Towards an understanding of African endogenous multilingualism

Ethnography, language ideologies, and the supernatural

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Abstract

In a globalised sociolinguistics "[d]ifferent types of societies must give rise to different types of sociolinguistic study" (Smakman and Heinrich [2015b]). To this end, a basic condition must be met: both target languages and societies must be well known. This is not the case in much of Central and West Africa: here local languages and societies are generally under-researched and sociolinguistic studies have focused mainly on urban contexts, in most cases targeting the interaction between local and colonial languages. With regard to individual multilingualism, this urban-centered perspective risks to limit scholarly attention on processes that, while valid in cities, may not apply everywhere. For one thing, there might still be areas where one can find instances of endogenous multilingualism, where speakers' language repertoires and ideologies are largely localised. The case in point is offered by the sociolinguistic situation found in Lower Fungom, a rural, marginal, and linguistically highly diverse area of North West Cameroon. The analyses proposed, stemming from a strongly ethnographic approach, lead to reconsider basic notions in mainstream sociolinguistics – such as that of the target of an index – crucially adding spiritual anxieties among the factors likely to condition people's linguistic behaviours.

Keywords: multilingualism, rural Africa, ethnography, language ideologies, spiritual insecurity

1. Introduction

Inspired by Smakman and Heinrich (2015a), in this paper I will try to deal with a topic I have also explored elsewhere (Di Carlo and Good [2014], Di Carlo [2015], Di Carlo [2016]) bearing in mind the possibility that it might contribute to "globalise sociolinguistics". In my view, this is a challenge aimed to widen the sociolinguists' epistemological repertoire in order to have their research methods and interpretive tools become more readily available to adapt to contexts and societies that show to be structured in ways that differ from the models of both social life and language-in-use we as Western or Westernised scholars are most acquainted to.

In order to do so, I will first introduce the key aspects of Western models and scholarly tradition that my research seems to question (Section 2), then offer a summary of my research on multilingualism in a rural area of North West Cameroon[1] (Sections 3 and 4), finally discussing (Section 5) the importance of

the emerging picture in developing novel sociolinguistic views on still largely unknown forms of multilingualism in Africa.

2. Preliminary remarks

2.1. Why focusing on rural areas?

Africa makes no exception in the global current demographic pattern of increasing urbanisation: over the last few decades, urban population has risen from about 10% to about 40% and is expected to exceed 50% by 2035 (United Nations [2014]). Current trends in social science research emphasize globalisation, super-diversity, and related topics which find in cities their quintessential contexts. As for Africa, one relatively new and promising topic of sociolinguistic research is the emergence of urban youth languages (e.g. Brookes [2014], Ferrari [2012], Kießling and Mous [2004], also Mous this volume). Recent publications have further stressed a dichotomy between current and "historical multilingualism" (Aronin et al. [2013]), so leaving one with the impression that the latter may be of little relevance for the advancement of scientific knowledge. So, why did I choose to focus on multilingualism in a rural area of Anglophone Cameroon?

Most of the studies led so far on multilingualism in Africa have focused on the interaction between indigenous and former colonial languages in urban language ecologies, thus leaving multilingualism in indigenous languages nearly unstudied (see Connell and Zeitlyn [2010] for an overview on Central and West Africa; among the few exceptions: Lüpke [2016+], Beyer and Schreiber [2013], Kaji [2013], Lüpke and Storch [2013], Cobbinah [2010], Cobbinah et al. [2017] and Connell [2009]). From this perspective, a focus on contexts offering the possibility to document instances of what I call here endogenous multilingualism can lead to observe unexpected phenomena and uncover portions of language ideologies offering novel avenues for a better understanding of African multilingualism as a whole, "a fact of social life in Africa for a very long time" (Whiteley [1971:1]). Since "endogenous multilingualism" is here intended to refer to phenomena of individual multilingualism where both the languages present in the speakers' repertoires and their ideologies are largely localised (cf. Kraus [2016:39] and Ndinga-Koumba-Binza [2007:97]), the point is finding language ecologies and markets where European languages play less of a central role than they do in cities.2 The Lower Fungom rural area3 of NW Cameroon is a case in point.

2.2. Some widespread (and implicit) assumptions

As the discussion ultimately aims to contribute to sociolinguistic theory, two key points need be addressed at the outset: the concept of polyglossia scales (Section 2.2.1) and the essentialist bias in the interpretation of (socio)linguistic facts *qua* indices (Section 2.2.2). The remaining of the article will provide support for looking at both as "Westernising mechanisms" (Smakman [2015]).

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lated multidisciplinary research in the Grassfields. I also want to thank David Zeitlyn and the two anonymous reviewers for their stimulating comments on an earlier draft of this article. Responsibility for the content of this paper is of the author's alone.

2 It will be apparent that "endogenous multilingualism" could be a cover term for similar sociolinguistic situations that authors have defined differently: "small-scale multilingualism" (Lüpke [2016a]), "traditional multilingualism" (Di Carlo [2015]) and, outside of Africa, "egalitarian multilingualism" (François [2012]) or "balanced multilingualism" (Aikhenvald [2007]): Lüpke (2016b) is a useful review in this regard. The same label "endogenous multilingualism", however, has also been used with a quite different meaning by the Council of Europe (Cavalli et al. [2009])–namely, that of country-internal linguistic diversity.

3 Overall similarly localised patterns have been observed also in non-strictly rural contexts (e.g. Kaji [2013]). Conversely, there are contexts that, while economically and geographically rural, show to be inhabited by different language ecologies: in the plantations, for instance, *linguae francae* are central and traditional social constraints on people's cultural and linguistic behaviours are often being replaced by emergent novel practices.

2.2.1. Polyglossia scales

Although it has been rarely used in the literature as such, the concept of "polyglossia scale" (Wolff [2016]) usefully purports what seems to be the default approach of sociolinguists to multilingualism. The term polyglossia here derives from the well-known concept of diglossia (in the wider sense of Fishman [1967]): it essentially refers to a situation in which, in a given multilingual speaker community, there is consensus that the main spheres of social interaction need be accessed via specific languages, or registers, or codes. This compartmentalised view of the relationship between polyglossia and multilingualism is exemplified by Stroud when he writes that "multilingualism involves some form of *functional ideological division of labor between languages*" (2007: 511, emphasis added). Compartmentalisation usually co-occurs with the assumed existence of an underlying ideological High / Low cline, so that different "labors" – and the specific languages required to carry them out as well as the populations stereotypically associated with them – are taken to correspond to different degrees of "prestige": this is a polyglossia scale. Questionnaires eliciting multilingual speakers to ascribe each language to one or more domains of use are instances of such a "polyglossia scale reasoning", and this is telling of how widespread this research perspective is in sociolinguistics.

However adequate to describe most of the known multilingual ecologies, it could be a mistake to view the polyglossia scale perspective as being of universal applicability, especially if one is reminded of the shift from first- to second-wave sociolinguistic variation study (Eckert [2012]) – i.e. from broad correlations between linguistic variables and macrosociological and assumedly universal categories such as social class or gender to the acknowledgment that *diagnostic categories do change in different contexts* (see e.g. Rickford 1986) and therefore must be identified in each case using ethnographic methods. For one thing, it does not seem far-sighted to take for granted that all societies are characterised by comparable degrees of diachronic stability of unequal power relations that are evidently needed for a model such as the division of labor between languages to be fully established in their linguistic markets (Bourdieu [1991]).

2.2.2. Indexes and essence

Another *de facto* sociolinguistic axiom largely lacking ethnographic validation is the relation between sociolinguistic indexes and their targets. Third-wave studies (in terms of Eckert [2012]) have incorporated Silverstein's (2003) indexical order, and this has allowed them to move away from the staticity of both etic (i.e. first-wave) and emic (i.e. second-wave) social categories and recognize that "patterns of variation do not simply unfold from the speaker's structural position in a system of production, but are part of the active—stylistic—production of social differentiation" (Eckert [2012: 98]). However mutable and negotiable in interaction, the ultimate targets of indexes seem to be invariably seen, in the literature, in terms of what Irvine & Gal (2000) have called "iconization process". Through this process, which the authors regard as universal, "linguistic features that index social groups or activities appear to be iconic representations of them, *as if a linguistic feature somehow depicted or displayed a social group's inherent nature or essence*" (Irvine & Gal [2000: 37], emphasis added; see also Eckert [2012:94]). The linguistic fact, that is, signals a given population which in its turn, via availability of some given stereotypes, indexes a given set of behavioural, moral, existential features. Are we to conclude that the indexical order consistently and without exceptions leads to the representation of essential, i.e. categorical identities (Brubaker & Cooper 2000)? What I will present in the next sections is probably a good instance of a possible alternative.

3. Field-based research in Lower Fungom

3.1. Lower Fungom: linguistic and ethnographic overview

Lower Fungom is an area around 240 square kilometers in size – i.e. roughly the size of the Municipality of Amsterdam (see Figure 1) – located in the Grassfields' northwest periphery within the North-West

Region of Cameroon. The area is inhabited by about 10,000 people distributed in thirteen villages whose population ranges from less than 200 people – such as Biya, Buu, and Ngun – to about 3,000 – like Koshin and Fang – (see Table 1). From the linguist's point of view, Lower Fungom is a region of extreme interest as it is characterised by an amazing degree of linguistic diversity: here no less than eight distinct Bantoid languages are spoken, five of which (i.e. Ajumbu [muc], Buu [no ISO code], Fang [fak], Koshin [kid], and Kung [kfl]) are restricted to a single village.[4] The resulting language density averages one language per thirty square kilometers, making Lower Fungom one of the linguistically most diverse micro-areas of the Cameroonian Grassfields – itself a well known area for its remarkable degree of linguistic diversity (see, e.g., Stallcup [1980: 44]).[5]

Culturally, on the surface these villages are quite similar to each other: a number of differences can be identified (Di Carlo [2011]) but they do not concern us here. What is surely common to all of them is that, until colonial times, each village used to be politically independent (i.e. a sort of microscopic version of "city-state", henceforth referred to as "village-chiefdom" for the sake of clarity), a centripetal feature that is still visible in the degree of political centralisation around the figure of the village chief, though not comparable to what is still observable in the larger chiefdoms of the Grassfields like Bafut, Kom, or Mankon (cf. e.g. Chilver & Kaberry [1967], Warnier [1985]).

Local language ideologies also go into the same, centripetal direction: Lower Fungom is characterised by an extremely localist sociolinguistic strategies (in the sense of Hill [2001]) according to which each village has its own "talk" (i.e. language). Locals would readily accept that at least in some villages people speak "rhyming talks" – i.e. closely related language varieties like in the case of the Mungbam [mij] varieties Abar, Biya, Missong, Munken, and Ngun (Good et al. [2011]; Lovegren [2013]) – but this does not change the basic ideological equation "one village = one language" (see Section 3.2.1).

Residentially, each village is composed by a number of "quarters", that is, separate areas each inhabited in the overwhelming majority of cases by men sharing a common male ancestor with their wives and offspring. These virilocal, exogamous patrilineages act as corporate groups in terms of economy and productive activities (e.g. land is typically undivided below the level of quarter or of its sub-sections) and, importantly, each quarter has a "quarter head" who ensures that it enjoys a certain degree of political autonomy within the village context.[6] This is why quarters should be considered the actual building blocks, as it were, of Lower Fungom societies.

There is only one dimension of life of these societies in which, besides language, the village is a meaningful social unit: this is ritual, and it will be my central concern in much of Sections 4 and 5.

HERE FIGURE 1

Figure 1: Linguistic map of Lower Fungom (top) within Central West Africa (bottom right).

HERE TABLE 1

Table 1: Languages and lects of Lower Fungom, with affiliations within the Bantoid, non-Bantu group of Niger-Congo, with approximate populations. Dotted line identifies possible language boundary not yet fully verified.

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[4] While the languages can all be reasonably classified as Bantoid (see Good et al. [2011]), six of them do not have any established close relatives outside of Lower Fungom, nor can they be straightforwardly shown to be closely related to each other. The language count proposed here differs from that in Good et al. (2011) as, in the meantime, we accumulated evidence showing that Buu is best considered as an independent language.
[5] By way of comparison, the famously linguistically diverse country of Vanuatu (see, e.g., Evans [2010: 214]), has about one language per 100 square kilometers.
[6] The village of Kung is the only exception in this regard as it is structured in matrilineages.

In this context of extreme language diversity and cross-village intermarriages within an overall small area, inter-village communication is ensured by both individual multilingualism and the diffusion of Cameroonian Pidgin English (henceforth CPE) as a *lingua franca*. The two communicative strategies, though observable in synchrony, are obviously outcomes of two different phases of local history: CPE has entered the area only in the last few decades (see Warnier [1979:210-212] and Menang [2004]) and appears to be progressively replacing or somewhat limiting individual multilingualism, which until not long ago represented the only possible means for people to communicate outside of their village as no other *lingua franca* is remembered in local ethnohistories. Different linguists who have visited the area have collected anecdotal observations concerning the local rates of multilingualism that, not surprisingly, seemed to be remarkably high especially in the older generations. The first aim of the research presented here was to raise, from a state of impressionism, the degree of our knowledge about the distribution and social motivations of multilingualism in Lower Fungom.

3.2 Sociolinguistic survey in Lower Fungom

3.2.1 Methodological remarks

The data I briefly describe and comment here come mostly from a twenty-day survey I carried out in the Spring of 2012 with two Cameroonian postgraduate students (see footnote 1). Unlike many sociolinguistic surveys, our aim was not to produce a statistically relevant sample.[7] Following an assumption close to that underpinning the Labovian notion of "apparent time" (see Cukor-Avila and Bailey [2008]), we decided to bias our sample by including a higher proportion of elderly men as these could be crucially instrumental in getting insights into the oldest level of language ideologies reachable, i.e. the one we suspect used to support the development of high rates of multilingual competence in the area prior to the diffusion of CPE .

We used semi-structured interviews (see appendix in Di Carlo [2016]) and were able to contact a total of 95 individuals (53 men and 42 women; only 17 respondents aged 40 or less) who were either residing in or married into one of six villages (Abar, Buu, Fang, Koshin, Missong, and Munken). The interview guide we followed was made of three sections: biography/ethnography, self-reported multilingual competence, and motivations for learning each of the languages mentioned.

In the first section, our aim was to obtain a detailed biography so as to be able to evaluate the number and nature of the social networks the respondent was part of, therefore assessing the degree of exposure to different languages. One aspect we discovered to be important in uncovering further data in this direction was people's personal names (Section 5.1).

The second part was intended to obtain a list of all the languages or lects (see Section 3.2.2) the respondent claimed to be competent in along with self-evaluative remarks about the claimed competence in each, while in the third part we aimed to get insights into the motivations for learning and the contexts of use of those languages / lects, so exploring local language ideologies.[8]

3.2.2 Languages and lects

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[7] It is important to recall here that the 2012 research was carried out as part of a project of documentation of endangered languages (funded by the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme) and, as such, its starting point was to check whether, as we suspected, multilingualism in the area is an endangered practice due to the increasing diffusion of CPE as an inter-village language of communication. Mine was probably one of the first ELDP-funded projects including also some documentation of multilingual practices. In this regard I would like to thank Mandana Seyfeddinipur for her availability on letting me adapt my research agenda to the emerging realities I was then still discovering.

8 For the sake of completeness, it is interesting to know that Nsen Tem (forthc.), in her assessment of multilingual competence of 80 consultants from Lower Fungom, concludes that self-reported information can be considered to a large extent reliable.

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to spend one word on what kind of adjustments were necessary in dealing with locals' language ideologies. As I said above (Section 3.1), linguistic analysis allows us to identify in Lower Fungom both one-village languages and clusters of varieties but this contrasts with local conceptualisations, according to which each village has its own language: in fact, it is commonplace in the area for one to say that there cannot be a traditionally politically independent "village-chiefdom" unless its inhabitants have a "language" of their own. It is apparent, then, that it would have been utterly wrong to analyse interview data only in the light of our own professional perspective: collapsing, e.g., Abar, Missong, and Munken into Mungbam [mij], though correct for a linguist, would have erased the possibility to include the locals' perspective (see also Hamm et al. [2002: 15]; see Auer [1999:312] for some methodological remarks), therefore frustrating our ethnographic efforts. In order to keep this emic perspective in dealing with lexicogrammatical codes loaded with this village-identity value regardless of whether they are mutually intelligible, we have used the genealogically and sociolinguistically neutral notion of "lects".

3.2.3   Basic results

A comprehensive discussion of the findings of the 2012 sociolinguistic survey can be found in Esene Agwara (2013). Here I will provide a short summary of some select basic results that are more directly relevant to the topic under analysis.

HERE FIGURE 2a

Figure 2a. Basic results of the the 2012 Lower Fungom sociolinguistic survey (n=95): Self-reported rates of passive and active multilingual competence.

HERE FIGURE 2b

Figure 2b. Basic results of the the 2012 Lower Fungom sociolinguistic survey (n=95): Self-reported rates of passive and active multilectal competence.

HERE FIGURE 2c

Figure 2c. Basic results of the the 2012 Lower Fungom sociolinguistic survey (n=95): Self-reported rates of passive multilectal competence arranged by gender of respondents.

HERE FIGURE 2d

Figure 2d. Basic results of the the 2012 Lower Fungom sociolinguistic survey (n=95): Self-reported rates of active multilectal competence arranged by gender of respondents.

HERE FIGURE 2e

Figure 2e. Basic results of the the 2012 Lower Fungom sociolinguistic survey (n=95): Average self-reported rates of active and passive multilingual competence arranged by gender of respondents.

HERE FIGURE 2f

Figure 2f. Basic results of the the 2012 Lower Fungom sociolinguistic survey (n=95): Average self-reported rates of active and passive multilectal competence arranged by gender of respondents.

Figures 2a-f summarise our findings concerning the rates of self-reported multilingual and multilectal competence. The most macroscopic fact is that there are virtually no monolingual speakers: at the very least, people interviewed speak one local lect plus Cameroonian Pidgin English. Men report to have slightly more extensive repertoires than women (Figs. 2e-f) in a general context of relatively high rates of passive as well as active multilingual (Fig. 2a) and multilectal self-reported competence (Fig. 2b-d).

Coming to data that are not straightforwardly quantifiable, it is interesting to know that one among the most common factors adduced by respondents as a motivation to develop a passive competence in a local lect is the ability to detect gossiping and other potentially harmful behaviours.[9]

As for active competence, the following appear to be the main points to be considered:

1. None of the local lects is reported to be spoken in order to increase one's prestige nor to represent one's identity through reference to a given shared set of behavioural features.[10]

2. Cameroonian Pidgin English is universally recognised as a convenient *lingua franca* that allows anyone to communicate freely in the whole of the surrounding region at large.

3. English and, to a much lesser extent, French, are conceptualised differently from both local lects and CPE. For one thing, they are acquired in schools, and schooling has remained a mirage for the overwhelming majority of people in Lower Fungom until recently. Except for purposes of communication with the very few foreign visitors to the area, these languages (especially English) are typically used to accrete the perception of the speaker's authority. Interestingly, several people told us that they use English to rebuke their children.

4. Respondents stated explicitly that fluency in a number of languages is highly prized on the account of the fact that, by so doing, one is able to "feel at home in different places". Some men even pointed out that, should their social condition deteriorate in the village where they are currently residing, the chances that they could get incorporated in other villages would be significantly higher thanks to their ability to speak fluently the local vernacular.

4. Essence vs. (multiple) affiliation in language ideologies

The main fact emerging from this initial survey is that prestige, except for the colonial languages— i.e. English and, to a lesser extent, French—is not among the main symbolic assets negotiated in the local linguistic market. More in general, membership in any of the thirteen village-chiefdom communities does not appear to be associated with behavioural or otherwise existential stereotypes therefore showing that, contrary to what we are accustomed to (see Section 2.2.2), endogenous ideologies seem to be more oriented towards the indexing of identity *qua* affiliation with a given group—i.e. village-chiefdom community (see points 1 and 4 above)—without any further reverberations concerning the speaker's projected personal qualities (such as, e.g., masculinity or socioeconomic status).

This can be taken as an evidence indicating that the Lower Fungom linguistic market is structured in a way that largely escapes the model of polyglossia scale (Section 2.2.1) and the assumedly universal "iconization process" (Section 2.2.2). It is interesting to note that comparable cases of non-prestige-based language ideologies have been documented in other rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa (Connell [2009] in Mambila, Cameroon; Lüpke [2009], Lüpke [2010a], Cobbinah [2010], Cobbinah et al. [2017], and Lüpke & Storch [2013:esp. 13–47] in Casamance, Senegal; Kaji [2013] in West Uganda) and, outside of Africa, at least also in Melanesia (François [2012] and Slotta [2012]).

This brings about another set of considerations: the meaning conveyed by the use of a given lect, in absence of an associated stereotype to be called up, is entirely dependent on the context, i.e. on who are the people participating as audience and passers-by. To make but an example, when a young man from

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9 The importance of how language patterns with needs of secrecy is nicely illustrated in Storch (2011).

[10] One of the anonymous reviewers commented that this is not surprising "based on urban sociolinguistics where the hegemonic prestige Labov talks about is out-of-awareness and Trudgill's "covert prestige" is an almost equally unaware "localist" identification with local linguistic forms and practices". While this is no doubt an important remark, the point I am trying to make here is that findings from Lower Fungom suggest that local language ideologies differ from those observed in US or European contexts because in the latter, no matter how localist and out-of-awareness the identification is, it always entails some features of essential identity: membership into working class, to make but one example, can be an index of masculinity (see also Section 4). What we found in Lower Fungom is suggesting of a different indexical trajectory, as I will try to show in the remaining of the article.

Lower Fungom uses his father's language (lect X) with his paternal uncle and then switches to his mother's "native" (i.e. mother's father's) language (lect Y) when he meets an important man from his mother's village and, then, switches to his mother's mother's father's language (lect Z) when he meets a man from the Z-speaking village—although everyone could speak CPE—he appears to be doing nothing relevant to the definition of his personal qualities. On the contrary, what he is doing is just representing himself, depending on the context, as a member of the groups known to speak respectively X, Y, or Z. The only clear consequence concerning how he would be perceived by the different interactants is that, by using one or the other lect, he would emphasise his relative position within a specific network included in the village-chiefdom community of speakers of that lect: this could be at the level of kinship—e.g. son to his father, grandson to his mother's father, or grandson to his mother's mother as in the fictive example above—or at other levels—like membership in some village-specific cult groups. One possible conclusion would then be that each language choice indexes a position within one specific network and this, in its turn, functions as a charter for the speaker's agency with respect to the audience.

What I and my collaborators have observed in the field so far is that one of the most common unmarked choices seems to be that of accommodating the elder's (contextually most prominent) linguistic identity: this is not surprising as it is done in order to conform with traditional expectations of respect paid to elderly people. However, we have recently come across an interesting case which could be more telling of what language choice can index in Lower Fungom.[11]

Two people, a young man (Young) and a senior man (Senior) original to the village of Young's mother, meet in a bar and start chatting using Senior's language, as expected. In the course of the interaction, Senior stigmatises what Young did in another village at some earlier time: Senior is in a position that allows him to rebuke Young as one of his children. After some exchanges in Senior's language, Young simply shifts to his paternal language: at this point Senior grows annoyed by Young's switch and says to Young (in Senior's language) things like "you're just a child, you know?". After this, the interaction comes to an end.

Considering Senior's annoyed reaction, his perceived meaning of Young's switch to his paternal language must have been connected with a representation of Young's immunity to Senior's authority. By shifting to his father's language, that is, Young has represented himself as part of a network in which Senior simply had no place, nor voice. On top of this, it must be noted that Young's choice did not entail that Senior did not understand what Young was saying as Senior is also proficient in Young's father's language. The fact that Young's father's language conveyed a "rebellious" meaning was entirely dependent on the specific timing within the interaction, i.e. on the context.

This is just another example suggesting that, in language ecologies like Lower Fungom's, both the static "Cartesian" logic implicit in polyglossia models (Section 2.2.1) and the essentialist ways of interpreting (socio)linguistic facts (Section 2.2.2) may indeed fail to capture social reality as it is inhabited and constructed by its actors. One of the main goals for a sociolinguist, then, would seem to be to get "thicker" descriptions (Ryle [1971]) of the sociocultural contexts of the interaction under analysis. Understanding multilingual behaviour in settings such as Lower Fungom, that is, calls for knowledge of the details of the specific situation in which any given interaction takes place (i.e. setting and participants) and also knowledge of what has been called "extra-situational context" (Goodwin and Duranti [1992:8]), which includes local patterns of social organisation, cultural values, and language ideologies. The following sections will now take an evident ethnographic detour in order to explore some key features of Lower Fungom "extra-situational context", aiming to provide the basis for a more mature second-wave sociolinguistic study (Meyerhoff and Stanford [2015:10]).

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[11] The interaction was documented by Rachel Ayuk Ojong (see footnote 12) and it is being analyzed at the time of writing this article: this is why it is only sketched here. My thank goes to Ojong for allowing me to mention this interesting case while she is still writing her dissertation (Ojong [forthc.]).

5. Group-making strategies, language, and the spiritual

5.1. Personal names and multiple affiliation

That the tendency towards multiple affiliation is a cultural reality in Lower Fungom (and beyond) can be seen also in naming practices: 80 out of the 95 people interviewed during the 2012 sociolinguistic survey gave us two birth names—one given by the paternal family, the other by the maternal family—and nearly half the respondents also had a third name, typically given by the family of a grandmother (see also (Di Carlo and Good [2014:251-52]). Having a name in a given family implies being member of the village-chiefdom in which the family resides and, therefore, also entails that one is expected to learn the local lect. This fact fits nicely with what is found in existing anthropological literature, and adds to a number of cases indicating that the tendency towards constructing multiple social identities and maintaining (often latent) multiple networks of solidarity was common in traditional sub-Saharan African societies, could go far beyond agnatic kinship *tout court* (see, e.g., Ranger [1983], Kopytoff [1987]) and may still be reflected in one's multilingual repertoire (see, e.g., Lüpke and Storch [2011:24-33]).

5.2. The role of language in group-making processes

The role of language as a strategy to sanction the existence of a group is, on the one hand, obvious and, on the other, still little known in detail, especially for what concerns the creation, in sub-Saharan societies, of groups based on cult or on some political and economic interests. Anecdotal evidence gives us a rough idea of how deep the connection is in local language ideologies between the existence of a group and the use by its members of a group-specific linguistic code (see also Di Carlo and Neba [2016] for a preliminary analysis of examples coming from the chiefdom of Bafut). This is made explicit in the following quote, which is an excerpt from an interview I held in 2010 with Buo Makpa Amos, a man from Missong (translated from CPE to English, parts of the excerpt of particular interest to the present discussion have been emphasised):

> As my father told me, we were from Fang side, even in Bum side there were many of us. *When you people are cooperating you speak one language. If you speak one language, you cooperate.* As a group of relatives moves, the brothers may decide to split, each choosing a different place to stay. This is what happened to us. We left the early place in Fang side as a whole and arrived in Abar. From here we scattered. Now, we Bambiam from Missong have relatives in Abar, in Buu, in Ngun. *Each family attached itself to a village and therefore had to speak the general language used there.* For example, we Bambiam attached ourselves to Bikwom and hence had to adopt their language; Bikwom people are attached to Bidjumbi and Biandzəm to form the village of Missong, and *this is why they all had to use the same language, that is, Missong.* This is why all the descendants of the family that moved from Fang side now speak different languages.

For Buo Makpa Amos (whose memories are an instance of Kopytoff's [1987] African internal frontier model, which is also documented in nearby regions of the Nigeria-Cameroon borderland, cf. Zeitlyn and Connell [2003]), language is an irreplaceable tool for sanctioning the existence of a group, whose main *raisons d'être* lie in ensuring cooperation, loyalty, and solidarity to its members. Access to deeper ethnographic knowledge is suggesting that this is just the surface of a complex, yet seemingly cohesive set of cultural elements.

5.3.   Multiple affiliations as a response to invisible threats

5.3.1. Types of sociopolitical organisation and the management of the supernatural

In his award-winning book, Adam Ashforth states that "[n]o one can understand life in Africa without understanding witchcraft and the related aspects of spiritual insecurity" (Ashforth [2005:xiii]). Lower Fungom makes no exception to the widespread tendency pivoting around the assumption that any given

event taking place in the material world is the reflection of some analog happening in the invisible world (see, e.g., Geschiere [1995: 22-29], Ellis [1999:13-20]; Moore and Sanders [2001]; Gausset [2010] and Baeke [2004] offer insights into this cultural feature as it is found in regions not far from Lower Fungom).

The key principle underlying most phenomena associated with spiritual anxieties concerns the degree of agency that one has in the invisible world: put roughly, the more agency one has in that world, the more one will be likely to be in control of one's material life. Relying on objects believed to contain beneficial magical power (e.g. the so-called gri-gris) or on the services of spiritual experts of various kinds to gain protection from evil spiritual forces is only one side of the issue. For one thing, following the same logic of the invisible determining the visible, then who has power in the visible world—like, e.g., a politician or a wealthy trader—must also have power in the invisible world, either directly or indirectly. Geschiere (1995) offers many examples of such a connection between political and spiritual power as they are found in more or less traditional societies within Cameroon, and furthers the discussion suggesting that this belief may have been deeply intertwined, in precolonial times, with the development of specific sociopolitical models. In a nutshell, what Geschiere (1995:164-171) suggests is that if in a society one finds a hierarchical social organisation centred on the figure of the chief, then the chief is also believed to possess spiritual powers and is expected to manage them for the prosperity of his subjects. If, on the contrary, the society is organised only in terms of "family heads", that is, in terms of a kin-based hierarchy in the absence of political institutions going beyond the level of the extended family, then agency in the invisible is not an essential feature of the leader.

As I already said (Section 3.1) and as it is indirectly confirmed in the quote from Buo Makpa Amos (Section 5.2.), Lower Fungom societies are constituted by near-independent kin groups coalescing under the ritual authority of a village chief (cf. Horton [1972]). The data at my disposal seem to confirm Geschiere's predictions since the chiefs of Lower Fungom villages are credited to possess spiritual powers which villagers expect will be used to provide themselves with "bush, chop, pikin", a CPE expression meaning "abundance of game, produce, and offspring" (see also Di Carlo [2011]) As elsewhere in the Cameroonian Grassfields (cf. Fowler [1993], Fowler [2011], Warnier [2009]), chiefs are thus conceptualised as sacred kings whose spiritual powers, given by village-based secret associations,[12] should first and foremost benefit their subjects. All these data point to one and the same conclusion: the main *raison d'être* of a village *qua* social unit is to be found in the localised management of spiritual power through the chief's ritual skills. At the same time, not all chiefs are considered equal: following the same logic of the visible determined by the invisible, the greater the number of people under a chief's authority the more effective his spiritual powers are believed to be.

5.3.2 Language, village-chiefdom and spiritual security

Is it possible to relate the localist trait found in Lower Fungom language ideologies (Sections 3.1 and 3.2.2), with the co-occurring trait stressing the importance of speaking multiple languages to index affiliation in multiple village-chiefdoms (Section 4), and the anxieties for protection in the spiritual world (Section 5.3.1)?

The point of departure in trying to answer this question is the use of a village-specific lect to index membership in it: as we have seen in Section 4, as a norm the indexical order built by the local ethno-metapragmatic view does not link village membership to any essentialist claim comparable to what happens in our Western views but, rather, results in representing oneself in its relative position within that community.

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[12] This is an essential aspect of social life throughout (at least) Central and West Africa, on which see Horton (1972) and, for the Grassfields, Kaberry (1962), Chilver and Kaberry (1967), and Fowler (1993, 2011). Di Carlo (2011: 65-80) is the only source for Lower Fungom in this regard beyond some 1920-30's British colonial reports (cited therein).

In these small and only partially centralised societies all positions are largely relative except for one: that of the chief. On top of all that is implied in the chief's loss of human-only nature at the time of his enthronement, it must be recalled that, while his political and executive powers are limited by village-based secret societies (Di Carlo [2011:72-75]), he is the only person in the village who is aware of all the secrets held in each of the village-based secret societies and, for this reason, he is the only person who is credited to be able to manage supernatural powers for the well-being of the whole village community. The chief's position within the community, therefore, is not of relative but, rather, of absolute nature: at any time he interacts with the other members, he stands invariably at the summit of the continuum of relations constituting the community.[13] Otherwise stated: being member of the community implies that one is a chief's *dependent*, where dependency is quintessentially spiritual in kind—i.e. pertains to the management of supernatural affairs.

Small village population is normally taken, in local interpretations of the world, as an indication that the chief has overall limited spiritual powers. From this perspective, it is clearly a risk for one to rely exclusively on the protection of one "small chief". Here the connection with multilingualism becomes visible: by being able to represent themselves as members of many villages, multilingual speakers can establish multiple relations of spiritual dependency, thus securing potential protection from a number of village chiefs (see Figure 3). In finance we call it diversification of risk.

It is clear that the model developed here, while intuitively appealing, must at this point be considered provisional, rather than definitive. In particular, it has not yet been possible to systematically assemble data from discourse or practice that corroborates the model in all its aspects—this is the main goal of my future research in Lower Fungom and surrounding areas. Moreover, structured interviews revealing local, overt awareness of the model have yet to be collected. Nonetheless, I believe this model is especially promising as a first attempt to bridge two key aspects of the life of sub-Saharan Africans, i.e. multilingualism and spiritual anxieties, and, even if it must ultimately be revised, it has value in structuring future investigations and creating a research agenda for the study of multilingualism, language ideologies, and social structures in societies which have not yet received significant attention in the sociolinguistic literature.

HERE FIGURE 3

Figure 3. a): the chain of implications, clockwise: 1. Lower Fungom language ideology conceptualises each village as a distinct speaker community; 2. the village behaves corporately (i.e. as a social unit) only in ritual matters; 3. the chief is the main actor in the ritual sphere; 4. since the chief is credited with powers that grant him agency in the spiritual world, he provides the community of his subjects with spiritual protection and, hence, security, which is prerequisite for material well-being. b): through active competence in multiple lects, an individual represents affiliation in multiple village communities: by joining different communities each enjoying protection from its own chief, the multilingual individual maximises the chances to obtain spiritual protection and, hence, material well-being.

6. Concluding remarks

This article started with the twofold recognition that the epistemological repertoire of sociolinguists working in sub-Saharan Africa is largely shaped by scholarship stemming from research in Western contexts and that, if the goal of sociolinguistics is to become a progressively "globalised" discipline, then this is a less than ideal limit. In order to overcome this limit, it would seem sensible to devote substantial efforts in letting the target community's ideologies emerge and then shape our interpretive tools accord-

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[13] It is interesting to note that chiefs meeting together in official capacity usually refer to each other by the names of their respective villages, as if each of them embodied the totality of his community.

ingly. This "second-wave" effort (Meyerhoff and Stanford [2015:10]) in capturing unknown, potentially unimaginable sociocultural and language ideological scenarios in currently lesser-known parts of the world lies at the root of a sociolinguistics that is willing to take the challenge of giving to each type of society its type of sociolinguistics (paraphrasing Smakman and Heinrich [2015b]).

In this paper I have tried to give a concrete example of how far one should be ready to go in order to collect evidence allowing the reconstruction of a hitherto unexplored sociocultural background, onto which linguistic facts can then be projected and interpreted in their possible social meaning. The journey has ultimately led to consider that an emic understanding of the Lower Fungom endogenous multilingualism might be built starting from a possible connection between, on the one hand, language ideologies bringing about ritual singularity of village-chiefdoms and linguistic diversity and, on the other, multilingualism as a tactic (in the sense of De Certeau [1984]) for people to cope, however subconsciously, with their spiritual anxieties in a context where none of the traditional authorities is perceived to offer a sufficient degree of security.

As with all explorations, one cannot but proceed by trial and error. In the case of Lower Fungom endogenous multilingualism, the background I have tried to summarise seems to be relatively solid but some of the language-culture correlations are still subject to confirmation. Some readers will find this proposal provocative, while my aim is to be fundamentally propositive. Although spiritual insecurity (Ashforth [2005]) is a central element in the life-world (Husserl [1970]) of so many Africans, be they villagers or urbanites, it has rarely if ever been considered as a factor patterning with their linguistic behaviour: I think that trying to include it in our current repertoire of possible interpretive keys would make sociolinguistics one step closer to becoming globalised.

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