
LANGUAGE AND SOCIO-CULTURAL CHANGE IN EJAGHAM

Wilson Atem Ebot

Introduction

The interrelation of language and other aspects of culture and society is so obvious that no part of the culture of any group can adequately be studied without reference to its linguistic symbols. As an illustration, let us consider social organisation, the complex of cultural traits which governs the relation of individuals and groups in human society. To determine the precise nature of those relations, it is necessary to analyse, not only the meanings but often the grammatical form, as well of the terms used to symbolize intragroup relationships.

Language as a Status Indicator

In his article on the "Verbal and Non-Verbal Honorific Expressions in Mungaka," Lima (1982: 22-33)¹ succinctly shows how respect for elders and social superiors² among the Bali people of the North West Province is faithfully and studiously reflected in the Mungaka language. He writes:

Another apparent consequence of this status quo is the existing practice and readiness to render verbal and non-verbal respect or homage to whom it is due. This often starts early in life. As soon as the child begins to lisp, he or she begins to receive instructions on the use of honorific form of expressions as part of their [his/her] language acquisition skills. Everyone learns to distinguish each existing form of expression from another, because to each hierarchical group corresponds a special form of expression... (1982:27).

Journal of Humanities, Nos 8/9, 1994/95

ISSN 1016-0728

When I examined the expression that Lima (1982) discussed I came to the conclusion that they revealed the hierarchical socio-political organisation of the Bali society. At the apex is "Mfon" who is assisted by "Mfotes" (sub-chiefs), then there are the "Komfons" (councillors appointed by the monarch), etc.

It is clear from an examination of the words or expressions used that their root is "Mfon"³ (literary "ruler"). Onto this root are added prefixes and suffixes, which in Mungaka, are clearly post and premodifiers, to differentiate one social group from the other. The difference, for example, between the "Mfon" (monarch) and "Mfote" (sub-chief) is marked by the substitution of the morpheme /n/ with the /te/ cluster which morphemically significant in semantic differentiation in Mungaka. The "te" morpheme, in this context, is a marker of lower social status while the final "n" morpheme is a marker of higher social status.

Situations such as that of Bali abound in many societies in the world. This may be illustrated with one further example. Opler, writing on the "Kinship systems of the Southern Athateskan Indian tribes" (1963; 38:7620-633), reveals how in Chiricahua Apache the relations of an individual with the relatives of his spouse are marked by extreme deference and studiously maintained respect observances. He points out that:

This distinction is systematically reflected in the language through the use of specific vocabulary of respect terms and a special third person pronoun to refer to respected relatives and a special second person form when such kin are addressed directly. A man calls his wife's relatives (taken as a group) *ka?Ixehe* (meaning, "those for whom I carry burdens") where "ka" is the respectful third person pronoun. If the indirect object in such a construction had reference to a relative out of the respect group the form would be "*ba?Ilxe*" (meaning, "I carry burdens for them" "*ba*" "*bi*" familiar third persons, plus- a" for benefit of (1941:140-185).

Although these examples show the obvious and necessary interrelation of language and other aspects of culture, Hoijier (1948) remarks that in most cases the cultural context which is a necessary ingredient for the study of linguistic change has always been taken for granted.

He then asserts that in order to understand and generalise on linguistic change we need to see it as a part of a wider process of cultural change "because changes in one aspect of culture would inevitably result, sooner or later, in all other aspects."

When, for example, machine tools were first introduced to Western European civilization, shifts in the economic system followed almost immediately. Capital accumulations derived from industry and trade rapidly replaced land and agriculture as the major wealth-producing sources. This in turn re-ordered the relations between individuals and groups in Western European Society: the earlier paternalistic and relatively more intimate relations between the lord of the manor and his dependants were gradually replaced by the more impersonal and formal relations of employer and employee. Ultimately, every aspect of West European civilisation underwent drastic change, an occurrence amply attested by the fact that we today find the civilisations of feudal Europe more strange in their fundamental traits than any other non-European civilisation.

Research Problem

Given this conception of cultural change, this paper aims at proving that change in the Ejagham and Kenyang languages is the concomitant effect of changes in the cultural patterns.

The research problem may be stated as follows: (1) Can it be established that linguistic change (by this I mean, not only semantic change but phonemic and grammatical change as well) is part of the pattern of the socio-cultural change in Cameroon in general and not independent of it? (2) Which mechanisms relate language to the rest of culture through which such co-ordinated changes of the latter take place?

Empirical Evidence

In response to the first of these questions there are a number of observations which suggest that periods of significant change in culture are roughly coincident with marked shifts in linguistic structure. Hoijer is of the opinion that it was "surely no accident that the radical linguistic changes which marked the transition from Anglo-Saxon to Modern English were roughly paralled in time by change from the

relatively isolated rural English culture of the Anglo-Saxon period to the highly urbanised industrial civilisation of England today" (1948:458). This however, does not imply that the rise of mercantilism in England automatically engendered the loss of endings in the English verb or the formation of a relatively analytic linguistic structure from one that was relatively synthetic. What this actually means is that the rapid and far-reaching changes in other features of culture that took place in England between 900 and 1900 stimulated an equally widespread change in linguistic features of that culture.

This conclusion suggests that the tempo of linguistic change depends on how rapid or slow the culture of a people moves. Linguistic change will tend to slow down where a particular culture is relatively static or slow and, when a group undergoes rapid changes in its non-linguistic culture, linguistic change may accelerate.

The Ejagham Language Situation

This hypothesis may be illustrated with material from the Ejagham area⁴ of the Eyumojock Sub-division in the South West Province of Cameroon. The people of this area speak the "*Ejagha*" language which has three distinct regional dialect varieties: *Njemaya*, *Obang* and *Keaka*.

Njemaya, which is spoken in the clan area referred to as *Ekwe* and situated adjacent to Nigeria, has the majority of its population buried in the forest, south of the central Cross River basin. Because of its inaccessibility (owing to the absence of motorable roads) the inhabitants of this area have had very few opportunities for interacting with people from other areas. Similar to them are the Obang people, who are situated to the southwest of *Ekwe* in the same stretch of forest. Consequent to this inaccessibility and lack of facilities that would attract immigrants into the area, aspects of culture (of which language is an integral part) are fairly intact and/or respond quite slowly to change.

Unlike the above two dialect areas, the *Keaka* speaking group is situated in Central Ejagham where there exists a good network of motorable roads which link all the villages, a higher literacy rate, better medical facilities and a bustling economic activity. As a result of the interaction that takes place in this area, many cultural practices that are found in both *Obang* and *Ekwe* are on their way to decay. The socio-cultural change that is rapidly taking place here is reflected in the language.

Data Analysis

This was observed in fieldwork data that reveals that certain linguistic elements used to reflect social or cultural values are disappearing in varying degrees in the areas described above. It was observed, for example, that the adjective *atah* (literally "grand") which was compounded⁵ with proper name (root) to form a complex lexical item was not universally used in Ejagham country. This is evidenced by the results obtained from fifty informants picked randomly from each of the three dialect areas described above. The informants were asked to say how they would address the oldest people in their villages. A summary of the various terms they indicated is represented in the following table:

Table 1. Passim

Dialect	Informants	FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE					
		"Atah"	%	"Papa"	%	"Massa"	%
Keaka	50	9	18	28	56	13	25
Njemaya	50	38	76	8	16	4	08
Obang	50	43	86	6	12	1	02

We notice that the frequency of occurrence of the old form *atah* is highest (86%) in the Obang area which is completely cut off because of lack of motorable roads. The Keaka dialect area has the least (18%) frequency of occurrence of this old form but the highest (56%) frequency of occurrence of the Pidgin English (PE) form of "Papa" and the English loan form of "Massa".

The reason for the rapid disappearance of such linguistic elements as *atah* in the Keaka area was summarised by an informant in the following statement: *Eiék ðkèt aboh-abob* (literally, "the only occupants of our villages nowadays are children"). This statement does not necessarily imply that the villages are made up of children but rather that the present generations have new values and aspirations. They tend to respect wealthy or educated people rather than poor people. In that case, since

the term *atah* cannot be applied to this new class of individuals, loan words from Pidgin English which is a lingua franca, and English are used.

The results analysed above point to the fact that "open communities" tend to face more rapid socio-economic change that is in turn reflected in linguistic shifts than it is the case with "close communities". Such rapidity in cultural change (linguistic and non-linguistic) in "open communities" is stimulated by outside contacts.

This generalization does not, however, imply that divergent tongues would become alike simply because their speakers come to share a similar culture. The Banyangs and Ejaghams in Manyu division have lived in intimate association for centuries but there is no evidence that Kenyang has, in the least, approached Ejagha, even though there is abundant evidence that most of Banyang culture is borrowed from the Ejagahm area. Harry Hoijer (1971:459) also reports that the Kiowa-Apache, Athapaskan in speech, have lived intimately with the Kiowa for long but neither of their languages has been assimilated to the other.

At this juncture, we may now attempt an answer to our second problem which requires us to answer the question: which mechanisms relate language to the rest of the culture through which co-ordinated changes of the latter take place?

There is no doubt that an obvious relation exists between semantic change and cultural change. For, as a people acquire, by invention or borrowing, cultural innovations of any sort, there are inevitable additions to their vocabulary. In some cases, especially when the cultural innovations come by diffusion, the linguistic additions will consist of borrowed terms, often taken from the same sources as the borrowed cultural items. In most cases, however, such borrowed forms take on the phonemic and grammatical peculiarities of the language that receives them.

It not infrequently happens that the borrowings alter both the phonemic and the grammatical patterns of the receiving language. This has happened in English, where both phonemic and grammatical patterns have been affected by borrowings from French.

An interesting example of phonemic alteration caused by borrowing is found in the English of "Educated" Bambui and Bafut people. The native languages of these people do not have the voiceless bilabial plosive [p]. In its place the voiced bilabial plosive [b] is used, especially at the initial position of words. Thus, words like "petrol", "pick", "place", etc are pronounced [b t rol], [bik], [blais] in rapid speech.

Masanga (1983:105-107) also reports similar substitutions in the English of the Moghamo people. He has, for example, cited the following phonemic shifts:

[u] → [0] medially
 [fud] becomes [fod]
 [gud] becomes [god]
 [kud] becomes [kod] etc

Another pertinent example is found in the Kenyang language wherein constant contacts between the lower and Upper Banyang speech communities have caused substantial shifts in the phonemic systems of the languages involved. The /f/ in lower Banyang has become /s/ in Upper Kenyang. Also /e/ has changed to /i/; /aya/ ; /a/ to /ai/; etc thus:

Table 2.

English	Lower Banyang	Upper Banyang
Put	<i>fɪə</i>	<i>sɪə</i>
Let's go	<i>sɛndɔk</i>	<i>si ndok</i>
who is he	<i>fʃiə a</i>	<i>fʃiəgo</i>
here	<i>fə</i>	<i>fai</i>

The phonemic changes indicated above come from the lower Banyang speech community with their neighbouring Ejagham tribal area to the east. Indeed, the point has been forcefully argued by researchers that the presumed regularity of individual sound changes is, in fact; but a diachronic reflection of the regularity of synchronic phonological norms or canons or word-shape (always and only within well-defined speech communities). Many scholars have recognized the fact that when internal linguistic conditions do not explain the likelihood or the fact of the appearance of a sound change, only social conditions will be able to explain such likelihood or the fact of its spread, establishment and maintenance within the community.

In addition to phonemic alterations described above, are vocabulary items that reflect cultural change through the formation of compounds and similar derivations to express newly acquired elements of culture. The Ejagham and Banyang languages again provide many examples of this development. Some of the more interesting cases are:

Table 3

Kenyang	Ejagha	English
<i>amang-ndek</i>	<i>mbang-okarah</i>	coconuts
<i>nsenge-ndek</i>	<i>mseng-okarah</i>	mangoes
<i>bakwa-ndek</i>	<i>ahjou-okarah</i>	pears

Ethnological evidence suggests that both the Banyang and Ejagham acquired "coconuts", "mangoes", and "pears" from a foreign land-most probably from the West Indies - and that these items were brought into their country by Europeans whom they refer to as *barek* for plural and *ndek* for singular (in Kenyang) and *abokarerah* for Ejagha plural and *okaran* for singular respectively. Without these second elements of the compounds the initial words themselves refer to different things. In Kenyang and Ejagha the words have the following meanings:

Table 4

Kenyang	Ejagha	English
<i>amang</i>	<i>mbang</i>	kernels
<i>nsenge</i>	<i>nseng</i>	native roundish fruit
<i>bakwah</i>	<i>ahjou</i>	plums

Literally translated, each of the former compounds means "food of the white man". Sapir (1936) also cites similar changes among the Navaho's *nà:da?*, which was their modern word for "corn". He reveals that ethonological evidence demonstrates that the Navahos acquired corn only recently and that the borrowing was made from their Pueblo neighbours - their hereditary enemies. He reveals that linguistic analysis and comparative study confirm that *nà:da?*, which Navaho cannot today etymologise, is an old compound of *nà:-* ("enemy") and the possessive form *-dà* ("food"). Thus *nà:da?*, historically interpreted, has the literal significance of "food of the enemy". There is no doubt that similar examples which have undergone changes abound in other non-literate cultures as a result of the influence of inter-group contacts. Such evidence points to the fact that causes of linguistic change must be sought in cultural contexts; for it is here that the complex fabric of language is made to fit the multifarious meaningful situations provided by the daily experiences of the members of a society. Just as a people faced with new problems in the production of food and other necessities will devise new technical means and reorganise their social structure to meet these problems, so it is that the introduction of new meanings and the corresponding expansion of vocabulary will bring about changes in the essential formal structures by means of which vocabulary items are organised into units of speech.

Conclusion

This clarification leads to the plausible conclusion that though utterances are composed of morphemes and words, the meanings of such utterances are conditioned very largely by the non-linguistic culture of the group which speaks the language. Hoijer (1964:460) reveals that as the culture changes, the lexical features of a language, as has been proved, may be added to or rearranged. This is so because these utterances include, among other things, linguistic forms that have special cultural significance, such as words and other locution defining artefacts, processes of manufacture, social forms or religious beliefs and practices.

As the culture changes, such linguistic forms may be increased in number, changed in meaning or otherwise varied. During a period of relative cultural stability, how-

ever, the utterances current in a given speech community attain a phonetic equilibrium in the sense that sounds are combined in definable arrangements.

The point has to be made here that it is not every phonetic change, or even the majority of them, that has its origin in lexical and hence ultimately cultural change. There are many phonetic changes which are clearly the result of strictly linguistic factors. For example, a change in one feature of a phonemic system may well set in motion a whole series of shifts representing the intergration of the newly developed phoneme to the system as whole. It is only the initial disturbance of the equilibrium that is brought about by changes in non-linguistic culture, in so far as these affect the lexicon of a language. Once such a stimulus to phonetic change has taken place, it is likely to bring in its train a whole series of contemporary shifts which eventually, like in the case of the Great Vowel Shift in the English language in the sixteenth century, may lead to change in almost every aspect of the phonemic system. It is definitely on this basis that Hoijer asserts that:

Phonetic change affects all the speakers in a given speech community together, it does not begin with one speaker and spread from one individual to another. It is in brief a social phenomenon not one that can be resolved into series of individual occurrences. The same is true of changes in non-linguistic culture (1964:462).

Usually, the speakers of a given speech community are unaware of sound change, since innovations in habits of pronunciation are not made consciously. Rather, it is when the speech context requires combinations of forms which run counter to speech habits that this need takes precedence and consequently modifies the speech habits of the community. This may be said to be the case with most of our Cameroon Home languages which are undergoing drastic alterations at all linguistic levels since such alterations are mostly influenced by the presence of English and French, it is possible to suggest that our native communities have greater need and aspiration for both these languages and the cultures of the native speakers of English and/or French.

Notes

1. *Occasional Papers*, the Department of English, University of Yaounde. Excerpts cited here are with the permission of the author.
2. "The Bali society is stratified on the basis of the monarchy, title holders, chieftaincy, royalty and traditional religious priesthood" (1982:27).
3. There is no doubt that the word "*fon*" used in the whole of the north west province, for a paramount chief was derived from "*mfon*" as a result of economy of effort.
4. The Ejaghams are bantoid speaking people who occupy the central area of the basin of the upper Cross River along the Cameroon/Nigeria boundary. They are divided into two parts by the River Munaiya. Part of them live in eastern Nigeria while the rest live to the west of Manyu division in Cameroon. Though separated in this way, both groups speak the Ejagham language.
5. In the process of compounding, certain modifications were effected, particularly when the name started with a vowel. Thus, for example, *atah* + "*Obed*" became *Ataben*; *atah* + "*Ebot*" became *Atabot*.

Bibliography

- Barker, Roger G & Barker, Louise. "Behaviour for the Comparative Study of Cultures" in Kaplan, Bert (ed), *Studying Personality Cross-Culturally*. (New York: Harper and Row Press, 1961) 457-476
- Boas, Franz; *Race Language and Culture*. (London: Macmillan Press, 1940)
- Boas, Franz; "Language and Culture". in *Studies in the History of Culture Menasha*: Wis. Banta, 1942)178-184.

- Bright, William O. "Linguistic Change in Some Indian Caste Dialects" in Ferguson, Charles and Gumperz, John (eds), *Linguistic Diversity in South Asia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960a).
- Cafe, Wallace (ed). *Aspects of Language and Culture* (Washington University Press, 1963).
- Dozier, Edward P. "Kinship and Linguistic Change among the Arizona Tewa" in the *International Journal of American Linguistics*, (1965) vol. 21:242-257.
- Herzog, George. "Culture Change and Language: Shifts in the Prima Vocabulary" in Sapir, L., Hallowel, A.I. and Newman, S. (eds) *Language, Culture and Personality* (Menasha: Wis Banta, 1941).
- Hoenigswald, Henry M. *Language Change and Linguistic Reconstruction* (Chicago: University Press, 1960).
- Hoijer, Harry. "Linguistic and Cultural Change" in *Language: Journal of the Linguistic Society of America*. (1953) vol. XXVII, 111-120 reprinted in Hymes, Dell. *Language in Cultural and Society* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1964) 455-466.
- Hoijer, Harry. *Language in Culture* (Chicago: University Press, 1954a).
- Lima, Adolf. *Occasional Papers of the Department of English* (Yaounde: University of Yaounde, 1982) MS.
- Malkiel, Yakov. "Paradigmatic Resistance to Sound Changes" in *Language: Journal of the Linguistic Society of America*. (1960) vol. XXXVI, 281-346.

- Malkiel, Yakov. "Weak Phonetic Changes, Spontaneous Sound Shifts, and Lexical Contamination" in *Lingua* (1962) II. 263-275.
- Masanga, David. *The Spoken English of Educated Moghamo people: A Phonological Study*. Unpublished thesis for Doctorate de 3^e Cycle. (University of Yaounde, 1983).
- Opler, Morris "The Kinship Systems of the Southern Athabaskan Speaking Tribes" in *America Anthropologist* (1936) vol. XXXVIII, 620-633.
- Opler, Morris. *An Apache Life-Wary* (Chicago: University Press, 1921).
- Sapir, Edward. *Language* (New York: Harcourt Brace Press, 1921).
- Sapir, Edward. *Culture, Language and Personality* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957).
- Tambiah, S.J. "The Magical Power of Words" in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (1968) vol. III^m 175-208.
- Weinreich, Uriel. *Languages in Contact* (New York: Linguistic Circle Press, 1953).