

Language mixing at home and school in a multilingual community (Mandara Mountains, Cameroon)

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Introduction. This paper is based on research conducted in a village located on the plain in the densely multilingual northern Mandara Mountains of Cameroon. The montagnard (traditionally mountain-dwelling) groups in this fifty-square-kilometer area speak twenty-five closely related languages belonging to the Central branch of the Chadic family, as well as unrelated languages such as Fulfulde, Kanuri, Arabic, and French. Montagnard groups are traditionally exogamous, patrilingual, and patrilocal (Barreteau, Breton, and Dieu 1984). Trilingualism seems to be normal and productive competence in five or six languages is not unusual among montagnards (Kordass and Annett 1977; MacEachern 1990). The individual who knows six languages may, however, speak only two or three of them well and have stronger receptive than productive skills in the other languages (cf., MacEachern 1990).

In the community where I conducted my research, most children are socialized to use the resources of multiple linguistic codes. From birth they are regularly exposed to more than one language. On a daily basis they see family members and neighbors learning and/or using second languages. Thus, the children of this community come to the classroom with significant experience with second-language (L2) acquisition and use.

In this paper I describe some practices and beliefs regarding language acquisition and use in a multilingual, multiethnic village and discuss discontinuities between home and school. I focus on language mixing, by which I mean translation, cross-linguistic communication, and intra- and inter-sentential switching. I then consider the implications of the French-only rule at school—the strict prohibition of the use of any language but French in the classroom and on the playground—for classroom acquisition of French by children of this community. I argue that in multilingual communities where language mixing is common practice, the French-only rule (widely practiced in Francophone Africa) may impede students' classroom French acquisition in two ways:

- (1) by conflicting with community practices of novice-expert and inter-ethnic/linguistic communication, thereby increasing the linguistic and cultural discontinuities between home and school; and

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- (2) by preventing children from using communicative competencies and language learning experience that could facilitate their classroom L2 use and acquisition.

This paper is based on case studies of four multilingual children and ethnographic study of their village and primary school. The data set includes recordings of natural discourse, language proficiency assessment activities, interviews with the children and their parents, and participant observation. I spent two periods in the field: two years of Peace Corps service (1992–1994) and one summer of systematic data collection (1996).

Communicative practices in the community.

Language socialization in the community. The montagnard convention of exogamy means that individuals usually marry outside of their ethnic/linguistic group. Consequently, bilingual households are far more common than monolingual ones. Child-directed speech was not simplified, and participants did not believe it was necessary to keep languages separate (by speaker or utterance) to avoid confusing the child or slowing her linguistic development. Participants explained that children do not require any instruction in their home languages, but they learn them by attending to more competent speakers and by speaking with peers and sibling caregivers. It is considered inappropriate for younger children to speak to adults often; brief verbal or nonverbal responses to adult questions are preferred.

Loosely supervised daytime wanderings may bring children in contact with playmates who speak other languages, and several participants reported that they began learning one of their secondary languages through such contacts. By the age of four or five, montagnard children routinely carry messages for adults (cf., Duranti and Ochs 1986; Rabain-Jamin 1998). Messages are usually memorized word for word and are sometimes in a language the child does not yet understand well or at all. One participant spoke of such message-carrying as his first lessons in a local lingua franca.

Multilingual communicative practices. In inter-ethnic/linguistic communication, a nonexpert interlocutor may be accommodated in a variety of ways. Translation and codeswitching are common practices. Cross-linguistic communication—wherein each interlocutor speaks her own preferred language and has sufficient comprehension of the language used by interlocutors (Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1991)—is also acceptable. Use of a lingua franca is another strategy, but even then language mixing often occurs. Even when all interlocutors share the same primary language and linguistic accommodation is, thus, not an issue, language mixing is common.

L2 acquisition and use in the community. Participants consistently described the same strategies for learning an L2: attend to the conversations of

experts and ask questions and practice speaking in private with expert friends. In this patrilocal society, the newlywed woman was frequently offered as the model for second-language acquisition: Within the first year of marriage she learns the language of her husband's family from the conversations of her new household and the explanations of her female in-laws and bilingual friends. A person wishing to learn a language not spoken in her household may meet regularly with an expert friend for lessons. These lessons are opportunities to practice conversation and to ask questions like "How do you say X?" or "I heard someone say Y; what does it mean?" When recounting their experiences in learning second languages, participants stressed the importance of such opportunities to converse, request translation, make errors, and be corrected in private.

Participants reported that they preferred to produce in public only those L2 forms they felt they had mastered. Playback sessions (wherein participants listened to and commented on recorded interactions) revealed that the same strategies used to accommodate an interlocutor—use of an intergroup language, codeswitching, translation, and cross-linguistic communication—were also used to avoid making L2 errors in public.

Language mixing was described as more than a relief strategy. Many participants cited it as a helpful feature of both L2 instruction and conversation. All participants said they found explanations of L2 linguistic forms and structures given in the novice's L1 to be much more effective than explanations given in even simplified L2. Two participants noted that language mixing provided clues to the meaning of unfamiliar L2 forms. In conversations recorded for this study, repairs often took the form of full or partial translation of the problematic utterance, and such repair sequences elicited positive assessments in playback sessions.

Communicative practices in the classroom. In the classroom, norms, preferences, and expectations for L2 learning and use were quite different from those of the community. Chorally and individually, students had to display French competence on command in front of the class. They were expected to do so by following instructions, answering questions, repeating or writing what was said by the teacher, or reading aloud or copying what was written by the teacher on the blackboard. French errors rarely went uncorrected even when language was not the focus of the lesson (cf., Mercier-Tremblay 1982; Mutomé 1982; Tourneux and Iyébi-Mandjek 1994).

The teacher understood that French immersion was difficult for his students, and he made great efforts to accommodate them. He slowed his speech, repeated himself frequently, and simplified his utterances syntactically and lexically. He drew on the blackboard and used gestures extensively to illustrate the meaning of his utterances. The teacher strictly enforced the French-only rule in the classroom, however, and, to a lesser degree, during recreation time. A child might be slapped, switched, assigned chores, suspended, or obliged to kneel with outstretched arms at the front of the class for several minutes for using his or her local language.

The teacher gave several reasons for the strict prohibition of local-language use at school, reasons that were echoed by education officials at the county, division, and provincial levels. For one, school is the only place that most children have an opportunity to hear and speak French, and the teacher is, for many, their only source of correct input and error correction. Furthermore, the teacher in this village (like the great majority of teachers in the far north province) was from another province and did not speak any of the local languages (cf., Tourneux and Iyébi-Mandjek 1994). Able to understand little more than basic greetings, he feared losing control of the students if local language use were allowed. Of particular concern to the teacher was the possibility that students could insult him and their classmates without his knowledge. He also pointed out that he would not be able to detect and correct misunderstanding of his instruction. So, he punished talk among students unless it was in French and made a point of seating children of different ethnic/linguistic groups together to discourage L1 usage and to promote integration. Development of a national identity was one of the goals of primary education, and learning French, the teacher explained, was an important part of that.

Implications of discontinuities. Many aspects of the teacher's practice may not have promoted students' acquisition of French, as was intended, because they were too unfamiliar or because they prohibited use of familiar L2 communication and teaching/learning strategies. Whereas the teacher sought to accommodate students by slowing his speech and simplifying it syntactically and lexically, community members do not make such adjustments when communicating with novices. Rather, they accommodate them by means of code switches, translation, and/or cross-linguistic communication, practices not allowed at school.

In this community, a novice may participate in L2 interaction in several ways. She may simply observe experts' conversations as a legitimate peripheral participant (cf., Lave and Wenger 1991). A novice may communicate cross-linguistically if her receptive skills are adequate, responding to L2 utterances in her L1 or another L2 in which she is more competent. Or, if she feels competent or comfortable enough, she may communicate in the L2. Codeswitching may be used as a relief strategy, either by the novice if she finds herself unable to express something in the L2, or by the expert if she wants to ensure the novice's understanding. Moreover, a novice may seek out and set the agenda for private, informal instruction in the L2, wherein her L1 or a more mastered L2 is used for explanations and as a point of reference. To summarize, a novice can participate in L2 interaction with the option of using her L1 and without being obliged to display noncompetence in public.

In the classroom, a novice's options are far more restricted. Only French may be spoken, and the teacher is the only sanctioned interlocutor and source of French input. When the novice does not understand an L2 form or utterance, there

is no recourse to her L1 or more mastered L2. Novices are required to speak French on command, and their utterances are subject to public correction. All of these practices, particularly the last, were reported by participants to have caused them considerable anxiety and frustration in their early years of schooling. Many children, I was told, were so often punished for breaking the French-only rule that they left school altogether.

The teacher expressed a firm belief that his methods were appropriate and, under better conditions, effective. He attributed the low success rate in French acquisition by children attending his school to the lack of teaching staff and materials, low motivation among students, and a community-wide lack of commitment to public schooling. For their part, community members attributed it to the lack of opportunities to hear and speak the language informally with experts outside the classroom.

Should the French-only rule be changed? Language mixing is a significant feature of novice-expert and inter-ethnic/linguistic interaction in this community. Moreover, participants identified language mixing as an important resource in their SLA. But, would changing the French-only rule lead to increased achievement in students' French acquisition? After all, proscription of language mixing was not the only aspect of classroom practice that conflicted with patterns of novice-expert and inter-ethnic/linguistic communication prevalent in the community. Many ways of using and learning language preferred in the community were hindered or punished at school, such as delay of language production, private practice and correction, and child-constructed interaction.

Even given these other differences in communicative practice, language mixing may make it easier for novices to participate actively in classroom activities. For one, allowing language mixing would reduce the culture and language shock children from this community experience when they begin school. Students would be able to apply to their classroom learning of French some of the language-learning strategies used in their community. Moreover, students would be less constrained by their L2 proficiency and less inhibited by anxieties related to public production of L2 forms not yet mastered.

Directions for further research. In the Mandara Mountains, as anywhere, careful research is needed to identify the necessary and sufficient features of culture to which teaching and schooling must be accommodated and to discover those aspects of community practice that can be adapted for use in the classroom (Weisner, Gallimore, and Jordan 1988). If we are to determine whether or not modification of the French-only rule would lead to improvements in classroom French acquisition by children from this community, we must first understand the role language mixing plays in their L2 acquisition and use in the community. Classroom research is crucial to understanding how the French-only rule could be

changed in ways that are acceptable and workable for students and teachers. Such research will not only aid in the development of appropriate and sustainable pedagogical innovation, it will also contribute to our understanding of the ways in which culture shapes language learning.

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