

Multilingualism and second language acquisition in the northern Mandara Mountains

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Introduction

Research into bi- and multilingualism in Africa has provided insight into the effects on language behavior of migration, urbanization, education, inter-group relations, and language status. Much of this work has been motivated by language planning needs, and the predominant methodology has been surveys that rely largely on self-reports of linguistic repertoire and language domains (Ohannessian, 1975; e.g., Koenig, Chia, & Povey, 1983; Kordass & Annett, 1977; Vossen, 1988). Spot observations have also been used to investigate patterns of language use (e.g., Bender, 1976; Dieu, 1979; Juillard, 1994; Whitely, 1974), as has discourse analysis of recorded interaction (Myers-Scotton, 1993). Some studies have assessed bi- and multilingualism both quantitatively and qualitatively (e.g., the 1987 sociolinguistic survey of rice farmers in Maga, cited in Seignobos & Iyébi-Mandjek, 2000).

This chapter presents findings from research that takes an ethnographic approach to the study of multilingualism. The exploratory study was conducted in a village located in the densely multilingual northern Mandara Mountains, in the Far North Province of Cameroon. The village is inhabited by two sociocultural groups – the Wandala¹ and the

montagnards². In 1996, the researcher collected language learning histories, assessed language proficiency, recorded natural discourse, and conducted group interviews. The study focused on four adolescents – two Wandala and two montagnards. Analysis of these data was embedded in broader ethnographic study of the village and the region, conducted in 1996 and during the author's Peace Corps service (1992-1994). The goal of the study was to gain insight into how, why, when, and where second languages (L2)³ were acquired and used in this community.

The linguistic profiles of the two sociocultural groups are quite different. The montagnards have a high level of multilingualism in terms of both proficiency and number of languages, usually learned informally. The Wandala, on the other hand, are often monolingual, or they acquire a second language under formal instruction or as adults. The two groups are shown to differ not only in their patterns of language acquisition and use, but also in their attitudes toward L2s and second language acquisition. Some divergent features of Wandala and montagnard family life and communicative practice that may reproduce and reinforce the sociolinguistic differences between the two groups are described. Finally, comparison of the Wandala and montagnard case studies suggests that members of the two sociocultural groups may be qualitatively different in their approach to the task of second language learning.

The sociocultural and sociolinguistic context

The study was conducted in Jilve, a village located on the plain in the northern Mandara Mountains. The population, approximately 1,100 inhabitants (Mana & Graham, 1992), is linguistically and ethnically diverse. At one level, one may speak of there being two sociocultural groups in the village and the region: the Wandala and the montagnards.

For several centuries the plain has been dominated by the Wandala, a Muslim polity, while the traditionally animist montagnard groups have controlled the mountains. The Wandala are the socioeconomically dominant group, and Wandala-montagnard relations have long been characterized by interdependence and ambivalence (Breton & Maurette, 1993; MacEachern, 1990, in press).

The northern Mandara Mountains have a long history of societal and individual multilingualism. Spoken in the region are fifteen closely related languages belonging to the Central branch of the Chadic family (Breton & Maurette, 1993). In the last century, migration to the plain and the introduction of markets has increased second language acquisition and use of Wandala and the other regional languages of wider communication that intersect in this region (Fulfulde, Hausa, and Kanuri) (MacEachern, 1990). Wandala has become the language of inter-group communication among the montagnards in the northern Mandara Mountains (Barreteau, 1984; de Colombel, 1987).

French is widely regarded as the language of socioeconomic advancement, but its acquisition and use are very limited. Government and mission school attendance is low among both groups. Through Koranic schooling, Wandala and Muslim montagnards may learn to read and write Classical Arabic without comprehension. (Please see Figure 1 for classification of the languages used by the focal participants.) Only a handful of older boys and men have continued past the first cycle of Koranic education and can comprehend and speak Arabic. In Jilve, a few men who have worked or traded in Nigeria have learned some Hausa, English, and/or Pidgin. English is also taught in secondary and the later years of primary school, but few inhabitants of Jilve have had any instruction in English.

Montagnard norms of multilingualism

Focal and peripheral montagnard participants regarded multilingual competence as normal and essential, and trilingualism seemed to be the norm for montagnards (please see Figures 2 and 3 for the linguistic repertoires of Jonas, Daya, and their parents). In addition to their home language(s), most people speak Wandala and the language of at least one neighboring montagnard group (cf., Kordass, 1977; MacEachern, 1990).

Montagnard participants asserted that any language was worth learning. While many people cited instrumental motivations for learning an L2, simply being able to communicate with speakers of a language in their language was widely considered to be a worthwhile goal in and of itself. As part of the French proficiency assessment, focal participants were asked, “Which languages would you want your children to know?” Daya wrote the following response:

Quant à moi si j’aurai des enfants j’aimerai qu’ils parle le français et l’anglais et puis notre langue naturelle. J’aime encore que mes enfants comprennent les deux meilleurs langues pour qu’ils [soient] bien ici au Cameroun parce ce qu’ils peuvent lire et entendre toutes langues. Dont c’est nécessaire à comprendre au moins cinq langues pour eux pour que mes enfants ne soient pas beaucoup derangés (Daya, August 1996).

In fact, productive competence in five or six languages is not unusual among montagnards (cf., MacEachern, 1990) (please see Figure 7 for the timeline of Jonas’ linguistic repertoire expansion). There are several patterns of marriage, child socialization, and communicative practice that serve to reproduce and reinforce multilingualism.

The montagnard groups are exogamous, patrilingual, and patrilocal, and bilingual households and early bilingualism are common (Barreteau, 1984). A newlywed woman is required to learn the language of her new household within a year or so if she is not already proficient therein (Breton & Maurette, 1993). With the supervision and assistance of her in-laws, she is expected to raise her children in the language of the father. However, children receive plentiful input in their mother's language through frequent contacts with her family and friends.

Montagnard women cultivate alongside their men, and children who are no longer carried on their mothers' backs are left in the village under the casual supervision of older siblings or grandparents. This allows for daytime wanderings that bring children in contact with playmates who speak other languages, and several participants reported that they began learning one of their secondary languages through such contacts.

From the age of four or five, montagnard children routinely carry memorized messages for adult members of their household (cf., Duranti & Ochs, 1986; Rabain-Jamin, 1998). These messages can be fairly long, and it is not unusual for the message to be in a language the child does not yet command well or at all. The child is expected to memorize the message, and the nature of the errand may be explained at least in part. One participant remembered such messages as his first lessons in Wandala.

Much of domestic life is lived outside the family compound, and children are often privy to conversations among adults of both sexes and diverse ethnic/linguistic groups. In inter-ethnic/linguistic communication, the speaker may accommodate in a variety of ways an interlocutor who is not a fully competent speaker-hearer of the speaker's language. Translation or codeswitching are common practices. Another option is cross-linguistic communication, wherein each interlocutor speaks her own preferred

language and has sufficient comprehension of the language used by interlocutors. Use of a lingua franca is another strategy, but even then language mixing⁴ often occurs.

Language mixing is a regular feature of conversations among montagnards even when all interlocutors share the same primary language and linguistic accommodation is not an issue. Thus, montagnard children are regularly exposed to multiple languages, both across and within interactions (Moore, 1999).

Wandala L2 acquisition & use

The Wandala do not share the montagnards' multilingual norm. Some Wandala do learn a second language or languages, such as Fulfulde, Kanuri, French, Classical Arabic, or English (please see Figures 4 and 5 for the linguistic repertoires of Isaak, Mayade, and their parents). However, their second language acquisition and use usually occur in the formal contexts of public or Koranic school. Informal second language acquisition – through travel for work or trade – takes place at a much later age than montagnards begin learning L2s informally (please compare Figures 6 and 7, timelines of linguistic repertoire expansion by Isaak and Jonas).

Wandala participants expressed interest in learning L2s such as Arabic (for religious practice), Fulfulde (for commerce and travel), French and English (for school and salaried employment). Despite their expressed interest in learning high status and formally instructed languages like French and Arabic, Wandala participants had low expectations for their informal second language learning. One focal Wandala participant was surprised that she had begun to learn Fulfulde once she moved in with a Fulfulde-speaking family in the town where she attended secondary school:

Interviewer: Mais si ce n'était pas obligatoire, est-ce que tu aurais

tu aurais appris le fulfuldé?

Mayade: Non

Interviewer: Pourquoi pas?

Mayade: Parce que, avant que j'étais avant de partir [to live in a household where Fulfulde is spoken], je disais que non, moi je ne peux pas apprendre le fulfuldé

(Mayade, July 1996)

Wandala participants cited three possible motivations for learning montagnard languages: (1) to understand what montagnards say about them, (2) to trade in the mountains, and (3) to use as a secret code in the presence of other Wandala. Very few Wandala, however, learn much of any montagnard language. This is not surprising given their socioeconomic dominance in the region, where their language serves as the local lingua franca. In interactions with montagnards, Wandala are almost always accommodated linguistically. As among the montagnards, patterns of marriage and child socialization reproduce and reinforce the Wandala pattern of monolingualism or formally instructed and/or late second language acquisition.

While most Wandala marry within the ethnic group, bi-ethnic households are not uncommon. Wandala often intermarry with recently Islamicized montagnards, and Wandala men sometimes marry non-Muslim montagnard women (with the expectation that the women will convert to Islam). Such unions are nearly always established within the Wandala community, where there is considerable pressure on montagnards to obscure their mountain origins and to behave, dress, and speak like the Wandala. Consequently, bilingual households are rare. When asked about the use of more than one language in a

household, Wandala participants expressed concern that early exposure to more than one language would be detrimental to children's language development.

Wandala women usually do not cultivate and spend most of their time inside the family compound or visiting relatives or friends in their compounds. Younger children keep fairly close to their mothers and are discouraged from playing with non-Muslim children. Like their montagnard peers, Wandala children carry messages for adults, but the messages (even if meant for a montagnard recipient) are in Wandala. Girls and younger boys spend little time around adult males, the segment of the Wandala population most likely to use an L2. Until they begin receiving formal L2 instruction at public or Koranic school around the age of six or seven, Wandala children have limited exposure to L2s. Children may observe older children and adults studying Arabic or French, but they are rarely exposed to second language acquisition and use outside of scholastic or religious contexts.

Comparison of the case studies

The four adolescents on whom the study focused were among the very few inhabitants of the village who had completed primary school. This was both a purposive sample and a convenience sample. The focal participants' education level allowed for the comparison of personal experiences and linguistic outcomes of several years of formal L2 instruction. It also made it possible to collect much of the data in French.

The two focal Wandala participants were Isaak (male, 17 years old) and Mayade (female, 16 years old). The two focal montagnard participants were Jonas (male, 16 years old) and Daya (male, 17 years old)⁵. All four were successful learners of French, as their education level attests. However, there emerged several differences between the Wandala

and montagnard participants. The montagnards not only knew more languages better than did the Wandala (please see Tables 1-4 for linguistic profiles of the focal participants), they were also more confident and self-aware in their second language learning and use.

The Wandala participants frequently overestimated their L2 proficiency. They also declined or avoided language assessment activities in instances where other evidence suggests that assessment would not have confirmed their claims of competence. The Wandala also expressed reservations about further expansion of their linguistic repertoires, citing fear of failure, lack of time, and the fact that they already knew as many languages as they needed.

The montagnard participants, on the other hand, sometimes underestimated their L2 proficiency. Far from avoiding language assessment activities, they expressed interest and pleasure in them. They also took risks during assessment activities, attempting tasks beyond their skill level. They articulated and demonstrated metalinguistic awareness and several strategies associated with effective language learning. Moreover, they were confident about future expansion of their linguistic repertoires, whether in formal or informal settings.

All four focal participants expressed clear ideas about how to learn an L2: listen in on conversations of competent speakers and seek private help from a friend who is a native or competent speaker of the target language. Such private lessons were said to provide opportunities to practice conversation and to ask questions like: “how do you say X?” or “I heard someone say Y; what does it mean?” Only the two montagnards, however, had ever engaged in such lessons.

In addition to the strategy of seeking private instruction and practice, the montagnard participants also spontaneously described and/or demonstrated the use of

several other strategies associated with effective second language learning (for comprehensive reviews of second language learning strategy research, please see O'Malley, 1990; Oxford, 1990). They planned and rehearsed for anticipated language tasks. They monitored their own production and comprehension for errors. They also identified problems they had in learning and using a particular L2 (primarily in pronunciation and lexicon) and directed their attention to those features of the language. When language assessment activities presented challenges that were beyond their current level of competence in the L2, the montagnards consciously used available information to guess the meaning and function of new forms.

The montagnards demonstrated a high degree of metalinguistic awareness not only in their use of language learning strategies. They were also quick to recognize cognates, even in languages they did not know well or at all. Below is one participant's written account of the cognate recognition he demonstrated during Zulgwa proficiency assessment (I have added in the first column the English glosses of the Zulgwa words in the second column)⁶:

'father'	dèdé	→	dayé (mandara)
'buy'	àsèkém	→	à sekwem (ouldémé) ⁷
'goat'	awák	→	awak (ouldémé)
'they go'	tá dá	→	tàdàa (mada)
'to (the) market'	à kwaskwa	→	à kwasekwa (mbremé) ⁸
'he/she is going to call'	à tà-zel	→	ara zel ⁹ (mada)
'now'	kinèhe	→	akanehé (mada)
'he/she gives'	a-vil	→	avelar (ouldémé)
'to you (plural)'	akùrum	→	a wuran yan ¹⁰ (ouldémé)

Je connais les mots parce que au temps que j'apprenais zolgo les mots
zolgo rassembler [sic] aussi à des mots ouldémé, mbremé, mada, mandara
(Jonas, August 1996).

Montagnard participants cited language mixing as a feature of informal L2 use and instruction that facilitated L2 learning. They commented on the value of explanations of L2 linguistic forms and structures given in the novice's L1 or in an L2 of which he or she had better command. The two focal montagnard participants also pointed out that language mixing in conversation provided clues to the meaning of unfamiliar L2 forms. Wandala participants, on the other hand, did not regard language mixing as a resource for L2 teaching and learning. Instead, they viewed it as a sign of limited competence, showing off, or an effort to conceal from third parties what one was saying.

Discussion

It may seem intuitive that individuals who have achieved greater competence in more L2s also have more positive attitudes toward and greater skill in second language learning. In fact, research has already demonstrated that multilinguals differ from their monolingual counterparts in their approach to second language learning, using different learning strategies, exhibiting greater metalinguistic awareness, and reflecting more on their language systems and language use (e.g., Clyne, 1997; Jeßner, in press; Klein, 1995; Nayak, Hansen, Krueger, & McLaughlin, 1990). It must be noted, however, that this research only compares monolinguals to multilinguals (i.e., bi- and trilinguals). No distinction is made between bilinguals and trilinguals, early bilinguals and late bilinguals, or bilinguals who acquired their L2 informally and those who were formally taught.

Differences among multilinguals in second language learning attitudes and skills may be linked to differences in the number of L2s learned or the age or context (formal or informal) of learning, but researchers have yet to explore these issues.

Differences in their language learning histories may account for the disparities observed between the Wandala and the montagnards in their use of language learning strategies, level of metalinguistic awareness, and attitude toward L2s and L2 learning. The two Wandala did not learn an L2 until they began learning French in public school, and their first experiences with informal language learning did not occur until they were in their teens. The two montagnards were both natively bilingual, and both began learning non-native languages by the age of four. Moreover, having watched family members and neighbors learn and use L2s, they had considerable vicarious experience with L2 acquisition and use before they themselves began learning L2s. Early immersion in multilingual discourse and early informal L2 learning may have fostered in the two montagnards language awareness and second language learning skills and confidence unmatched by their Wandala peers.

The phrase ‘context of learning’ is used above – as in most second language acquisition research – with respect to whether an L2 was acquired informally or under formal instruction. However, the context of learning is not limited to instructional conditions. Full understanding of second language learning requires attention to the larger sociocultural context in which it occurs. The cultural expectations and norms with respect to language acquisition and use are quite different in the Wandala and montagnard communities. Montagnards take it for granted that they can speak and understand multiple languages and that they may continue to expand their linguistic repertoires throughout their lives. Wandala, on the other hand, are monolingual, and the acquisition

of French, Arabic, or Fulfulde is regarded as a noteworthy accomplishment. Montagnards engage in multilingual discourse regularly and nonchalantly, whereas Wandala regard language mixing with disdain and suspicion.

It appears that, growing up with these different community beliefs and communicative practices, the Wandala and montagnard participants developed culturally distinct views of and approaches to language learning and use. Wandala children grow up in a largely monolingual world, where languages other than Wandala are learned under formal instruction and used in religious or educational settings, or learned much later in life for purposes of work, travel, or commerce. Montagnard children are socialized into multilingualism from birth, taught early on by the examples, opportunities, and challenges in their immediate environment to use the resources of multiple languages for both communication and second language learning in a variety of settings and for a variety of purposes.

Longitudinal study is necessary to establish and understand the relationships between community patterns of marriage, socialization, and communicative practice and community members' social and cognitive approaches to second language learning. The retrospective nature of the data collected in this study allows only for speculation. Further research into the influence of community norms and practices of multilingualism on members' language learning can contribute to our understanding of second language acquisition and multilingualism. Such research will contribute to our understanding of the ways in which culture shapes language learning, which in turn will facilitate the development of appropriate and sustainable educational language policy in Africa and other multicultural, multilingual parts of the world.

About the author

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ENDNOTES

¹ Wandala are often referred to, colloquially and in the literature, as Mandara, the Fulbe name for the ethnic group.

² The term *montagnard* is used here, as in the literature and the speech of participants in the study, to refer collectively to the various ethnolinguistic groups (cf., MacEachern, 1990) who have traditionally inhabited the foothills and plateaus of the Mandara Mountains. The ethnolinguistic groups living in the village under study included Mada, Mafa, Pelasla, Wuzlam. Other groups were also present, but not in significant numbers.

³ Second language and L2 are both used to refer to a language that is not native to the learner, be it the second, third, or *n*th language he or she has learned.

⁴ The term language mixing is used here to refer to the language contact phenomena listed above: translation, cross-linguistic communication, and intra- and inter-sentential switching (cf., Ritchie & Bhatia, 1996).

⁵ One male and one female *montagnard* participant would have been ideal. However, this was not possible because no *montagnard* girls in Jilve had completed more than the first three classes of primary school.

⁶ The Zulgo phrases used in the assessment activity were taken an article by Beat Haller, Robert Hedinger, and Ulla Wiesemann, "The verbal complex in Zulgo." My special thanks to Beat Haller for helping me personally with the Zulgo data.

⁷ Ouldémé is the French name for Wuzlam.

⁸ Mbremé is one of five dialects of Pelasla.

⁹ Jonas is mistaken in identifying the Mada phrase *ara zel* ('with the fellow') as cognate with the Zulgwa phrase *à-tà-zel* ('he/she is going to call').

¹⁰ Jonas is also mistaken in identifying *a wuran yan* (Wuzlam, ‘to his son’) as cognate with *a-kùrum* (Zulgwa, ‘you plural’).