

THE CONTRIBUTION  
OF SOCIOLINGUISTIC THEORY  
AND PRACTICE TO THE STUDY  
OF MULTILINGUALISM  
(WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO WEST AFRICA)

Given the predominance of multilingualism in many countries there is great need for a new, interdisciplinary approach to the problem. Sociolinguistics—or the sociology of language—provides such an approach and can help to shed new light on a phenomenon which is often discussed in terms that tend to create more problems than they solve. In order to demonstrate how sociolinguistic theory and practice can contribute to the study of multilingualism this paper will attempt to outline briefly some of the basic premises of sociolinguistic theory which appear relevant to the understanding of the phenomenon of multilingualism and also to define multilingualism as a social behaviour in response to a contact situation.

## I. SOME BASIC PREMISES OF SOCIOLINGUISTIC THEORY

The study of language and languages has always formed an important part of the human sciences, not only in the context of modern Western civilization, but in ancient times and in all great civilizations. However, the way in which language has been perceived and studied varies considerably. Suffice it here to sum up the way 20th century Western linguists have delimited their field of study. Although methods differ in the various schools of thought, main-stream linguists concentrate on the scientific description of a given language—its phonological, morphological and syntactic system. They take as their model the language as it is now spoken by native speakers of that language—a static model in an idealized, context-free situation. Needless to say, their work is of fundamental importance in connection with languages as yet unwritten and unstudied. It is thanks to their scientific efforts that these languages are and will be transcribed and studied in order to become more effective tools of communication in the modern as well as the traditional context.

Most closely related to the work of the descriptive linguist is that of the comparative linguist who analyses the contrasting features of two or more languages in order to establish a system of relationships, whether typological or genetic-derivative, which serves as a basis for the classification of languages. A branch of linguistics which was particularly important in the 19th century and continues as a side-line today is historical linguistics, the study of language change, primarily of the written languages. The rules of change observed in connection with written languages are then applied to unwritten languages, thus providing them with a past, albeit a hypothetical one. The important aspect of this type of work is that it posits a different model of language, namely a dynamic one instead of the static model of the descriptive linguist, but it does not attempt to analyse the causes of change, or to seek these causes entirely within the linguistic system itself, often in the form of linguistic interference from another linguistic system.

Other disciplines studying “language” have a different perception and study different aspects of language. Most influential for the development of the new discipline of sociolinguistics were studies carried out in anthropology, sociology and psychology.

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Anthropological studies in the field referred to as “language and culture” are concerned with language as a form of social interaction and as an expression of the very structure of society. Various branches of psychology are interested in the role of language in the socialization of the child, the relation between language and concept formation and in social stereotypes expressed in the form of attitudes towards languages. Other social scientists are studying social stratification and the role of language in nation-formation. Needless to say, the various aspects of language studies imply different scientific concepts and methods. The most important methodological tools employed by sociolinguists were influenced by linguists, sociologists and anthropologists (or ethnographers).

The sociolinguist’s perception of the nature of language may be summed up as follows: Languages are not independent, autonomous systems, but are context-bound, their linguistic features determined by a great variety of extra-linguistic factors ranging from the immediate and specific situation of a single speech act to the most general socio-historical, cultural, religious and even environmental context of a given speech community. Nor are languages monolithic since, upon closer inspection, each “language” comprises a broad spectrum of regional and social varieties as well as situation-specific “registers” or speech style. While many linguists would agree with Chomsky’s definition of linguistic competence as the ability of the native speaker to spontaneously produce grammatically correct utterances (Chomsky, 1965), sociolinguists are more concerned with “communicative competence” (Hymes, 1974). Or, to put it in more concrete terms: a child acquiring his mother tongue needs to learn far more than its lexicon and grammatical rules—he needs to be able to choose, from a number of synonymous variants, which is appropriate in which situation. Should he say “father” or “daddy”? Should he say “a heavy tropical rain continued all night” or “it was raining cats and dogs”? In other words, he has to be able to convey social meaning if he is to be accepted as a full member of his society. Important in this context is the sociolinguistic concept of “appropriateness,” which raises the notion of arbitrary idiosyncratic choice to that of “rule-governed behaviour.”

The discovery of the variability of language led sociolinguists, among other things, to see the phenomenon of multilingualism in

an entirely different light. Social scientists of different branches, and laymen alike, tend to look upon multilingualism as a nuisance at best, as an aberration at worst, though each for different reasons. Linguists who are preoccupied with the formulation of precise rules are inconvenienced by what they term “interference” from another language with the one they are studying. Educational psychologists are concerned about the negative effect of bilingualism on the concept formation of a growing individual. Political scientists and practitioners worry about national unity, while educators and decision makers have nightmares when contemplating the consequences of specific options in multilingual countries, and calculating the costs of education.

The sociolinguist, on the other hand, would claim that monolingualism does not exist, either at the level of the individual or at the community level, and that natural language behaviour is always multilingual and variable. Individuals command, as a rule, several registers—formal and informal speech and usually a third, neutral register; most speak regional variants, social variants, professional jargons as well as a standard language. From the sociolinguistic point of view “language” is an ambiguous and inconvenient term and most would agree that it is primarily a political concept. For instance, what distinguishes the speech of the West Frisian Islanders from that of the East Frisian Islanders is that the former is spoken within the Dutch political boundaries and hence referred to as a dialect of Dutch, whereas the latter is considered a dialect of German. Dialectologists worked with the concept of a dialect continuum, without reference to a specific standard language, and have established that linguistic distance grows in direct relation with geographic distance. Hence, mutual intelligibility across political borders may be greater than mutual intelligibility between one dialect and its distant variant within the same country (in Europe the greatest distances are generally on the north-south axis).

However, the full sociolinguistic reality is far more complex in our modern times. Universal, compulsory education, the mass media and an increasingly mobile population have brought about greater language uniformity within the European nation states than ever existed before. At the same time indigenous linguistic minorities are becoming more vocal in their demands for greater

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autonomy and massive labour migrations have created new linguistic minorities which are becoming increasingly difficult to assimilate in formerly “monolingual” nation states. Redefined in sociolinguistic terms these “monolingual” nations are nations where, as a response to political exigencies in the past, and as a result of compromise, a single standard language was developed, imposed by the power structure and spread through education and the mass media.

The underlying assumption then is to treat multilingualism as a “normal” state of affairs and to concentrate, in the studies of multilingualism, on defining the different types of language use, on describing its overt and covert rules and regulations, on analysing its causes and social implications and discovering trends of sociolinguistic change. The latter is of particular importance and, unfortunately, receives too little attention at present because of the ideological baggage which hampers a great percentage of sociologically orientated enquiry—namely its completely ahistorical approach. An interesting case in point, the American sociologist Lieberson (1980) working with a purely empirical approach over a long period of time, discovered that situations change and that conclusions based on time-bound data become invalid. Yet the remedy he recommends is more frequent data collection and comparison.

Trends of sociolinguistic change are invariably linked to the use of second languages or lingua francas. In the context of this study the term “lingua franca” refers to any local language (or creole language) which is adopted by speakers of other languages for the purposes of inter-ethnic communication. Whenever such a lingua franca replaces the language of one generation and subsequently, the mother tongue of the next, we speak of “language shift”. In contrast “language maintenance” is prevalent in stable bilingual situations, where the lingua franca serves for one set of social functions while the mother tongue predominates in the family domain and other intimate relations. The importance of studying language shift trends lies in the accent on the dynamic character of language use as opposed to a static view of such behaviour patterns.

## II MULTILINGUALISM—A SOCIOLINGUISTIC BEHAVIOUR IN RESPONSE TO A SPECIFIC CONTACT SITUATION

One useful approach to the analysis of multilingualism is to investigate the different types of contact situations which are at its root and which, in their turn, are determined by historical, socio-cultural and environmental factors. As will be shown, each type of contact situation is associated with specific social and linguistic strategies. Three types of contact situations can be distinguished: (a) co-existence with minimal contact; (b) co-existence with socially prescribed contact; (c) co-existence with acculturation.

### *A. Co-existence with minimal contact*

This type of contact situation is characterized by its horizontal features, i.e. separate autonomous linguistic communities live side by side and form a kind of patch-work quilt over a given geographic space. Inter-ethnic contact is rare and communication is usually carried out via specialized individuals such as traders, messengers and interpreters. This is thought to have been the normal state of affairs in the prehistoric phase of all civilizations, but due to special conditions many small-scale societies have survived into modern times. In such cases isolation was originally caused and then perpetuated by such dominant environmental features as mountains, valleys, rivers, marshes, islands, deserts as well as impenetrable forests. Inasmuch as man became master of his environment these isolating factors have been minimized, but only after other barriers had been erected—namely physical-cultural distinctiveness, a strong sense of social cohesion and separate identity, developed throughout a long history of social development. In Europe, the survival of many linguistic minorities on the periphery of modern nation-states testifies to the power of environmental and socio-cultural isolating factors: the Basques in the Pyrenees astride the French-Spanish border; the Ræto-Romansh speakers in the Swiss Alps, the Alemannic speakers in South Tyrol, the Bretons in France and the Welsh in England—to mention only a few.

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### *Linguistic fragmentation in West Africa*

The West African coast and parts of its hinterland, from the Gambia down to the Ivory Coast and again in Nigeria, consists almost entirely of low-lying marshes and mangrove swamps, broken up by meandering rivers and large estuaries which dissect the coastline into quasi-islands and actual off-shore islands. In many places the coastal swamps merge into dense forests which, while they support a slightly higher population density, still impose barriers to communication and thus favour the social pattern of small autonomous village societies. A look at Dalby's *Language Map of Africa* (1978) shows that these areas form part of the "Sub-Saharan fragmentation belt"—the most heterogeneous linguistic zone of Africa. Yet in many cases the findings of historians seem to contradict those of the linguists in this particular region. According to Portuguese sources quoted by Quinn (1972) the coastal area on both sides of the Gambia estuary was the territory of the Joola kingdom in the 15th century. It was only due to the subsequent slave raids that the Joola population was forced further south into the swamps of the Casamance and Cacheo, where they still live. Despite their former, more hierarchical social organization, they are now fragmented into a dozen or more ethnolinguistic groups, some of which speak closely-related dialects, others having developed varieties which appear to have little inter-intelligibility (Doneux, 1978). Rodney (1975) and Hair (1967) having investigated Portuguese sources of the 15th and 16th centuries dealing with the Guinea Coast (Gambia to Liberia), also emphasize the degree of continuity among the coastal population, in particular their cultural and to some extent linguistic homogeneity at that time, until the invasion of Mande-speakers added some linguistic enclaves, separating certain West-Atlantic groups from one another.

It thus seems reasonable to surmise that the present linguistic fragmentation may be the result of precisely those isolating factors mentioned earlier, that the physical environment maintained and reinforced previously weaker sub-divisions. In addition we have to take into consideration the historical background of slave raids followed by colonial conquest—four centuries of violence, of decimation of the population, of economic and cultural stagnation.

In this context social, and with it, linguistic fragmentation became valuable assets in the fight for survival. Every autonomous village society had to fend for itself and challenge the invader anew—a strategy which proved very effective against the invading colonial troops, as shown by the fact that it took the French troops 75 years to bring the Casamance population under control (Roche, 1976).

The linguistic strategies which emerged in such a context may be described as follows: minor dialect differences serve as identity markers between one village and the next and, in the case of hostilities, may serve to distinguish friend from foe. Hence they tend to be encouraged and exaggerated, and in a relatively short time linguistic barriers grow and reduce inter-intelligibility. This is particularly the case in a social setting where, traditionally, social initiative belongs to the group and its representatives, and not to the individual. There are many examples of neighbouring village societies communicating through an interpreter, despite the fact that to the outsider their forms of speech are virtually identical.

However, not all ethnolinguistic groups living side by side are small communities. Isolated or not, most ethnolinguistic groups have a “homeland,” a core territory where their language is spoken by the majority of the population, and where a large proportion of the population remains monolingual throughout their lives. While such societies were self-sufficient and independent there were no problems of communication. Problems only arose with the advent of the colonial administration, which attempted to combine a number of large or small ethnolinguistic units. Inasmuch as modern African states are heirs to the colonial territory, the problems arising from “horizontal multilingualism” are the same: they concern the ability of an infrastructure designed after a centralist model to deal with linguistic-cultural diversity. Since the priorities after independence were economic development, linked to a transfer of western technology and science, the options seemed clear at first—only a European language and literacy in a European language could serve these goals. Although the priorities are still the same, demands for greater authenticity pose new questions and force decision makers to search for new options—to choose one national language or several? And what about the small linguistic communities? Would they be more disadvantaged by the promotion of other African languages or is the maintenance of the



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European language a guarantee for providing them with equal opportunity?

### *Horizontal multilingualism in the modern context*

These and similar questions are often discussed in a vacuum, since particularly for the small village societies the situation has changed drastically: isolation is no longer a survival value, on the contrary—it has become an obstacle to social and economic progress. At the same time physical isolation is being partly overcome by the building of roads, bridges and air strips; by radio and telephone. Children are sent to school in neighbouring villages and country towns, while the young unemployed leave for the urban centres to earn a living. The village society no longer exists as a compact and independent unit—it is integrated into the district, the province, the nation; its subsistence level economy gradually replaced by a money economy and dependence on the outside world; its socio-cultural distinctiveness eroded by the influx of new norms and new values. It is said that language is the most conservative form of social behaviour, but what are the chances of survival of languages spoken only in a few villages by the old, while their off-spring abandon village customs and language in order to survive in the urban jungle, often to intermarry and adapt to a new life style? Considering that none of the great civilizations are homogeneous in origin and are enriched by cultural values from other, extinct societies, the disappearance of languages should not be moaned as a total loss. Language shift may look like socio-cultural suicide but is, in fact, the only appropriate survival strategy for minority groups in a rapidly changing world, because the other option—language maintenance—implies resistance to social change, stagnation and a museum type of survival.

Of course the situation looks different in the case of large ethnolinguistic groups, making up sizeable proportions of a nation's population and occupying a proportionate section of its territories, particularly if this territory is important from the economic point of view. As political scientists will be quick to point out—here we have a potential secessionist situation. The Biafra conflict of the sixties in Nigeria, though the result of a

complex set of causes, is perhaps an extreme example, and the resolution of this conflict by the creation of a federation of twelve states in 1968 (now 19), based on the ethnolinguistic territorial principle, is one way of dealing with the problem. In other West African countries the units are smaller, but some form of decentralization may well be the best option without necessarily impairing the development of national unity. Language policy-makers should keep in mind that it is commonly observed human behaviour for the individual's identification with society to progress in ever widening circles, from the closest units of family and clan to village or town, to the district or ethnolinguistic group and hence to the nation, and hopefully beyond. For some the nation is a very distant, very vague concept and it is not only in Africa that a person identifies himself primarily as "Sereer" or "Casamançais" and only secondarily as Senegalese—many Germans are primarily Bavarians or Prussians and secondarily Germans. The co-existence of distinct linguistic groups within a larger, political frame is nothing new and extraordinary. National standard languages are usually felt to be artificially imposed varieties by some sections of the population at some stage.

### ***B Co-Existence with socially prescribed contact***

vertical features. In other words, distinct ethnolinguistic groups do not live each in a separate territory, but two or more groups share the same geographic space and interact in a well-defined, socially prescribed manner. When analysing the cause of this type of sociolinguistic situation we can again distinguish between environmental and socio-cultural factors. A physical environment which facilitates contact is one where afore-mentioned isolating features are absent, where no natural barriers are set to the adventuring spirit of man. The more favourable the environment, the more likely that competition between several groups is strong, that original settlers have to defend their territory against invaders. Apart from successful repulsion of the invaders, or expulsion of the original population, such struggles are often resolved by the two groups establishing a pattern of more or less peaceful co-existence.

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One form of co-existence leads to eventual fusion, which will be discussed under type *C*, the other form results in the development of a specific pattern of social division of labour. The latter permits two ethnolinguistically (and possibly racially) distinct groups to live together harmoniously, while preserving their identity and distinction. Thus a primarily agrarian society may co-exist with a group of semi-nomads, traders, artisans or warriors. In each case the economic activity of one group is complementary rather than competitive with that of the other. The linguistic strategies associated with a social division of labour is a parallel role distribution of languages, i.e. language X dominates the agricultural sector while language Y is the language of trade, and inasmuch as the two groups interact in the pursuit of their daily tasks, individuals have to be bilingual. Depending on the kind of role distribution and the number of languages involved, stable bi- or multilingual language use characterizes the daily language behaviour of a smaller or larger section of the population as a whole.

### *Vertical multilingualism in West Africa*

The history of many West African societies inhabiting the Sahel and Savannas of the interior provides examples of this type of contact situation. Annual irregularities in the pattern of rainfall, typical of this region, and population growth have frequently forced populations to search for more favourable conditions. Particularly the three great river basins of the Niger, Gambia and Senegal became foci of ever new waves of invaders and, in some cases, archaeological remains confirm oral traditions which point to the multi-ethnic past of the population. Thus historians and scholars of oral tradition have long since concluded that the original population of the inland Niger Delta were Bozo fishermen (Delafosse, 1912) who later became the boatmen employed in the Niger trade by Soninke and subsequently Manding traders and Songhai rulers. The discovery, in 1977 of an ancient site referred to as Zoboro, or Jenné-Jeno (ancient Jenné) dating to 900 AD with evidence of seven older trade links to the Sahara seems to confirm this (McIntosh, 1981). Similarly the multi-ethnic population of the

Gambia valley still reflects the various waves and types of invaders: original Tenda peasants live side by side and in close contact with Fula pastoralists and Manding traders and settlers. The lower Senegal basin, originally the home of a number of related clans (Wolof, Sereer, Tukolor) was invaded by Berbers around 1000 AD. As a result of scarcity of land and social change accelerated by the conversion to Islam, a series of migrations set in, emphasizing ethnolinguistic differentiation between the remaining Tukolor and migrating Sereer, Wolof and Fulbe. This was subsequently reinforced by the new environment and occupations each group chose and by different contact situations they encountered. After centuries of change and frequent re-shuffling of the population and renewed contact between the above ethnolinguistic groups, their distinctiveness is based on linguistic and past occupational specializations. The Tukolor, proud of their ancient Islamic past, became the major proselytizers of Islam in the Senegambia. The Wolof specialization for many centuries was warfare and trade, a past which made them particularly adaptable to the new conditions created by colonization and independence. The descendants of Fulbe nomads are still by preference pastoralists co-existing, often in the same villages, with Sereer, Wolof or Joola peasants (cfr. Mansour, 1980).

### *The spread of lingua francas*

Vertical multilingualism, or the role distribution of languages determined by a social division of labour, usually favours the spread of a dominant language as lingua franca. Dominant, in this context, may mean that a conquering ethnolinguistic group imposes its language on a conquered population, or that a particular type of economic activity, introduced by a distinct ethnolinguistic group, is favoured by the prevailing circumstances. In West Africa some dominance patterns were established through the medieval kingdoms, empires and trade routes of the Manding people, whose influence reached from the Sahara to the forest fringe of the Ivory Coast and Guinea, from the Atlantic coast to the Niger bend. Military conquerors settled as the ruling caste and, in many cases, imposed Mandinka as the language of

administration in annexed territories, while long-distance traders established settlements along their trade routes, introducing Manding social organization, customs and language. As a result, in addition to countries where Mandinka-Bambara is the majority language (Mali, Gambia), Manding dialects (Malinke, Mandingo, Dyula) still dominate traditional internal trade, particularly in the Ivory Coast, Upper Volta, Guinea and parts of Sierra Leone and Senegal and, depending on the circumstances, fulfil the function of a regional or national lingua franca.

Even where older dominance patterns have been replaced by new ones, their existence needs to be taken into consideration, particularly in a context where the struggle between modernism and conservatism is aggravated by the failure of modernist solutions to overcome socio-economic problems. For instance, in Senegal Wolof has been expanding as lingua franca since the colonial period, as the direct result of the role of Wolof intermediaries in colonial trade and their pioneering efforts in the cultivation and marketing of peanuts—the new export crop. Despite this association of Wolof with urbanization and modernization its spread, or rather its official promotion is resisted by Pulaar speakers, the second-largest group in Senegal and one which claims a more ancient and more glorious past. On the other hand in Mauretania, Wolof and Pulaar speakers form a modern-oriented minority, resisting the ancient and very repressive dominance patterns of the Moors and their recently introduced programme of arabization.

European language history has taught us that linguistic minority groups, which were submerged for centuries, may resurface in response to politico-economic change, and usually as a result of excessive measures of a rigidly centralized government. The Basques, having suffered most under the Franco-regime, now demand complete autonomy, while the past economic exploitation of Wales and Scotland continues to nourish separatist movements. For these reasons it is indispensable for African policy-makers to have access to material analysing the various socio-historical events which shaped the present sociolinguistic contact situation in their countries.

So far we have ignored one type of multilingualism in African countries which also belongs to this category, namely the co-existence of the (foreign) official language with African

languages. The contact situation which lies at its root is the colonial conquest, a conquest very dissimilar to the many waves of internal African conquests mentioned earlier. Colonial domination was complete, embracing the political, economic and socio-cultural sphere and often resulting in the destruction of the socio-cultural fabric of African societies. The sociolinguistic consequences of such a situation are primarily expressed in language attitudes, i.e. a devalorization of African languages and cultures and a shift in psycho-sociological orientation away from the group of origin towards the prestige group. Since total assimilation is blocked for a number of reasons, the result is more individually perceived self-definition and the development of an elite class, isolated from both its matrix and the group it wishes to imitate. The other sociolinguistic consequence is the super-imposition of English, French or Portuguese on an already existing pattern of multilingual language use, whereby the foreign language has specific functions, dominating all the domains of social behaviour connected with government, administration, the modern economic sector, education and the media.

### *Diglossia*

The sociolinguistic situation as described above, is similar to the “diglossic” situation described by Ferguson (1964), namely the coexistence of a socially prestigious form of speech (High) with a less prestigious form (Low)—e.g. Classical Arabic (H) with Colloquial Arabic (L), Standard German (H) with Swiss German (L). However, in the case of the examples of diglossia or polyglossia, as given by Ferguson and others, the majority of the population uses both forms of speech, depending on the appropriateness of each to the topic of conversation or the type of social interaction. In the African context the use of the “High” form of speech is limited to those who have enjoyed adequate education in this language, which may be only about 10% in some countries. For this minority group then, the pattern of language use corresponds to diglossia or polyglossia: in formal situations, or when discussing topics for which the local languages appear to lack adequate expressions, the foreign language dominates; in intimate

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situations with members of the same group (i.e. in the domain of the family, friendship, religion, village associations etc.) the mother tongue is spoken, and often a third, more neutral but informal, African lingua franca is employed with members of other ethnolinguistic groups, particularly when the speakers wish to emphasize African solidarity. It is often claimed that European languages are also important as a tool of inter-ethnic communication, but the present facts do not support this claim.

Language use in multilingual speech communities thus emerges as rule-governed behaviour and, contrary to expectations, multilingualism is not necessarily an impediment to communication. Nevertheless, a polyglossic situation as described above has serious consequences for the languages involved in such a hierarchy. As long as a foreign language dominates the "High" sector, other African languages, no matter how widely spoken they are, cannot develop more elaborate forms of speech. On the contrary, a rigid hierarchy of languages tends to bring about atrophy and perpetuates the *status quo*. The use of African languages in education is only a first step in the process of revalorization and linguistic development.

### *C Co-existence with acculturation*

When two ethnolinguistic groups are in close contact over a long period of time a process of acculturation may develop; that is to say the two different sets of socio-cultural values will influence each other and eventually a common set of values may be adopted. Full acculturation implies likewise the elimination of linguistic differences, though there are several ways in which this may come about. The real content of the acculturation process and its impact on the respective communities will of course depend on how it is achieved.

#### *Linguistic convergence*

In a case where two or more ethnolinguistic groups are closely related, share a common historical past and have many

socio-cultural features in common, it is likely that, given the correct political climate, linguistic convergence develops. In such a situation the politico-economic advantages of unification tend to overrule distinctions maintained by language behaviour and local customs, and a standardized national language is readily accepted. The existence of a geographically neutral and socially prestigious standard language subsequently may lead to actual convergence of dialects and a reduction of linguistic diversity. Summed up in a few phrases like this it appears to be a very simple and straightforward matter; nevertheless this process took up to 500 years in some European nation states: in France the decisive step towards language unification was taken in 1539 with the royal decree, establishing “Francien” as the language of law courts and forbidding the use of others; in England Parliament adopted (London) English in 1362 and the court in 1413; and in Germany the influence of Prague “Kanzleideutsch” and Luther’s Bible translation of 1521 led to the development of a standard language (Wolff, 1971). And yet linguistic diversity continues in those countries.

### *Acculturation and language shift*

In the West African context acculturation has usually taken the form of language shift. We had previously mentioned under type *B* the contact situation resulting from conquest and/or long distance trade during the Middle Ages. In many such cases a dominance situation resulted in stable bilingualism and in many other cases bilingualism was a transitional phase leading to assimilation and language shift of the conquered populations. Historical records, oral traditions and the study of toponyms, clan names and tribal names, give evidence of ethnolinguistic groups which have either disappeared entirely or which count only a dwindling minority now. Most of the small minority groups of the hinterland between the Gambia, Casamance and Cacheo up to the Futa Jallon in Guinea (especially the various Tenda groups and the Bañun) have been absorbed into one of the two dominant and more highly organized societies—the Manding and the Fulbe—or they entered the mixed Luso-African societies of Ziguinchor,



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Bissao and Cacheo. Other ethnolinguistic groups, such as the Wolof of Senegal, are conscious of being of mixed origin and their endogamous caste system may well be a remnant of former ethnolinguistic division.<sup>1</sup>

However, more important than these pre-colonial examples of language shift are those connected with the development of urban centres in West Africa. All coastal cities, but also island capitals and country towns have a highly diverse composition, and in all of these a local lingua franca developed in response to the contact situation. In most cases, the choice of an urban lingua franca is determined by the original inhabitants and the inhabitants of the immediate neighbourhood. Thus in Dakar Wolof is the dominant lingua franca, in Konakry it is Susu, in Accra, Gã and in Bamako it is Bambara. But how far the influence of an urban lingua franca reaches and to what degree it leads to language shift depends on other factors. In Dakar and other Senegalese towns the assimilative power of Wolof was examined by Wioland (1965) who found that permanent residence in town usually led to language shift in the next generation, a process which was accelerated by inter-ethnic marriage. Not only did Wolof prevail in the homes of a Wolof and a non-Wolof marriage partner, but also in homes where neither of the partners were Wolof, though of different ethnic origin. Similar studies have yet to be carried out in other West African towns, but the situation is not always as simple. In Accra the dominance of Gã has purely geographical reasons, and the influx from other Ghanaian towns where Twi is the major lingua franca is creating an ambivalent situation. Likewise in Freetown the lingua franca role of Krio is gradually being eroded by an increase in Temne and Mende speakers, now making up 60% of the population (Tabouret-Keller, 1971).

Acculturation with language shift requires very specific socio-cultural and economic conditions. Some of the strongest motivations for language shift are socio-economic advantages, but a tolerant, receptive attitude of the assimilating ethnolinguistic group increases the likelihood of language shift whereas a

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Barry (1972) on the rules concerning kingship in Waalo—the king was elected from among the male heirs of a royal Wolof family but his mother had to be of Sereer, Fulbe or Berber royal descent.

xenophobic, chauvinist attitude repels possible candidates. In addition, a close linguistic relationship, socio-cultural proximity and a tradition of friendly inter-ethnic relations facilitate acculturation and language shift, whereas past hostilities and religio-cultural differences make it more difficult. In Senegal, for instance, it is well known that Muslim Sereer most readily become “wolofized,” whereas resistance to assimilation is said to be more pronounced among Christian Sereer and Joola. According to Loewen (1968) other factors affecting language shift are “cultural vitality vs cultural entropy” and the question of “group orientation vs individual orientation in self-definition”. In each case the latter is more likely to lead to language shift, whereas the former is associated with language maintenance. An interesting example of the first juxtaposition is the socio-linguistic situation in the coastal area of Guinea where the socio-culturally more vital, more adaptable Susu are assimilating Baga, Nalu and Landuman populations (Houis, 1963). The question of group vs individual orientations is undoubtedly a general phenomenon of modern times, of urbanization, education and increased mobility, which all combine to reduce the size and influence of family and clan, and in so far as language allegiance to a primary group is concerned, such claims tend to be overruled by considerations of socio-economic advantage and personal promotion.

### *The emergence of creole languages*

Another form of acculturation results in a fusion of two very different languages and the emergence, first of a “pidgin,” later of a “creole” language. As defined by Peñalosa (1981) “a pidgin is a contact vernacular which originated out of the contact of two unrelated languages, usually one European and one non-European, /.../ it is ordinarily a simplified version of one of the languages, usually European, modified in the direction of the other” (p. 100). Such languages with very reduced functions (essentially for buying and selling) arose mainly in the vicinity of trading posts on the shores of the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Ocean and on islands. Their European component is mainly Portuguese, English or French, and sometimes all three together. Creole languages

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developed later, when people of diverse non-European ethnolinguistic backgrounds came together as settlers and middlemen at the trading posts and had to communicate with European traders and with one another. Inter-racial and inter-ethnic marriage led to a pidgin-speaking community where new generations were raised, speaking the new hybrid language as their mother tongue, so that its functions became extended, vocabulary and new grammatical features were developed to convey all the nuances of meaning necessary for the full life of a community.

The West African coast played a particularly important role in the development of creoles all over the world. The first European traders to reach the West African coast in 1444 were the Portuguese and for about 100 years they held an almost absolute monopoly of the coastal trade (Brooks, 1980; Rodney 1965) The Cap Verde Islands were annexed to Portugal and settled by Portuguese traders, who in 1466 received a charter of full rights of commerce on the West African coast from Cape Mount to Sine Salum, and subsequently the Cap Verde Islands became the main midway station for the Spanish slave trade to Central America. However, on the coast the Cap Verdians came into conflict with “*lançados*” a term referring to Portuguese having “cast their lot” with Africans. In other words, these Portuguese had renounced their allegiance to the crown for the sound financial reasons of not wanting to pay taxes, and lived with and like Africans, under the protection of local kings. Their main settlements were in Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissao (Cacheo and Bissao) and in the Casamance region of modern Senegal (Ziguinchor), and it is in this contact situation favouring acculturation and fusion of two races, two cultures and two languages, that we have to seek the origin of Crioulo. At present Crioulo (also called Portuguese Creole) is still spoken on the Cap Verde Islands, in Guinea Bissao and Senegal (Ziguinchor and Dakar). Studies of other creole languages have revealed that particular grammatical features common to the West Atlantic group of languages reappear in other, distant creoles, as well as the remains of certain Portuguese words. These point to a common West Atlantic/Portuguese origin, whereby the main vocabulary stock was later replaced by French or English words.

The only other important creole language which survived on the

West African coast is Krio, an English-based Creole spoken in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Freetown was founded in 1791 as a settlement of free slaves, captured at sea and liberated by English abolitionists. They had no common language, but since Sierra Leone had originally been a Portuguese trading ground, it undoubtedly had its communities of Crioulo speakers. This and a few words of English learned on board were most likely the origin of Krio. Today native speakers of Krio make up 1.9% of Sierra Leone's population, but about 85% speak it as lingua franca.

## CONCLUSION

It has been claimed that the various types of sociolinguistic surveys should ultimately provide the scientific basis for language policies and language planning. This assumes that the government's interference in the socio-linguistic behaviour patterns of the population is either desirable or necessary. While this may be true, it does not automatically mean that governments in multilingual countries must select a single national language in order to generate a sense of national unity. The concept of linguistic nationalism is linked to the ideology of a particular phase (19th century) of European capitalism, which set into motion successive waves of separatist movements and created many new nation-states without, however, abolishing unjust treatment of linguistic minorities. Evidently the role of language in nation-building will have to be re-assessed in the context of multilingual developing countries and, in many cases, new pluralist solutions will have to be found. An objective, scientific analysis of socio-linguistic situations should help to defuse the entire range of language-related questions and place the responsibility for conflict squarely into the politicians' field. Just as social organizations of the past have adapted to multilingual situations by devising a division of labour between co-existing languages, thus establishing a viable system of oral communication, modern governments should be able to make rational choices without creating new inequalities.

It is frequently claimed that attempts at replacing the present (foreign) official language by local language X is a take-over bid by

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ethnic group X, and that other ethnic groups will be disadvantaged and barred from access to power. In such a situation policy makers should be able to point to extensive socio-linguistic studies, giving evidence of actual patterns of language use. If language X turns out to be a lingua franca of wide-spread oral use, it must be made clear that first, its introduction in education, and subsequently, its use, as official language, merely adds the formal written function while leaving the naturally evolved, oral patterns of communication intact. This and the fact that in modern times social inequalities are linked to educational opportunities, in terms of who has access to what kind of education, points to the non-linguistic basis of such inequalities. There can be no doubt that in this respect urban dwellers are favoured because of better educational facilities in town, a situation which is not likely to change as a result of a different language policy.

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