

Evolving alternatives: Language choice in a rural Cameroon market

Bruce Connell & Peter Goldman
York University

In multilingual environments there may be a language that is most commonly used in the market setting. Typically a lingua franca or a trade language, over time, will take on this role, spreading via trade routes. Observation of language choice and use in the market may give an indication as to the fluctuating fortunes of the various languages available (Calvet 1992, Connell 2009, Cooper & Carpenter 1976).

Connell (2009) described and commented on language use in the weekly market of the village of Somié, a highly multilingual village in a remote part of Cameroon. The goal of that research was to explore constraints on choice of language in the market of this small village, thereby offering some insight into conditions on multilingualism in rural Africa, where the large majority of such research has been urban-based. The results of that study showed fourteen different languages being used in the market though two, the primary language of the village (Ba Mambila) and the regional lingua franca (Fulfulde), predominated.

The work reported in the present study is a follow up to the original investigation, based on data collected roughly a generation after the original study. The investigative method used has been called ‘transaction analysis’ (Cooper & Carpenter 1976), and involves a research assistant(s) observing and recording details of language use between market traders and their customers for selected commodities. In the original study of Connell (2009) five commodities were selected as representative of the market for the particular season. Observations were recorded of the transactions (language of the trader, language(s) used in the transaction, gender, and approximate age of the customers) over the course of a single market day. The results were informative for the specific commodities and season. The present study expands the time frame of the investigation: rather than a one-day snapshot, observations were recorded every market day for a period of one year. This way, in addition to providing insight into developments in language choice and use in this market nearly two decades after the earlier study, the present study permits a broader view of transactions and a view of possible seasonal fluctuations related to the availability and desirability of the selected commodities.

Assessment of the results reveals two primary trends: first is an increase in the use of Fulfulde, the regional lingua franca and, second, a consequent reduction of the number of languages used in the market. Implications of these trends, taking into account the evolving language ecology of the region, are discussed.

References

- Calvet, Louis-Jean (1992). *Les langues des marchés en Afrique*. Aix-en-Provence: Institute d'études créoles et francophones. (Distributed by Didier Érudition.)
- Connell, Bruce (2009). Language diversity and language choice: A view from a Cameroon market. *Anthropological Linguistics* 51.2: 130–150.
- Cooper, Robert Leon & S. Carpenter (1976). Language in the market. In Lionel M. Bender, J. Donald Bowen & Robert Leon Cooper (eds.) *Language in Ethiopia*, 244—55. London: Oxford University Press.