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# A kente of many colours: multilingualism as a complex ecology of language shift in Ghana

*Adams Bodomo, Jemima Asabea Anderson and Josephine Dzahene-Quarshie*

## Abstract

*Language shift, a process which may lead speakers to use their language in fewer domains with respect to other languages or even lose proficiency in their language altogether in favour of other languages, is a prominent concept in linguistics. But the concept has been mainly studied from Western perspectives (e.g. Fishman 1964, 1991, Veltman 1983 and Bastardas-Boada 2007). This paper discusses language shift from the perspectives of Ghana, a highly multilingual developing nation in West Africa. We introduce the concept of ecology of language shift, and argue that any theory of language shift must rigorously take into consideration the complexity of the ecology in which language shift occurs. Multilingual language shift processes, which involve situations in which different types of language shift take place concurrently or sequentially in a country, are thus very different from simple language shift situations in less multilingual set-ups. The paper provides a relatively detailed empirical study of language shift based on a questionnaire survey before outlining some language maintenance activities, such as the pervasive use of indigenous Ghanaian languages in FM radio broadcast, that are being pursued to contain language shift in Ghana. Some of these language maintenance activities may also be useful for containing language shift in other African countries.*

**KEYWORDS:** MULTILINGUALISM, LANGUAGE SHIFT, LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE, MASS MEDIA, EDUCATION SYSTEM, GHANA

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## 1 Introduction

The term *language shift* is a 50-year old term within the field of Linguistics often credited to the American linguist Joshua Fishman, yet there is hardly any unified view about its definition and conceptualisation. Since its earliest appearance in published works, it has continued to feature as a popular topic in sociolinguistic analyses (Fishman 1964, 1991, Veltman 1983 etc). Broadly speaking, for us, language shift is a process in which successive generations of speakers, both at individual and at community levels, gradually lose proficiency in their mother-tongues or the language of their speech community in favour of other languages. The process may lead to *language loss* among individuals or even *language death* for an entire community.

But the important issue is what triggers language shift? This question underlies a crucial consideration in the study of this important topic – the lack of a unified theory of language shift. Many theories abound to explain language shift and its juxtaposed term *language maintenance* – a term used to describe the pull factors that prevent language shift and allow some individuals and communities to continue to use their languages in bi- or multi-lingual set-ups. Among theories of language shift include the domain theory (Fishman 1964, 1991), the idea that when one language gets an expanded domain of use over others there is the tendency for bilingual speakers to shift to it. We employ this theory a lot in explaining our questionnaire survey in this paper. Another theory is the functional choice theory (McConvell 1991:150–151), the idea that ‘(...) the expression of either solidarity with or distance from certain social groups is probably the most important function of language choice in bilingual situations and probably also the factor which above all others determines whether language shift takes place.’ These two, among many other theories of language shift, attempt to adduce factors that underlie language shift.

In this paper, our aims and objectives are to contribute to the understanding of language shift, both in terms of its conceptualisation and its theory with insights from Ghana, a highly multilingual country on the West African coast. We advance the term *ecology of language shift* to refer to the context in which language shift occurs and argue that rigorously specifying and accounting for the ecology for language shift must be the bedrock of any theory of language shift. We claim in this paper that while language shift can be maintained as a universal concept to a very large extent, for us, *multilingual language shift* or language shift in highly multilingual contexts, as we find in the new nations of Africa, is radically different from language shift in less multilingual environments, as we find in some Western countries, such as Britain and the US. We claim that until there is a detailed analysis of multilingualism as it manifests itself in Ghana, no adequate analysis of language shift in the country can obtain.

Towards advancing these aims and objectives, the paper is organised as follows: in section 2, we focus on the concept of multilingualism, especially on some misconceptions of the term before we do a relatively detailed discussion of multilingualism as it pertains in Ghana towards an implementation of our idea of the multilingual ecology of language shift.

Besides the theoretical contribution mentioned above, a further contribution we hope to bring to bear on a better understanding of the concept of language shift is from an empirical perspective. While there exist many surveys and discussions of multilingualism in Ghana (e.g. Dakubu 1988), mostly with cursory mention of the concept of language shift, to the best of our knowledge, there is no systematic field survey of language shift to research the language habits of different generations. In this paper, we discuss language shift in Ghana based on a case study involving a questionnaire survey of the language habits of a group of parents and children in Accra, the capital city of Ghana, and Tema, Ghana's main port city. In section 3, we do a further conceptualisation of language shift to be followed by the detailed case study and analysis, clearly outlining our methodology and discussions. Section 4 of the paper then takes up a discussion of *language maintenance*, in which we briefly mention some measures taken by various interest groups in Ghana to address the challenges posed by language shift in order to maintain and, more importantly, manage the multilingual nature of the country. Section 5 concludes the paper, tying together the various strands towards a better understanding of *multilingual language shift* – language shift in a highly multilingual nation-building set-up.

## 2 Multilingualism

### 2.1 Defining multilingualism: concepts and myths

In this section we first attempt to explicate the term multilingualism and its presumed antonym, monolingualism, and their associated concepts. We then address a number of views and myths surrounding these concepts. From an etymological perspective multilingualism and monolingualism are quite clear concepts. Monolingualism obtains where members of a society would communicate with each other through a single language while in the case of multilingualism members of a particular society would communicate with each other by means of many languages. However, in the analysis of contemporary sociolinguistic entities, we often deal with complex political entities such as nations and countries where these etymological perspectives of defining mono- and multi-lingualism are put to question. Countries such as France, Germany, Spain and Britain have often been termed monolingual countries because they recognise only one national or official language and most people speak the

national or official language. It is, however, increasingly clear from minority and separatist agitations that monolingualism is a masked reality in such countries. Therein lies one of the myths we come against under this topic. Multilingualism would then be reserved for countries such as Switzerland and Belgium which have more than one official language.

But clearly this is not a sufficient or even necessary criterion for defining multilingual countries. The term is appropriately applicable to countries with one official or government language, usually an imposed colonial language, which is not spoken by the majority of the population. Such is the case of most of the so-called developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Most often there are large numbers of indigenous languages in addition to the imposed colonial-turned-official language.

From the above it may be observed that while it is quite easy to determine a community as monolingual or multilingual it is not easy to do so at the national level. There is hardly a country in the world in which we can find just one language used in all social contexts.

A further complication to the definitions of mono- and multi-lingualism is with regard to language variation. Speech forms may vary in space, time and class and it is not always easy at some points in the variation scale to say where two forms are dialects of the same language or belong to two distinct languages. The answer to this question will come to bear much on whether we regard such a community as monolingual, bilingual or even multilingual. For example, Norwegian has two standard forms, Bokmål and Nynorsk. While some Norwegians think that these are dialects of the same language, Norwegian, others think that they are separate languages. To the first group, Norway is a monolingual country but to the second Norway is, at least, a bilingual country.

What the above complications in the definitions of monolingualism and multilingualism show is that the concept of monolingualism with regards to present-day political entities such as we find in various countries of the world is in itself a myth: there is in reality no such thing as a monolingual country, unless we choose to unfairly exclude minority and immigrant non-official languages from our categorisation of languages spoken in these countries. Virtually all the Western countries that are often erroneously labelled as being monolingual are indeed multilingual countries. Attempts at sweeping minority languages under the carpet have failed and this is manifested by the rise of ethnolinguistic minority agitations such as the Sami in Scandinavia and the Basque and Catalan groups in Southern Europe for more linguistic rights. Even in North America recent immigrants from Latin America and Asia are beginning to demand a greater use of their languages in society. The end result will be a more and more multilingual society in all these countries, as is already the case in the developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Multilingualism, then rather than being the exception, is actually the rule in our modern world community. A multilingual country in our definition is any country in which a section of the population uses a language or some speech form that is considered by them to be different from the official language or language of national government. In such an environment of multilingualism as described here language shift which naturally involves a choice between two or more languages is bound to be a far more complex issue, and an understanding of this multilingual ecology is thus inescapable. Let us now turn to a discussion of a multilingual ecology of language shift as we find in Ghana.

## 2.2 Multilingualism in Ghana: the ecology of language shift

Ghana is a highly multi-lingual community on the west coast of Africa. The number of languages that are spoken in Ghana has been put between 45 and 80. Different scholars have given different numbers because it is sometimes very difficult to draw a clear distinction between what should count as a language and what should count as dialects of other languages. Agbedor (1996), Bodomo (1996, 1997), Dolphyne and Kropp-Dakubu (1988), and Laitin (1994) have all given different numbers of languages that exist in Ghana. Gordon and Grimes (2005), however in the *Ethnologue*, put the number of languages spoken in Ghana at 83 (this number includes English and two sign languages). All the indigenous languages belong to the Niger-Kordofanian language family. Specifically, these belong mainly to the Gur and Kwa sub-families.

Ghana's indigenous languages can be categorised into ten major language groups or, more precisely, language subgroups but these groups do not conform to a one-to-one matching with the ten regions of the country. Some of these contain very large numbers of mother-tongue speakers while others hardly number hundred thousand mother-tongue speakers. Appendix 1 provides a list of the languages of Ghana and where they are mainly spoken.

In addition to these indigenous languages, there are other West African languages spoken in Ghana such as the Chadic language, Hausa, and some Mande languages, whose status as indigenous languages seem to be debatable. While it is true that some of the more acceptable indigenous languages spread continuously into Ghana's immediate neighbouring countries where they are also regarded as indigenous, the geographical distribution of Hausa within West Africa, for instance, shows that it is completely cut off from major Hausa speaking areas such as northern Nigeria and Niger. This is suggestive of a migration from a clearly identifiable distant area where most speakers of the language regard as their traditional homeland. Further evidence that Hausa may not be indigenous to Ghana lies in the fact that the language is mainly popular in the migrant quarters known as 'zongos', where many immigrants

shift from their own languages to speaking Hausa mainly, but also English if they have been to school.

Apart from these West African languages which are spoken in Ghana but which may not be said to be indigenous to the country, we can name a third group of languages which are clearly non-indigenous to the country. English is the dominant language in this group but this could include others spoken in very insignificant degrees. English, though foreign to Ghana, is one of the most important languages in the country; it has been used as an official language since the country was colonised by the British and still enjoys an overwhelming position as the language of education and of mass communication vis-à-vis the indigenous Ghanaian languages, and it is this language that is the beneficiary target of language shift in Ghana in most cases. Though some indigenous languages, including the government-sponsored ones (Akan (Asante Twi, Fante, Akwapem Twi, etc.), Dagaare, Dagbane, Dangbe, Ewe, Ga, Gonja, Gurenne, Kasem, and Nzema), are beginning to challenge this position in their respective regions, and indeed are beneficiary targets of language shift in their own right, English is still the most widely spoken language in the country if we consider all its forms – from pidgin to standard educated English. Of course, this situation has come about because of an inter-play of historical, linguistic, educational and political factors, some of which are touched upon in our discussion of multilingual language shift at various points in the paper.

Other European languages are also spoken to various degrees in the country by individuals and very restricted communities. Examples are French (taught as a school subject and spoken among educated bilinguals) and Arabic (taught in Islamic schools known as ‘makaranta’ and spoken in Lebanese communities). We now turn to the main discussion of language shift in Ghana in the next section.

### 3 Language shift in Ghana

#### 3.1 Introduction: conceptualising language shift

Instances of language shift have been reported in several communities in the world. Fishman (1964, 1991), Denison (1977), Gal (1979), Kahane and Kahane (1979), Huffines (1980), Veltman (1983), Ohiri-Aniche (1997), and Bastardas-Boada (2007) have all reported cases of language shift and even language death from different parts of the world. Gal (1978, 1979) reports a case from Oberwart in Austria involving German and Hungarian. Dorian (1981) also reports a case from the East Sutherland in the northern Highlands of Scotland which involves Gaelic and English. As would be expected, most, though not all (see for instance Ohiri-Aniche, 1997) of these studies that have been referred to above

are accounts from developed countries or communities in Europe and the Americas. What this tells us is that language shift has been studied extensively in Western countries and little has been done on language shift in Africa, Asia and other developing nations. Meanwhile there are serious cases of language shift going on in many African countries which merit serious attention, hence our aim to discuss multilingual language shift.

Given the fact that many of these African countries are multilingual communities, we believe that research findings from the language shift and language maintenance situations that are present in these African countries would not only contribute significantly to theoretical and empirical accounts of language shift, but would also be of great interest to sociolinguists around the world if they are given serious attention. The multilingual countries of West Africa provide a very rich ecology for discussing complex cases of language shift. If for nothing at all, the data obtained from these communities could be compared to data studies that have been reported in other parts of the world. This, we believe would offer great insights that can help explain some theories in linguistics. This study hopes to fill the void that has been created by the absence of reports from the developing world, not only in terms of presenting novel data but also in terms of presenting original theories and insights towards a better understanding of the important concepts of language shift and language maintenance.

In the present study, we discuss language shift and language maintenance in Ghana. We have decided to take this position because the current situation in Ghana is a rather ambiguous situation where individuals who belong to the upper social class are gradually shifting from the indigenous languages to another language but at the same time there are serious institutional efforts to maintain the indigenous languages that are used in the country. This position has led to a situation where the new language and the old languages are fighting over certain domains of use. Our position in this paper is that there are advantages in maintaining both the new and the old languages in Ghana. Much like the exquisite multi-coloured patterns of the famous Ghanaian *Kente* cloth,<sup>1</sup> the multilingual situation of Ghana should be maintained in order to prepare the Ghanaian child to function in this multilingual environment. At the same time the government, teachers, parents, and other educational planners should evolve practical and workable systems that will accommodate multi-lingualism in Ghana and stem the negative effects of language shift.

### 3.2 A case study of language shift in Ghana

Ghanaians place a high premium on the English language which is the ex-colonial language at the expense of the numerous indigenous languages that are used in the Ghanaian community. Thus, although colonialism ended many



years ago and Ghana obtained independence in 1957, Ghana is still stuck to the ex-coloniser's language for diverse reasons. Some of the reasons that have been given for the choice of the English language as an official language instead of selecting a single indigenous Ghanaian language as the national language include the fear that the choice of any indigenous language might create divisions in the country. Closely related to this is the fact that it would be politically difficult to decide which of the many languages should be selected (Anyidoho and Kropp-Dakubu 2008). Thus, although Ghana has many indigenous languages, the ex-coloniser's language still functions as the national or official language of the country.

In the last few years, we have observed that there is the tendency for many children born and raised in urban centres in Ghana to acquire this ex-colonial language, English, as their first language. While these children seem to believe that it is elitist to say that English is their first language or the only language they speak, the parents of these children have contributed to the desire that these children have for the acquisition of English as their first language. These children who sometimes have parents who belong to different ethnic groups are sometimes compelled by their circumstances to speak English because their parents do not share the same first language and they have no other common language than English. The home language for such parents and their children is thus English. In other situations, the parents belong to the same ethnic group or they share a common language but they make their children speak English because of the beliefs and attitudes that they hold about language acquisition and language proficiency. These parents believe that the acquisition of English as a first language would enhance their children's intellectual, social, and economic development. For these reasons, some of these parents expose their children to the English language very early in life.

These children therefore grow up as monolinguals in a multilingual setting or they learn the indigenous languages later in life. It is these observations that we made that prompted the current case study. The first part of this study seeks to investigate the situation that has been described above. Specifically, the paper investigates the linguistic choices that are made by adults and children in specified formal and informal domains. The domains that have been selected for this study are domains in which indigenous Ghanaian languages were originally used.

### 3.3 Data collection and methodology

The data for the first part of this case study were obtained from responses to questionnaire that were administered to respondents who were randomly selected in a stratified random sampling. The sample population was drawn

from Accra and Tema, two urban communities in southern Ghana. These two communities were used for this study because considering the cosmopolitan nature of these communities we believe that residents of these two communities would provide us with excellent samples for investigation. Moreover, these two communities are representative of social structures in Ghana and they have a fairly balanced ethnic mix and population fluidity. We collected data from 100 parents and 100 children in the two communities under investigation. Thus, in all we had two hundred respondents. The adult category comprises lecturers, teachers, engineers, accountants, doctors, hair dressers and other professionals. The ages of the children range between 10 and 16 years. The other 100 questionnaires were administered to 100 students of two Basic Schools: one in Tema and the other in Accra. We decided to study the language choices of these parents and children because we expect that this would give us comparable basis on which we can determine if there is a shift in the language habits of the children since the parents and children belong to two different generations.

### 3.4 Discussion

The first question asked respondents to indicate how many languages they were able to speak. Their answers to these questions are displayed in the tables below:

**Table 1: Number of languages spoken by children respondents from Tema**

| No. | Speakers |
|-----|----------|
| 1   | 2%       |
| 2   | 34%      |
| 3   | 38%      |
| 4   | 18%      |
| 5   | 4%       |
| 6   | 4%       |

Basically, many of the children, whose ages range between 10 and 16 years, as mentioned above, reported that they spoke between two and four languages. Thus the data indicated a high level of bilingualism among children. None of the children from Accra reported that they were monolingual. And only 2% of the sample population reported that they were monolingual. This tells us that in spite of the shift that is suspected to be taking place, bi- and multi-lingualism are still on the ascendancy in these two communities. In fact, we believe that as these children grow older, they may even acquire additional languages.

**Table 2: Number of languages spoken by children respondents from Accra**

| No. | Speakers |
|-----|----------|
| 2   | 32%      |
| 3   | 54%      |
| 4   | 12%      |
| 5   | 2%       |
| 6   | 2%       |

A comparison of Tables 1 and 2 shows that there is a slight difference between the number of languages that these children reported that they spoke. While about 38% of the sample population from Tema reported that they spoke 3 languages, as many as 54% of the population from Accra reported that they spoke 3 languages. What factors account for such differences in the data? It could be that the level of multilingualism in Accra is higher than that of Tema because there are more languages that are used in different domains in Accra. In terms of the number of languages that are spoken, there were a few age-related differences that were observed between the adults' and the children's language use.

**Table 3: Number of languages spoken by adult respondents from Accra and Tema**

| No. | Speakers |
|-----|----------|
| 2   | 14%      |
| 3   | 35%      |
| 4   | 41%      |
| 5   | 6%       |
| 6   | 2%       |
| 8   | 2%       |

Unlike the children, a bulk of the adult population (41%) reported that they spoke 4 languages. This confirms our suspicions that the older people get in multilingual societies, the more languages they acquire.

On the questionnaire for the parents, the next set of questions sought to know the language the parents spoke with their children at home (P->C), the language with the care givers they had at home (P->CG), the language their children spoke with the care givers (C->CG), the language the parents spoke with their friends and their neighbours who did not share the same first language with them (P->F/NdiffL1), and the language they spoke with their friends who

shared the same first language with them (P->F=L1). Table 4 below shows the responses given by the parents from Accra.

**Table 4: Responses from parents**

| Language Spoken | P->C | P->CG | C->CG | P-F diff L1 | P-N diff L1 | P->F (=L1) | P->F (=L1atCh) |
|-----------------|------|-------|-------|-------------|-------------|------------|----------------|
| Ghanaian Lang   | 35%  | 18%   | 14%   | 14%         | 33%         | 63%        | 69%            |
| GH + Eng.       | 35%  | 2%    | -     | 21%         | 20%         | 16%        | 15%            |
| L1 + Gh. Lang   | -    | -     | 2%    | 4%          | 8%          | 10%        | 10%            |
| English         | 24%  | 4%    | 8%    | 53%         | 39%         | 11%        | 4%             |
| Pidgin English  | -    | -     | -     | 2%          | -           | -          | -              |
| Not applicable  | 6%   | 76%   | 76%   | 6%          | -           | -          | 2%             |

The responses given by these parents indicate that 24% of the population spoke only English with their children when they were at home. About 35% spoke only their first languages while another 35% spoke both English and the first language (L1) at home. If we add the number of parents who speak only English with their children at home (24%) to the number who speak both English and an indigenous language, we have about 59% of people who use English either partially or totally with their children at home. This is a fairly high figure considering the fact that these people have the option of using only the indigenous language which is their first language. In terms of the language which they speak with friends and neighbours who do not share the same first language with them, 53% said they would opt for the English language when they have to deal with their friends but when it came to their neighbours, 33% said they would opt for English while 39% said they would opt for another Ghanaian language. In the case of a church, more parents opted for the first language when they had to deal with friend who shared the same first language with them. In situations where the families did not have a care giver other than the parents, the respondents indicated that the situation was not applicable to them. This accounts for the high percentage of non-applicable cases.

The data from the children presented different results. Table 5 below shows the data obtained from these children. The data showed that more children speak English with their friends with whom they share the same first language (C->F=L1). In all but one of the situations, a higher percentage of these children would use English. The only situation which recorded a low percentage in the choice of English was the language which these would use with their parents at home (C->P). These children speak English to their siblings at home (C->S) and to their friends when they are at school (C->FatSch) or when they

are playing or at church (C-FatChurch). Presumably, this is because they are more comfortable using English to communicate on school matters and on topics common to young people who do not share a common mother-tongue or who do not have the same degree of proficiency in their shared mother-tongues. About 48 % of the respondents use English at home with their siblings (C->S); the rest use a local language. Interestingly, only 30% of the population used English at home with their parents. So when they spoke to their parents, they used a local language but when they spoke to their siblings, they spoke English. Why did the same respondents use English when they spoke to their siblings and use a local language when they spoke with their parents? One possible explanation could be that the parents spoke local languages to the children and received local languages in return.

**Table 5: Responses from children**

| Language Spoken  | C->P | C->S | C->F =L1 | C->Fdiff L1home | C->F =I1sch | C-FatChurch |
|------------------|------|------|----------|-----------------|-------------|-------------|
| L1               | 50%  | 32%  | 30%      | 32%             | 30%         | 14%         |
| L1 + Eng.        | 16%  | 16%  | 4%       | 4%              | 10%         | 12%         |
| L1 + Gh. Lang.   | -    | -    | -        | 2%              | 4%          | -           |
| English          | 30%  | 48%  | 58%      | 62%             | 54%         | 64%         |
| Other For. Lang. | 2%   | -    | -        | -               | -           | -           |
| Not applicable   | 2%   | 4%   | 8%       | 2%              | 6%          | 10%         |

Why are these children opting for English in these domains which were traditionally reserved for the indigenous languages? There are many factors that have accounted for this language shift. Sometimes language shift occurs as a result of economic or social reasons or in some cases it comes about as a result of migration of one group of people to another place. The information obtained from the questionnaire showed that the impetus for language shift in our case is different, and this point is quite prominent in terms of our claim that one must do a rigorous analysis of the ecology of language shift for a better understanding of the language shift and allied phenomena like language maintenance and educational planning. In many of the situations that we dealt with, it is the parents of the children who initiated this desire in the children. The parents who do this usually have higher education themselves. From the questionnaire, we observed that some of these children have parents who they speak their indigenous languages with but because they want them (the children) to be very proficient in English, they introduce the child to English very early in life.

In such situations, the child acquires English as a first language but still goes on to learn the parent's mother-tongue as a second language.

### 3.5 Language shift involving regional Ghanaian languages

The complex ecology of language shift in Ghana goes beyond English as a target for shift as discussed here. Another dimension of the *multilingual language shift* in the country involves situations where each of the major regional languages is also a beneficial target of shift to it. In Ashanti and neighbouring regions, many migrants to Kumase, Obuase, Sunyani, Cape Coast, Koforidua and other major cities end up using Akan in most domains to the detriment of their own languages and this may lead to loss of the mother-tongue by their offspring. The same is true for Northern Ghana. People who settle in Tamale, Bolgatanga and Wa often end up using Dagbane, Gurenne and Dagaare/Waale respectively as a lingua franca and this could affect the way their offspring speak their parents' language. In Volta region, Ewe is a target for language shift from speakers of smaller languages such as Sedele (Adele) and Tutrugbu (Nyagbo). So in Ghana language shift does not just always involve only two languages, it could involve a preliminary shift from mother tongue to a regional Ghanaian language<sup>2</sup> and ultimately to English! This is *sequential language shift* but the shift can also be one of *concurrent language shift* in which the offspring of an immigrant picks up a new Ghanaian language in informal situations, such as in the neighbourhood playground and picks up English at the same time in formal situations, such as a school. The following illustrates possible sequential language shift situations in Ghana:

|                      |                                |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|
| Upper East Region    | Nabit->Gurenne->English        |
| Upper West Region    | Sisaala->Dagaare->English      |
| Northern Region      | Likpapkaln->Dagbane->English   |
| Brong-Ahafo Region   | Nafaanra or Bono->Akan-English |
| Ashanti Region       | Bono->Akan->English            |
| Eastern Region       | Larteh->Akan->English          |
| Central Region       | Awutu->Akan->English           |
| Western Region       | Wasa->Nzema or Fante->English  |
| Volta Region         | Sedele->Ewe->English           |
| Greater-Accra Region | Dangbe->Ga->English            |

Most of these involve languages in distinct language groups and branches, though some of these shifts involve closely related dialects such as Bono<sup>3</sup>/Akan and Dangbe/Ga, in which case we can then talk of *dialect shift*, which in itself is a major kind of shift that needs further investigation of its own within the *multilingual ecology of language shift* in Ghana that we have demonstrated

throughout. Indeed, the shift does not have to involve only minor Ghanaian language to regional Ghanaian language to English. It can involve minor Ghanaian language to regional Ghanaian language to more nation-wide Ghanaian and West African languages like Akan and Hausa. So for instance, a Sisaala speaker might pick up Dagaare/Waale on moving from his home in Tumu in the Upper West region to Wa, the regional capital. Years down the line if he moves down south to Kumase or Accra he might end up learning Akan and, of course, English throughout this trajectory, but he could learn Hausa if he happens to live in the zongos or immigrant quarters of Kumase and Accra.

The claim is not that the immigrant child simply forgets or loses his or her mother-tongue or an already acquired language upon learning a new language. What we mean by sequential and concurrent language shift in such situations is that the child finds him- or her-self using his or her mother-tongue in fewer and fewer domains to the extent that the new languages (the regional Ghanaian language and English) are becoming more and more primary in his or her life. The child thus shifts to using more and more of the regional language and English, and this shift in domains of language use can lead to less and less proficiency in his or her mother-tongue, and ultimately to language loss. Thus there are many patterns of language shift in Ghana and these patterns of language shift are as exquisite as the cloth and thread patterns we see on Ghana's famous woven cloth, the kente! Therein lies our notion of a *multilingual ecology of shift*.

#### 4 Language maintenance

In spite of this case of language shift in Ghana that has been discussed here, we are of the view that on a macro level there are efforts to maintain the indigenous languages that are spoken in Ghana and we are going to discuss some of the efforts that have been made to maintain the indigenous languages. We have taken our evidence from the media and education. While on the part of the individuals that have been discussed here there is an obvious instance of language shift, we are of the view that there are conscious and unconscious institutional efforts aimed at maintaining the indigenous languages that are used in Ghana. Since language shift is the long-term result of language choice, we believe that the choices that are made in these institutional settings are contributing to counter the situation which has been described above. So what is happening now is that Ghanaians are beginning to reserve the local languages and the English language for different domains and in many institutional settings, there is gradually an encroachment of the local languages on the domains that were formerly restricted to the English language.

#### 4.1 Language maintenance: the role of the mass media

One important tool that is being used to promote or support a multilingual model of education is the mass media. Increasingly, Ghanaian languages are playing a very important role in the mass media. The liberalisation of the airwaves in 1996 gave way to the birth of more than 130 FM stations and about ten television stations. The majority of these FM stations which broadcast in indigenous Ghanaian languages have given opportunities to voices which were marginalised because of their inability to speak English to express their views. Until these local language FM stations came onto the scene, the Ghanaian broadcasting media was strongly dominated by the English language. The current situation where local language FM and television stations have evolved has developed as a result of the recommendation of the National Media Policy of 2000. The Policy recommended that the use of Ghanaian languages be increased and encouraged in order to promote national unity. As the Media Policy rightly points out:

The use of local languages is marginal, resulting in the exclusion of the majority of the population from expressing and representing themselves and their way of life and participating in the national discourse. (Ghana National Media Policy 2000:24)

Thus, through the use of the indigenous languages in the mass media, large segments of the population who were otherwise excluded from the communication process can now participate in the democratic process. Since these indigenous languages are used in many media fora, the great majority of the rural as well as urban illiterate are now included in the process of communication. Today there are many more radio stations that are broadcasting their programs in the local languages. The following local language radio stations show the increase that has taken place:

| Name of radio station | Medium of communication | Location |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|----------|
| Peace F.M.            | Akan                    | Accra    |
| Adom F.M.             | Akan                    | Tema     |
| Meridian F.M.         | Akan                    | Tema     |
| Happy F.M.            | Akan                    | Accra    |
| Top Radio             | Akan                    | Accra    |
| Hits F.M.             | Akan                    | Accra    |
| Great F.M.            | Akan                    | Accra    |
| Sena                  | Akan, Ga, Ewe           | Tema     |
| Hot F.M.              | Akan                    | Accra    |



|                       |              |                 |
|-----------------------|--------------|-----------------|
| Asempa F.M.           | Akan         | Accra           |
| Obonu F.M.            | Ga           | Accra           |
| Fox F.M.              | Akan         | Kumasi          |
| Hello F.M.            | Akan         | Kumasi          |
| Radio Mercury         | Akan         | Kumasi          |
| Capital F.M.          | Akan         | Kumasi          |
| Nhyira                | Akan         | Kumasi          |
| Max F.M.              | Akan         | Enchie          |
| Oman F.M.             | Akan         | Accra           |
| Volta Star Radio      | Ewe          | Aflao           |
| Radio B.A.R.          | Akan         | Sunyani         |
| Eastern F.M.          | Akan         | Koforidua       |
| Rock F.M.             | Akan         | Takoradi        |
| Eagle F.M.            | Akan         | Cape Coast      |
| Kasapa F.M.           | Akan         | London, England |
| Ahomka                | Akan/English | Elmina          |
| Fontomfrom F.M.       | Akan         | Kumasi          |
| Radio Savannah F.M.   | Dagbane      | Tamale          |
| URA Radio F.M.        | Dagaare      | Wa              |
| Radio Upper West F.M. | Gurenne      | Bolgatanga      |

All these radio stations started operating in the country only a few years ago. These local language stations have contributed immensely to the development of the indigenous languages in Ghana.

#### 4.2 Language maintenance: the role of education

Throughout Ghana's history of formal education from 1957 to date, various language in education policies (an outline and discussion of which should be the subject of another paper, see for instance, Bodomo 1997) have been bilingual in nature to some extent, either local languages or English have been used as medium of instruction (MOI) at different levels in the education system, with the local languages often at the lower rungs. While it is sometimes hard to convince parents to accept the use of local languages rather than English as MOIs for educating their children, there is much discussion about the need to promote the use of indigenous Ghanaian languages. Given the important role of education in language maintenance, there is therefore the urgent need to educate Ghanaians and policy makers on the advantages of using local languages as MOI as that would go a long way to contribute to the maintenance of Ghanaian languages.

## 5 Summary and conclusion

Multilingualism in Ghana involves a rich tapestry of languages, dialects, and domains of language use. This country of 20 million people sharing some 80 languages and dialects serves as a complex, exciting ecology for many linguistic phenomena involving language structure and use, language contact, language learning, language choice, code-mixing, code-switching, and, of course, language shift and its allied concepts of language loss, language death, and language maintenance. In this paper, we have embarked on a sustained definition, conceptualisation, theorizing, analysis, and illustration involving language shift in Ghana.

To summarise the aims, objectives, postulations, arguments, analysis, and results of this paper, first, with the aim being to draw attention to research and analysis on language shift in West Africa and other developing regions of the world, we have introduced the concept of the *ecology of language shift*. We have also proposed that a unified theory of language shift must have as its base a rigorous analysis of the ecology of language shift. Second, we have postulated a multilingual ecology of language shift in the case of Ghana and argued that an understanding and careful analysis of the multilingualism in Ghana is *sine qua non* for a complete and comprehensive understanding and analysis of language shift and its allied notions of language maintenance in Ghana.

Third, our analysis of multilingualism in Ghana shows that there are anywhere from 60–80 languages and dialects in Ghana, comprising many small district languages, and 10 main or regional languages as listed in section 2. These languages are often termed government-assisted languages in the Ghanaian context. In addition to these indigenous languages are English, the official language, and some other West African languages like Hausa. Many foreign languages such as French, Swahili, Spanish, and Chinese<sup>4</sup> are also learnt and spoken in Ghana by individuals and restricted communities. This is an exquisite ecology for language shift.

Fourth, based on careful analysis of this complex ecology in the form of rigorous literature review, questionnaire survey for a case study of parents and teachers in Accra and Tema, and, of course, on our own knowledge as members of this multilingual ecology, we adduce the following facts and results about language shift in Ghana.

Language shift in Ghana, as a manifestation of a universal linguistic concept, is similar to language shift in other parts of the world in that it involves individuals and communities of speakers making choices about language learning and language use that could lead to the speaker or speakers losing their mother tongue or community language in favour of some other language. This mostly

involves just two languages in bilingual and other less complex multilingual societies.

However, language shift in Ghana and West Africa is also different from language shift in many Western countries and societies. It is much more complex, and it involves more than two languages in most cases. Language shift in Ghana usually involves shift from indigenous Ghanaian languages to English. But language shift also involves, in no small measure, shifting from a mother-tongue or minor indigenous language to a major, regional one. Indeed the shift can involve three or more languages in the Ghanaian context. We have thus introduced the concept of *multilingual language shift* (in this case mostly trilingual) to describe the shift from minor indigenous Ghanaian language to major indigenous Ghanaian language and subsequently or concurrently to English. Subsequent and concurrent trilingual language shifts are important contributions from the Ghanaian context towards a more complete and universal theory of language shift.

Fifth, we have also discussed ways in which language shift in Ghana is managed by various interest groups. While Ghanaians, as we have seen, are very eager to learn English for their educational and career advancement in a global world, they are also very keen to preserve and use their mother-tongues since they see these indigenous Ghanaian languages as part and parcel of the bedrock of their history, culture, and identity. We have therefore shown that the mass media and the educational system have been used to promote English, but, interestingly, also to promote the mother tongues and, especially, the major indigenous regional Ghanaian languages as languages of broadcast on FM radio stations and also media of instruction and subjects of study in school.

In conclusion, language shift in Ghana is worth the attention of linguists because of the complex multilingual ecology it offers towards a better understanding of the universal concept of language shift. Much more needs to be done beyond what has been achieved in this paper. We need to do more comprehensive empirical surveys in all parts of Ghana beyond the Accra and Tema survey reported here to ascertain language choices by parent and children generations that may have consequences for language shift and language maintenance. We also need to compare this multilingual ecological tapestry that Ghana offers with those of neighbouring African countries and indeed with language shift situations in other parts of the world in order to draw similarities and contrasts, an essential methodology for building a complete theory of language shift. Finally, language shift research must go beyond just language choice and language use to looking at the formal linguistic structures that are involved in this complex multilingual ecology of language shift.

## Appendix

Languages of Ghana showing their regional distribution (listed in order of approximate number of speakers):

| Language/Dialect   | Main location (Adm. Region) |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| Asante Twi         | Ashanti                     |
| Ewe                | Volta                       |
| Fante              | Central                     |
| Dangbe             | Greater Accra               |
| Ga                 | Greater Accra               |
| Dagbane            | Northern                    |
| Dagaare            | Upper-West                  |
| Bron               | Brong-Ahafo                 |
| Gurenne            | Upper-East                  |
| Likpakpaln         | Northern                    |
| Kusaal             | Upper-East                  |
| Nzema              | Western                     |
| Akyem              | Eastern                     |
| Akwapem Twi        | Eastern                     |
| Kwahu              | Eastern                     |
| Mampruli           | Northern                    |
| Wasa               | Western                     |
| Buli               | Upper-East                  |
| Isaaleng           | Upper-West                  |
| Waale              | Upper-West                  |
| Ahanta             | Western                     |
| Gonja              | Northern                    |
| Moba               | Northern                    |
| Kasem              | Upper-East                  |
| Awutu-Efutu        | Central                     |
| Talni              | Upper-East                  |
| Birifor            | Northern                    |
| Agona              | Central                     |
| Kyerepong (Okyere) | Eastern                     |
| Nanuni             | Northern                    |
| Nabit              | Upper-East                  |
| Lelemi (Lefana)    | Volta                       |
| Nafaanra           | Brong-Ahafo                 |
| Larteh             | Eastern                     |

| Language/Dialect         | Main location (Adm. Region) |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Bassari                  | Northern                    |
| Mo-Deg                   | Brong-Ahafo                 |
| Anum-Boso (Gwa)          | Eastern                     |
| Sehwi                    | Western                     |
| Anyi                     | Western                     |
| Nkuraeng                 | Brong-Ahafo                 |
| Krachi                   | Volta                       |
| Anufo                    | Northern                    |
| Nchumburu                | Northern                    |
| Siya (Avatime)           | Volta                       |
| Sekpele (Likpe)          | Volta                       |
| Nkonya                   | Volta                       |
| Tampulma                 | Northern                    |
| Nawuri                   | Northern                    |
| Siwu (Akpafu and Lolobi) | Volta                       |
| Ntrubo-Chala             | Brong-Ahafo                 |
| Vagla                    | Northern                    |
| Chakali                  | Upper-West                  |
| Sedere (Adele)           | Volta                       |
| Konni                    | Upper-East                  |
| Tutrugbu (Nyagbo)        | Volta                       |
| Gichode                  | Volta                       |
| Hanga-Kamara             | Northern                    |
| Tegbo (Tafi)             | Volta                       |
| Ekpana (Logba)           | Volta                       |
| Sele (Santrokofi)        | Volta                       |
| Liwuli (Bowiri)          | Volta                       |

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## Notes

- 1 The metaphor, *a Kente of Many Colours*, in the title of the paper is inspired by the song title, *A Coat of Many Colors*, a major top of the charts song, written, recorded, and sung by the legendary American singer Dolly Parton in 1971. This metaphor is meant to express the rich diversity of Ghana's multilingual landscape.
- 2 A reviewer has asked about where Hausa should be placed in this discussion of regional languages. We do not include Hausa among regional languages because Hausa is not a language specific to any region in Ghana. There is a general misconception even among some Ghanaian linguists in assigning Hausa as a regional language peculiar to northern Ghana. Hausa is, in reality, spoken mainly in pockets of urban communities in cities in many regions such as Accra, Kumase, and Tamale.
- 3 Bono is spoken mainly in the Brong-Ahafo region but there are many Bono-speaking parents in the Ashanti region who are originally from Brong-Ahafo. Children of these parents would shift from Bono to Asante Twi and then to English.
- 4 For instance, the first Bachelor of Arts programme in Chinese at a major West African University, the University of Ghana, was started in August 2009.

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