift to Gonja, with nearly all being competent in Gonja, using it as the lingua franca. As a result, most non-Gonjas have dual identities: they are Gonja by association, while simultaneously maintaining their ethnic identities. Linguistic choices in Daboya may be mainly pragmatic, in response to the interlocutor, but they are also identity-driven and may involve code-switching. While the non-Gonjas learn languages other than their own, “native” Gonjas have little motivation to do so – a sign of the power/status asymmetry. Recent years have seen a considerable increase in ethnic sensitivity among the Gonja client tribes, starting in the 1980s when the Vaglas made a bid for self-governance. As mentioned above, there have been recent clashes between the Gonjas and Tampulmas, though so far not directly affecting Daboya.

Pong-Tamale has a population of 3,000 and lies some 40 km north of Tamale. It is part of the former Dagomba kingdom, which was established as long ago as 1480 (Iddrisu, 2015b, p.25). This fact, along with the larger population and greater economic power of Dagbon compared to Gonjaland – the city of Tamale lies within Dagbon – means that there is no dispute about the traditional ownership of the land, nor is there any ambiguity as to ethnic identity. Pong-Tamale, too, is multilingual, though the several non-Dagomba groups are not assimilated, but remain separate. Unlike Daboya, Pong-Tamale numbers among its residents people from other countries, including Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. The ethos can, therefore, be said to be one of plurality, which distinguishes it from the assimilationist Gonja set-up. Dagbani, the language of the Dagombas, is a widely-used lingua franca in Pong-Tamale (though not all non-Dagombas speak or understand Dagbani (Mahama, 2004, pp.203, 235)). In contrast to Daboya, the non-ethnic language Hausa also has this function. As we shall see, this has consequences for language choice in development communication.

18.4.4 Self-reported language use in the villages

The study, reported in Mahama (2004), involved qualitative and quantitative methods, informed by ethnography and participant observation in the communities. The research questions were:

1 what are the language practices of Daboya and Pong-Tamale?
2 what is the relationship between all language practices and language choices for development?
3 how do language-related issues such as identity/ethnicity and language attitudes affect development communication?
The second author carried out fieldwork and analysis in 1999–2002, with a follow-up in 2010, which served to confirm the previous results (Mahama, 2013). In the main project, 32 people were interviewed in each village using a questionnaire asking about language use in a range of domains (contexts), including development. The participants were divided equally among males and females, young (under 30) and “old” (self-evaluated), literate and non-literate, “natives” (ethnically Gonja/Dagomba) and “non-natives” (ethnically non-Gonja/Dagomba). “Literate” refers mainly to literacy in English. In addition, a number of village leaders and NGO workers were interviewed (employees of Catholic Relief Services in Daboya and World Vision International in Pong-Tamale).

This account sounds straightforward, but the picture is complicated by the presence of client groups in Daboya but not in Pong-Tamale. It was found that a number of those who initially identified as “Gonja” then claimed Tampulma or Hanga ancestry; for sampling purposes, they were classified under these latter ethnicities. They had become assimilated to a certain degree, despite the fact that many maintained distinct cultural practices. Some also maintained the ethnic language, while others had shifted to Gonja (as we saw earlier, in Section 18.4.3). There is, then, ambivalence in terms of identity, with many non-Gonjas deciding to identify with the Gonja group mainly for instrumental reasons, while also being emotionally tied to their ancestral group. The link between language and ethnic group, which is powerful in this region, is not unidimensional, but depends on subjective factors. In stark contrast, in Pong-Tamale, there was no question of a Dagomba identity among the non-Dagombas, even though a majority were fluent in Dagbani. The use of this language by non-Dagomba groups is mainly as a lingua franca, alongside Hausa and, for educated people, English.

Table 18.3 shows responses to questions about language use in a number of non-development domains.

Since the table lists the single most used language, it does not show the range of languages that might be used, including multilingual practices. In each of these domains, the most used language is the respondent’s “tribal language” i.e. the one associated with her or

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Daboya</th>
<th>Pong-Tamale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home/Family</td>
<td>Tribal language</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hausa</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street</td>
<td>Tribal language</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hausa</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>Tribal language</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hausa</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(adapted from Mahama, 2004, p.157, Table 6.5)
his ethnic group. These figures do not tell us which tribal languages are involved, but we can assume that at least half of the respondents (the ‘natives’) were speakers of one of the two majority languages. As for the “non-natives”, Tampulma and Hanga speakers form the largest groups in the Daboya sample, with eight and four participants, respectively (Mahama, 2004, pp.163, 258), while no group dominates in Pong-Tamale (there were at least eight groups). There are some marked differences both between the domains and, more particularly, between the villages. Not surprisingly, the ethnic group’s language is used less in the street and work domains than in the home/family. What is more striking is the fact that a range of non-ethnic languages are used in the home/family domain in Pong-Tamale, while this is not the case at all in Daboya. In particular, Hausa is used in Pong-Tamale, where 87.5 percent of non-Dagomba respondents claimed to speak it and 43.5 percent of the Dagombas (Mahama, 2004, pp.151–2). As earlier noted, Hausa is often used in the home by ethnically and linguistically mixed households, particularly in northern Ghana. Predictably enough, Hausa is also used in Pong-Tamale in the more public domains.

This does not explain the absence of Hausa in any of these domains in Daboya, even though it is understood by many there. The reasons for this are uncertain, but they include the strong position of the Gonja language and the high level of assimilation with that group on the part of non-Gonja people. Respondents mainly report using only Gonja at the market (Mahama, 2004, p.188), while those in Pong-Tamale report using mainly Dagbani, but also Hausa along with several other languages (Mahama, 2004, p.190). Pong-Tamale, being on the main road north to Burkina Faso and Niger, sees a higher through-put of people, with the result that Hausa is needed, alongside other languages, for inter-ethnic or, indeed, international communication.

18.4.5 Communication in development – fault lines laid bare

We can now turn to communication in development contexts. Earlier, we argued that this domain (or set of domains) brings together the local, the regional and the national/global. Interaction between development workers and local people, therefore, ranges from the local, if the workers are also from the same area, through regional, if there is contact with people from a town or city, to national or global when people from Accra or further afield are involved. However, development intervention takes many forms, and there are numerous instances where local people take the initiative themselves, without the direct involvement of an NGO. Part of the questionnaire dealt with the use of language in various development contexts, as well as attitudes to the use of languages. Tables 18.4 and 18.5 show respondents’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Radio n=32</th>
<th>Watching drama n=32</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gonja</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Mahama, 2004, p.263)
Ethnicity, conflict and language choice

As expected, the ethnic group languages are preferred. But again, we see a preference for Hausa in Pong-Tamale, where it is in second place, but no mention of it in Daboya. If we look at face-to-face development communication, we see a different picture. Tables 18.6 and 18.7 show reported language use in three contexts involving interaction.

In Daboya, development meetings that do not involve outsiders are conducted in the village language. Communal work, which is more informal, follows everyday language use, and hence other ethnic group languages are reported (Tampulma and Hanga). When development workers are present, again, Gonja prevails, with a good deal of English. The situation in Pong-Tamale is broadly similar, except for the presence of Hausa as a significant language during activities when development workers are not present. When they are present, we find that Hausa is entirely missing.

The patterns of reported use in both villages have the potential to cause friction between ethnic groups. In Daboya, we have seen how Gonja is broadly taken to be the pragmatic choice of language, with non-Gonja groups buying into the Gonja identity to different degrees. A principal reason for this is the strongly assimilationist, long-standing, ideology of

Table 18.6 Self-reported main languages for interaction in development settings in Daboya (n=32 for each interaction)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of development</th>
<th>Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gonja</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own development meetings</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal work</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meetings with development</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>workers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Mahama, 2004, p.230)

Key: Figures stand for number of people.

Gonja/Tampulma and Gonja/Hanga = code-switching involving these languages (not translation).
the Gonja group. British colonial policies in the 20th century aggravated the situation, as we have seen, by forcing non-chiefly groups to come more completely under the control of the chiefly groups, like the Gonjas. Separatist movements within the non-chiefly groups, including the Tampulmas, have gained in influence and confidence and continue to do so, leading to a number of violent conflicts. The lesson for development agencies is that they should be as aware as possible of the ethnic sensibilities present where they operate; careful choice of language alongside recognising the presence of other ethnicities can help to reduce friction between groups. Similar sensitivity should be shown when planning mother-tongue literacy instruction in primary schools – though here the practical, financial and political problems are probably greater still (cf. Ansah, 2014).

The responses from Pong-Tamale raise somewhat different issues. Here, there may be rivalries, but, as we have seen, control of land and resources is not in dispute, nor are ethnic identities contested. But there are many ethnic groups living in the village, including some from other countries, and the choice of Dagbani excludes those who have not acquired it. The World Vision International workers who were interviewed described using Dagbani only, on the grounds that it is a Dagomba village. This is surprising since Hausa is widely used in local development work, as Table 18.7 shows, as well as being an existing lingua franca for many of the West African migrants. It is also well-known to many of the development workers. However, the potential for old wounds to be opened up seems slighter in Pong-Tamale than in Daboya. On the other hand, marginalising certain parts of the population (migrants and others who do not speak Dagbani) does not aid integration.

### Table 18.7 Self-reported main languages for interaction in development settings in Pong-Tamale (n=32 for each interaction)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of development</th>
<th>Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dagbani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own development meetings</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal work</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meetings with development</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>workers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Mahama, 2004, p.234)

Key: Figures stand for number of people.

English/Dagbani and Hausa/Dagbani = translation from English or Hausa to Dagbani (mainly not code-switching).

18.5 Conclusion – language, identity and conflict, and recommendations for development

In this chapter, we have argued that language, at a macro level, is rarely, if ever, the root cause of a conflict. The source of a conflict is prior to the conflict, and that source is never linguistic. An apparently linguistic source is, on closer reflection, embedded in a much wider dispute: this is clearly the case with the Soweto riots, although the imposition of a language policy was the immediate event that provoked the struggle – the *casus belli*. In Wales and Canada, the language-based disputes are derived from the fact that language and ethnic identity are closely aligned in those countries (albeit ambivalently in Wales). In other
cases, linguistic difference is co-opted and even exaggerated to serve a wider political goal – as in the former Yugoslav states, or 19th century Norway. In Ghana’s Northern Region, despite the fact that most conflicts are between distinct ethnolinguistic groups, the extensive literature on the conflicts never mentions language.

Yet, as we have argued, even in an apparently stable region, ethnic disputes often remain in latent form, and it may take insensitivity in language choice to bring them to the surface again; this is the link we would like to make. Northern Ghana was chosen for the investigation of this possibility because of its high ethnic and linguistic diversity, the tight association between ethnicity and language, and the region’s history of conflicts in the recent past. This gave us the opportunity to detect this link, or at least to figure out where to look for it – even if (fortunately, perhaps) the opportunity did not arise for us to study any conflicts directly.

We have argued that language is not a significant direct cause of conflict. However, language is often implicated in conflicts in different ways because it is a powerful marker of social and ethnic group. To try to make general recommendations for how to tackle all tensions that are language-related would be beyond the scope of this chapter, so we will provide some ideas that are directed at improving development communication, enabling it to reduce the chance of conflict, or at least to avoid exacerbating tensions:

1. development agencies (NGOs) should find out the history of the ethnic and social groups that exist in the locations where they plan to work, paying particular attention to the relationships between them.

2. they should find out which languages are used, and by which groups. This includes the extent of multilingualism and conversational practices that include translanguaging.

3. they should find out in what contexts particular languages are used, and why. Are there choices, and what is the social meaning of those choices?

4. related to (3), they should find out whether there are contentious issues arising from particular language choices.

5. language choice for development communication should recognise local power structures, while challenging them to the extent that otherwise marginalised groups can be included in the communication.

References


Ethnicity, conflict and language choice


Paul Kerswill and Edward Salifu Mahama


