

LANGUAGE ATTRITION, LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT AND CODE SWITCHING AMONG AFRICANS IN CANADA

ABOUBAKAR NANA AICHATOU

Research Scholar, Department of English, Abdou Moumouni University, Niamey - Niger

ABSTRACT

Migration is more and more increasing but yet, integration in the host country depends on how well and proficient you are in the language of destination. Change in the linguistic environment, language ecology, isolation, parents' attitude lead to native language attrition and or endangerment. In fact, attrition, which "can represent the tangible symptom of disconnectedness and severance" (Monica, 2011) concerns most often children who are living abroad with or without their parents. Despite the worldwide efforts to secure mother tongues and to promote linguistic and cultural diversities, due to migration, globalization and as well as other related factors, the mother tongues are increasingly under threat or disappearance; at least, this is true of the Africans children living in Canada. Within the framework of a qualitative method, the current research, through questionnaires, interviews, investigates the problems and points out the danger of losing mother tongues if no measure is taken.

KEYWORDS: Language, language Attrition, Code Switching, Language Endangerment, Migration & Family

1. INTRODUCTION

"Languages, with their complex implications for identity, social integration, education and development, are of strategic importance for people and planet. Yet, due to globalization processes, they are increasingly under threat, or disappearing altogether. Many of them are dying at an alarming rate (Usmane, 2014:11). Russ (2012) is reported to state: "One language dies every 14 days "and to predict that "by the next century nearly half of the roughly 7, 000 languages spoken on Earth will likely disappear ...". As to Rosemarie cited by Osler in Usman (79) "Languages are becoming extinct at twice the rate of endangered mammals and four times the rate of endangered birds." With regard to this state of affairs, International Mother Language Day has been observed every year since 2000 to promote linguistic and cultural diversity and multilingualism. Other global process that brings about language attrition and or endangerment is migration which as to Paul Lewis (2015) is not a new phenomenon and consists in "the movement of the people that also means the movement of languages from their original geographic locations to new locations and to new language ecologies. (...)".

It is in this perspective that I decide to investigate the factors inducing African migrants especially children language attrition and/or endangerment, as children are mostly prone to language attrition. Mayers-Scotton (2006:414) has contended: "languages are rarely equally valued: even if we formally assign them equal status on a theoretical level, they are not linguistically experienced as such." This is daily experienced by Africans when they have even no opportunity to switching codes. Globally 40% of the population does not have access to an education in a language they speak or understand, especially in the context of migration where, according to the language ecology, languages in contact, the universe own attitude bring about African languages attrition, endangerment or death.

So, when the immigrants' children acquired a second language (L2) in their host country this acquisition influences their native languages (L1s). This influence often manifests as "language attrition, the non-pathological loss of

the native language due to emigration and the related lack of exposure to the mother tongue” (Köpke and Schmid, 2004:45). In addition to L1 attrition, there is a rarely mitigated simultaneous use of L1 and L2 in discourse but at a family level. For, children are demonstrably more prone to language attrition. For those who born abroad, the problem is worse as it is the host country’s language acquired that represent their first language what becomes a threat to their natural mother tongue they, at the end, don’t understand and or speak. In this particular case, these languages are endangered in the sense that “speakers cease to use it, use it in fewer and fewer domains, use fewer of its registers and speaking styles, and/or stop passing it on to the next generation.” UNESCO (2012)

The differentiation and combined investigation of code switching, which is socially motivated, and language attrition, which is predominantly a psycholinguistic issue is a new and important approach to the analysis of bilingual data. In research so far the one area has hardly taken note of the other (Walters2005). To maintain this stand of Walters, another concept that of language endangerment, which is a sociolinguistic issue, is worth considering.

This paper attempts to investigate the socio linguistic consequences of the globally migratory phenomenon among African children in Canada. It identifies socio demographic factors that affect immigrants’ language attrition and bring about endangerment.

The methodology used to unravel applies a triangulation of qualitative and quantitative methods where data were collected through observations, interview and questionnaires. The data were collected periodically from 2013 to 2019.

This paper discusses the overall distribution of occurrences of attrition and to a small scale code switching across the corpus and sheds light on how attrition and endangerment correlate with identity related factors such as, language ecology, parents’ attitude, the length of residence in Canada, etc. On the other hand, it shows how the quasi inexistence of code switching brings about language endangerment/disappearance?

In this paper, I, first of all, provide a brief theoretical discussion of lexical attrition and language endangerment. Then, I provide a functional analysis of the bilingual language use among Africans living in Canada. Finally, I show how extra linguistic and internal factors correlate with the bilingual data and I discuss the relevance of distinguishing between language attrition and endangerment.

2. PREVIOUS WORKS

As Lewis, M. Paul, (2015) stated: “Migration is not a new phenomenon and, whatever the cause, the movement of people also means the movement of languages from their original geographic locations to new locations and to new language ecologies.” These changes in the linguistic environment studied by linguists as “contact linguistics” and by sociolinguists as “language ecology”, result in changes in the languages, themselves. (Significant modification in the language repertoire of the migrants)

Thomason/Kaufman, (1988); Trudgill (1986) point out that “Language change may be thought of as having internal (intra-systemic), external (contact-based) and extra-linguistic (socio-political and economic) motivations. As to Jones, (2002:1). It is reasonable to suppose that the migration of people is a leading cause of contact-induced change; in other words, migration is a key extra linguistic factor leading to externally-motivated change. In every case of migration, except where a homogenous group of people moves to an isolated location, language or dialect contact ensues.

Lewis (1982:25), summarizing Mangalam (1968) states that Migration also has far-reaching consequences for the

social fabric of the three communities affected: the society of origin, the society of destination, and the migrants themselves. It follows that migration has profound socio-linguistic consequences...”

This change manifests itself in terms of language ‘attrition’, a term “somewhat controversial, as it refers to the decline in proficiency in one language for bilinguals-their native language. This is a common occurrence for bilinguals (when they move to another country) who start using their second language more frequently..

On the other hand, the term ‘first language attrition (FLA) refers to the gradual decline in native language proficiency. As speakers use their L2 frequently and become proficient (or even dominant) in it, some aspects of the L1 can deteriorate or become subject to L2 influence. For Monica (2011): “Language attrition” describes the loss of, or changes to, grammatical and other features of a language as a result of declining use by speakers who have changed their linguistic environment and language habits”.

Language attrition is the process of losing a native, or first, language. The process is, generally, caused by isolation from speakers of the first language and the acquisition and use of a second language. A notable example of this is found in migrants, who move to a country in which a language foreign to them is spoken, and go on to use that later-learned environmental language in their daily lives. Their gradual decline in proficiency in their first language or L1, resulting from both isolation from other speakers of their L1 and interference from the L2 they are acquiring, is considered language attrition.(Wikipedia: July 2017)

Moreover, language attrition may occur if the overall effort to maintain the first language is insufficient while exposed to a dominant L2 environment. This is the case of those African languages. According to UNESCO: “A language is endangered when its speakers cease to use it, use it in fewer and fewer domains, use fewer of its registers and speaking styles, and/or stop passing it on to the next generation. No single factor determines whether a language is endangered” (Usman, 2014: 52). He goes on to state: “An endangered language may therefore become extinct when its speakers disappear or switch to another, usually more populous or powerful, language.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 The Data

The present research, on language Endangerment and or attrition, is based upon my periodical visit to Canada between August 2013 and September 2019 where I conducted in-depth interview with Africans residing in Canada based on questions such as:

- What language do you normally use to communicate with your family –wife/husband especially your children?
- What language do you normally interact with your relatives/friends particularly their children?
- Does your children understand and/or speak your native language fluently/average/passable/not at all?”
- How do you experience going home (if ever) to your country with your children?

I also resort to questionnaires regarding the informants’ socio-demographic background, aware or unaware of the research aims. At this juncture, I must say the unawareness of parents/children would allow me get more reliable data in their ‘linguistic spontaneity’ (Carpi, y.u: 6), then reliable results as parents may disguise to display their own responsibility in the languages’ decadence. So, I voluntarily omitted to explain my research objective sometimes to my respondents for

ethical concern. In fact, in most cases, I realized that respondents were spontaneous in responding. That is, spontaneity was greater when they are unaware of my research aims to avoid the situation of the couple where the father told me none of his children understand nor speak their mother tongue whereas the mother said one of their children speaks it. Thus, conversational analysis of the everyday speech is another research instrument I use as it is grounded in people's social life.

3.2 Demographic Information on Participants

Children are more susceptible to (first) language attrition than adults. Research shows an age effect around the ages of 8 to 13. Before this time period, a first language can attrite under certain circumstances, the most prominent being a sudden decline in exposure to the first language.

Demographic background information was collected through the distribution of questionnaires and interview. The participants, in this study, were Africans who immigrated to Canada with children aged 3 to 13; The parents also vary significantly in social status (unemployed, drivers, teachers, government employees, former diplomats, nurses,, etc.), and ethnic background (Rwandese, Burundese, Nigeriens, Congolese, Chadians, Senegalese, Burkinabese, Guinean...) with wide ranging background in regard to their length of residence in Canada, between 6 and 25 years. They agree to be cited.

3.3 Code switching, Lexical Attrition and Endangerment

We allude to Du Bois's view that research on language attrition overlaps with research on code-switching in that some theoretical frameworks, such as Myers Scottons' are often used in both research fields. Also, in both fields the simultaneous use of two languages, L1 and L2, is investigated. It is worth noticing that language attrition puts emphasis on the loss of L1 whereas Code-switching focuses on the simultaneity. But in a context where languages in contact are formally assigned equal status just on a theoretical level, a third notion, significantly higher among participants is worth considering: Attrition being a process of loss, of forgetting, of deterioration."(Monica, 2011) gives way to endangerment of one of the languages considered as "low" namely African languages. This is, because its speakers cease to use it and or pass it onto the next generation

In this context of ours, the language attrition being significantly higher among participants, the language ecology in addition to other factors does not give room to code switching. It hardly happens with those Africans, mostly adults, in contact with others in order not to be over heard while interacting; else, the amount of code switching overall is lower if not quasi inexistent among children with whom we underscore occasional code-switching as follow:

The Conversation is Held between Sisters at a Breakfast Time.

Ni'ima (8years old): Donne-moi mon shayi

Atou (11 years old) : Ni'ima, il faut être généreuse

Ni'ima : Ita ma da nata

Conversation between the Girls and their Mother

Mother : Tu as éteint tu as tourné le dos

Atou : bai yi ba, wuta ce na kara

Atou : (addressing her aunty). Maman, dibi, maman ta ce ma Ni'ima ta bar sa mascarade kuma take zuwa tana

dauka tana sawa

Aunty : cest quoi ?

Atou : wannan abun da ake sawa a ido

After Eating

Atou (addressing her senior sister); Nana, comme tu as fini, tu peux gyara gurin

Atou ; mama, Ni'ima wai ba ta ba ni ba in yi recopier a kayyenta sai na ce : je m'excuse, tu es la meilleure, tu es une petite sœur modèle.

Mama : C'est quoi ça ?

Ni'ima : wannan (brandishing the glass in her hand) ? Kanwa ce

Atou : pourquoi vous avez touche à mes affaires ? In kara gani kin shiga dakina

Mama: Elmama qu'est-ce que tu fais?

Elmama (14years old): mi kika ce ?

Mama : qu'est-ce que tu fais ?

Elmama ; miya ce nika sama ruwa ta yi decongeler ; miyal kubewa

Language Attrition or Endangerment

Interv : ina suke

Elmama : elles ne sont pas venues

Interv : mi suke yi ?

Elmama : je ne sais pas

Interv : ko ba sa zuwa ?

Elmama : non, elles vont venir

Elmama : les voila. Elles arrivent ;

Interv : su ne suke gudu !?

Elmama : oui, elles sont en train de courir.

Even if you address the child in its native language, in case the child understands the mother tongue, he or she responds in the language acquired: they cease to use their language;

4. DATA ELICITATION

To the question, whether their children speak or understand their mother tongue or not, respondents provided the following answers which are made explicit in the chart below:

Table 1

Name	Nationality	Number of Children	Age Range	Year of settlement in Canada	Number of children who speak Mother Tongue	Number of children who understand Mother Tongue
Ernest	Burundese	four	5-7-9	1999	0	0
Chantal	Congolese	three	5-7-9	14 years before the interview	0	0
Albert	Chadian	two	13-15	2005	0	0
Gisele	Congolese	five		2003	0	5
Voisine	Burundese	four	7-9-11-13	2001	0	0
Zalika	Nigerienne	two	6-8	2010	0	0
Anta	Senegalese	two	3-6	Born in Canada	0	0
Khadidja	Guineean	two	3-5	2014	0	0
Rita	Rwandaise	two	3-6	2013	0	0
Kadi	Burkinabese	three	3-5-7	2003	0	0
Sharifa	Nigerienne	tWO	3-7	2007	2	2
Aminatou	Nigerienne	three	2-5-8	2011	3	3

Through our fieldwork, what we observe is that in addition to parents' use of French to accomplish their duty of educators; they, for instance, introduce their visitors in French, encouraged their kids to do the same, 'introduce' themselves in French, even where they have common language; therefore, when you approach kids in mother tongue, in a bit to create a more familiar atmosphere they respond in French. This choice reveals the particular symbolical value parents assigned to the French language with respect to their native language. The choice has been shown to be an important factor in language attrition. Decline in use of a given language leads to gradual loss of that language. As a result, children are demonstrably more likely to lose their first language than adults.

5. DISCUSSIONS

The younger a child is, the more likely it is that L1 will be replaced by L2 when changing the linguistic environment. (Dubois, y.u: 1). As a rule, children are demonstrably prone to attrition more than adults while "the most serious indication of a language's imminent demise is when it is no longer spoken by children... as Usman (2014: 60) states.

In the context of migration, there are factors that bring this process into action: the emigration factor, the age of departure from the home country, the lack of exposure to native language, the ecology of language, the parent's attitude toward their own language, languages equal only in theory, and the length of time. This process, generally speaking, affects more obviously those bilinguals for whom 'a language other than their first has started to play an important, if not dominant, role in everyday life' (Wikipedia, August 2019).

This is the concern of the participant of the present study; they were aged 3 to 13 when their parents migrated to Canada; the age factor initiates the onset of attrition. In the long run, they can neither speak African languages nor understand it and when their parents are speaking they do not understand what is being said: also they (children) never talk to each other in their mother tongue. Big question: how can these transmit their language to the future generation? Besides, the term 'first language attrition (FLA) refers to the gradual decline in native language proficiency. As speakers use their L2 frequently and become proficient (or even dominant) in it, some aspects of the L1 can deteriorate or become subject to L2 influence. "Attrition is therefore a process of loss, of forgetting, of deterioration." (Wikipedia, op cit)

Considering our data, we maintain Usman's stand which says that intergenerational transmission is largely on the decline, what leads to the worse: African languages endangerment. As to UNESCO: "A language is endangered when its

speakers cease to use it, use it in fewer and fewer domains, use fewer of its registers and speaking styles, and/or stop passing it on to the next generation..." (Usman, 2014: 52). In spite of the following metaphor that: "You never forget how to ride a bicycle, but due to lack of practice you may get a bit wobbly" (Monica); or "can spiders forget how to spin webs?" An infinitesimal percentage of our participants get a bit wobbly while the majorities completely forget their native language.

Participants' observation for over 6 years confirms that only French is used in conversation and an occasionally code-switching, where some African expressions get inserted into the Africans' speech but at home, were used.

6. FINDINGS

What we find out is that emigration, age, language ecology, habits, especially parents' attitude towards the mother tongue are the most languages attrition and endangerment inducing factors. As migration to Europe, Americas and other parts of the world is today more and more increasing, to the question what in the environment, habits, attitudes or personality of a speaker which causes attrition opposed the question of how to reduce if not prevent/avoid languages attrition and therefrom language endangerment.

The ecology of language and parents' attitude towards their one language are definitely the key inducing factors. There is no room to speak African languages in those countries at school, on the work place, on the market, stadium, gymnasium, library, hospital, in no way. Therefore, the responsibility of preserving the mother tongue should be taken in that the role of the family in language preservation is quite crucial (Usman; 2014:75). He observes that:

It is incumbent to the family to teach a child to speak the mother tongue if the family is to play its proper role... no matter the degree of endangerment of an indigenous language, its speakers, if determined at family and communal levels can stop the disappearance of its linguistic heritage largely by ensuring that intergenerational transmission of their mother tongue is implemented in every household.

7. CONCLUSIONS

It is known that so many factors contribute to language endangerment. Among the factors, the current research investigates that migration plays important role in the process of endangerment as the chart in the discussion section has made it explicit. Our findings have proved that the children of the migrant have difficulties in understanding/speaking their mother tongue; if ever few of them achieve, it is done through code switching. As language is a first cultural identity and knowing the global efforts to promote cultural diversity and multilingualism, the research does not only point out the problems but mainly it calls attention to secure mother tongues within the environment of dominant languages; especially when we know that most of Africans languages are not being taught in schools where those migrants live.

REFERENCES

1. Bukar Usman 2014 LANGUAGE DISAPPEARANCE AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN BIU EMIRATE Klamidas Communications Ltd. Abuja, Nigeria
2. Du Bois, Inke (y.u) Language attrition and code-switching among US Americans in Germany. Universitat Vechta; Anglistik/Sprachwissenschaft, Driverstrasse 22, 49364 Vechta
3. INGOE. Ispording 2015 What drives the Language proficiency of immigrants? IZA World of Labor August

- 2015 wol-IZA.org
4. Kerswill, Paul 2006 "Migration and Language" in Sociolinguistics: An international handbook of the science of language and society, 2nd ed., Vol. 3, De Gruyter, Berlin,
 5. Köpke, B. and M. S. Schmid, 2004 Language attrition: the next phase. In M. Schmid, B., M. Keijzer and L. Weilemar(eds); 2004:1-43
 6. Lewis. M. Paul 2015 Migration and Language Contact. SIL International Languages of the World. Oct 2015
 7. "Interference of Mother Tongue in Learning English among Rural 179 Tamil Students in Selected Engineering Colleges in Coimbatore District", BEST: International Journal of Humanities, Arts, Medicine and Sciences (BEST: IJHAMS), Vol. 3, Issue 10pp. 177-188
 8. Myers-Scotton, C. 2006. Multiple voices. *An Introduction to bilingualism*. Malden; MA: Blackwell Publishers
 9. Monica. S Schmid 2002 First Language Attrition, Use and Maintenance: The case of German Jews in Anglophone countries (Study in Bilingualism) Hardcover. 7th May 2002
 10. Monica. S. Schmid. 2011. Language Attrition (Key topics in Sociolinguistics) Paperback_7July
 11. Piltier, I. (Ed.) 2016 Language and Migration London-Routledge
 12. Rymer, Russ, "Vanishing Voices," *National Geographic Magazine*, July 2012.
 13. "Determination of the Indeterminate Bare Noun in Karbi", International Journal of Linguistics and Literature (IJLL), Vol. 3, Issue 3, pp. 1-8
 14. UNESCO President's Letter, Northcoast Conference XXXIII, March 22-24, 2012
 15. Walters, J. 2005. *Bilingualism: the sociopragmatic-psycholinguistic interface*. Mahwah, NJ:Lawrence Erlbaum.
 16. 2011 Language Attrition (Key Topics in Sociolinguistics) Paperback –7 july 2011.
 17. "Assessment of Cultural Landscape Values and their Protection Status in Ihlara Valley", International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (IJHSS), Vol. 8, Issue 1, pp. 7-18
 18. Bilingualism-matters: ppls.ed.ac.uk Lost for words? Considering language attrition.
 19. Bilingualism-matters: ppls.ed.ac.uk The Importance of the Native Language Practitioner Day (Birkbeck, University of London, November 10th 2017)
 20. "Breathing the Uniqueness of Kunkana Culture by Word-of-the Mouth Tradition", International Journal of English and Literature (IJEL), Vol. 8, Issue 5, pp. 19-24
 21. What are the challenges, benefits and opportunities in being able to use several languages?
 22. <http://wol.iza.org/articles/what-drives-language-proficiency-of-immigrants>
 23. Ethnologue Languages of the World. Migration and Language Contact
 24. WIKIPEDIA- Language attrition retrieved july 2017 <http://wol.iza.org/articles/what-drives-language-proficiency-of-immigrants>