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Abstract

The research reported here draws on a study of five teenagers from a Dinka-speaking community of Sudanese settling in Australia. A range of factors including language proficiency, social network structure and language attitudes are examined as possible causes for the variability of language use. The results and discussion illustrate how the use of a triangular research approach captured the complexity of the participants' language situation and was critical to developing a full understanding of the interplay of factors influencing the teens' language maintenance and shift in a way that no single method could. Further, it shows that the employment of different methodologies allowed for flexibility in data collection to ensure the fullest response from participants. Overall, this research suggests that for studies of non-standard communities, variability in research methods may prove more of a strength than the use of standardised instruments and approaches.

Keywords: sociolinguistics, language variation, language maintenance, language shift, social network analysis, domain analysis, research methodologies.

1. Introduction

In the field of sociolinguistics there has been, in recent years, much discussion about the research methodologies employed. In particular, issues concerning replicability and standardisation have been foregrounded in sociolinguistic research articles. In Applied Linguistics courses on research methods and at forums or workshops at conferences there has been discussion and focus on the nature of and differences between quantitative and qualitative research methods and their application in various types of linguistic studies, including sociolinguistic. This paper explores

¹ We wish to thank the Dinka participants who took part in the research. For their helpful feedback in the development of this paper, we would also like to thank conference participants at ALS 2006 and at the University of Melbourne Postgraduate Conference 2006, in particular Celia Thomson.

some of these issues and aims to show, as the title suggests, that one size does not fit all when it comes to sociolinguistic research methods and, moreover, that variability in research design and methodological tools can in practice be a strength.

2. Background and Literature Review

Issues of research methodologies have long been debated in the field of language maintenance (LM) and shift (LS). More recently concerns with replicability and standardisation have come to the fore. While acknowledging the complexity of investigating language variation, maintenance and shift based on a broad range of sociolinguistic variables, sociolinguists have at the same time advocated for greater uniformity in research methodologies. This has largely been framed within aims to provide a structured analysis of LM issues that can be more easily reproduced and compared (Li Wei, Milroy & Pong 1992; De Bot & Stoessel 2002; Stoessel, 2002; Wiklund 2002; Tannenbaum, 2003). De Bot & Stoessel point out the large number of variables (up to 33) that Fishman (1991), Edwards (1994) and others have identified that play a role in LM and LS, commenting on the problems this poses for designing statistically valid empirical research. Tannenbaum (2003) suggests there is a 'need for a standardised measure that could enable the investigation of language maintenance in a limited, detailed and subtle fashion' (p.376). With this in mind, he sets out specifically to address this perceived gap by developing a 'questionnaire that would measure various aspects of language maintenance in parents and children, viewing language maintenance as a multifaceted construct' (p. 375). However, he focuses only on parent-child interactions and he acknowledges the need to find ways of incorporating a wider range of variables than were present in his instrument.

To deal with the range of variables, the combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods is seen as particularly fruitful for this field. The problem remains in many researchers minds, however, as to how to make these disparate methodologies more uniform. In a special issue of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* focusing on social network analysis, editors De Bot & Stoessel comment, "One desirable goal ...would be to encourage a more uniform way of looking at social networks so that studies emerging in this field could be made better comparable and transparent" (De Bot & Stoessel, 2002:3).

While social network methodologies in particular have allowed for a combination of quantitative and qualitative practices to be successfully combined and in fact De Bot & Stoessel argue that this is necessary, there appears to be an underlying assumption that a framework that is replicable is, in and of itself, a desirable goal, presumably for the credibility and authority perceived to be inherent in scientifically conducted studies. However, employing standardised methodologies runs the risk of privileging methodology concerns over flexibility and complexity.

With similar objectives in mind, Stoessel (2002) designed a three-tiered approach to data collection including domain and social network analysis questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Her data collection instrument proved effective for her research aims and with her chosen sample group of ten university-educated female immigrants. However, the applicability of the instrument to other populations less tightly controlled for education levels and other variables is doubtful given the length and complexity of the questionnaires and the time required overall for data collection. Stoessel acknowledges the difficulty of applying her approach to large scale studies and suggests amending more quantitatively based questionnaires designed for larger scale studies to include a greater variety of qualitative questions.

The issue of 'standard methods' then, becomes crucial when dealing with communities in which sociolinguistic variables differ and are not easily controlled for. Replicating others' methodologies for the sake of 'standardisation' may not be the best means for encouraging complexity to emerge. The question may well be asked as to why complexity is a desirable goal. We contend that complexity is a *necessary* goal if our aim is to understand the particular circumstances and social context of a particular group, as in the case of new migrant populations.

One group whose language use backgrounds are complex as a result of being subject to extreme changes of circumstance is refugee teens. In light of their circumstances, it seems unlikely that this group in particular would be best represented by the use of standardised tools. After considering the models provided in the research literature, it was clear to us that a different perspective needed to be taken in carrying out research with this minority population. Through the development of research tools specific to the population being studied, one question kept arising. It is this that forms the basis of the current research. While the researchers discussed above have been concerned with addressing the question of what can be *gained* in developing standard methodologies, we approached the issue from a different perspective, asking instead: What is to be gained by NOT standardising methodologies?

In addressing methodological questions in bilingualism, Li Wei (2000) recommends that a study should aim to employ the best research methods 'that are appropriate for the research agenda and can provide evidence for answering the research questions' (p.481). On this basis it appears that attempts to create a uniform methodology would seem to ignore the inherent complexity of the circumstances and phenomena under investigation. This is not to suggest that there should be no consistency in methodological approaches, simply that the approaches used should be appropriate to the target group and research questions of the study and allow for detail and complexity to emerge. Drawing on the work of Davis (1992), Lynch (1996) and Patton (2002), Thompson (2006) underscores the value of a 'triangular' approach in enabling the researcher to take multiple perspectives on the phenomena being investigated and thereby arrive at more complex and comprehensive understandings. With respect to achieving this aim, the methodological approach undertaken in this study is primarily qualitative, modifying and combining aspects of several of the methodologies mentioned, in particular the triangular method of Stoessel (2002). In order to understand the circumstances that drove the methodology, it is useful to be aware of the backgrounds of the target group of the study under discussion.

2.1 *Background of Sudanese migrants in Australia*

The Sudanese have been arriving in Australia for much of the last decade and they continue to arrive as the lack of stability in their home country ensures they remain one of the government's priority groups for offshore humanitarian visas. Most arrivals to date are southern Sudanese fleeing the conflict that has displaced over 4 million of their compatriots, of whom 11% have managed to leave the country (online SAIL, 2005). At the last census in 2001, the Sudanese numbered 8000, an increase of 199% since the 1996 census, making them the largest of Australia's 'new and emerging' migrant groups (Dept. of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs cited [online] SAIL, 2005). That they constitute the largest wave of African migration to Australia to date was reinforced in a recent newspaper article where it was reported that numbers Australia wide are now at 17,000 with approximately 8000 in Melbourne alone

(Masanauskas, 2005). When results are released from the census data collected in early August 2006, we will be able to determine how great the latest increase has been.

Of the population living here, two of the largest cultural and language groups are the Dinka and the Nuer and for this small-scale study it was decided to focus only on Dinka teens. Before arrival in Australia many Sudanese families have spent several years as refugees in either Egypt or Kenya and many have spent a year or two prior to that in either Ethiopia or Somalia. Participants in this study had spent between 2 and 11 years as refugees in what we termed the *transition country* before arriving in Australia.

The impact of conflict on education has meant that currently in Sudan, only 23% of children attend school and only 10% of women are literate (online Sudanese Online Research Association, 2005), so low levels of literacy are common amongst Sudanese migrants arriving in Australia. In June 2005 a forum was held for community service providers working with the Southern Sudanese in the Maribyrnong City Council area in Western Melbourne where a substantial number of Sudanese migrants live. There it was reported that conflict in the Sudan has resulted in a complete lack of or disruption to education for many Sudanese across a range of ages and that the relatively short time – 6 months on average – spent in specialist English Language Schools on arrival in Australia was inadequate preparation for teenagers to enter the mainstream school system. Miller, Mitchell & Brown (2005) also report that Sudanese students' problems with low literacy levels, adjustment to school life and other learning difficulties are compounded by the psychosocial issues arising from the experience of trauma and that this presents particular difficulties for teachers also, even those experienced in working with refugees.

While schools attempt to deal with these challenges, other community-based programmes have begun to play a role in addressing the specific needs of the Sudanese refugee community. SAIL, the Sudanese Australian Integrated Learning Programme, is a volunteer run ESL tutoring programme which operates on Saturdays in 3 locations across Melbourne. This programme attracts up to 500 Sudanese children, teens and adults and matches them up with more than 250 Australian volunteer tutors. This weekend programme provided an ideal opportunity for us to engage with Sudanese teens to carry out our sociolinguistic study of language use and attitudes to language maintenance amongst this group.

3. Methodology

The study focused on teens within the Dinka-speaking Sudanese community based in the western suburbs of Melbourne, investigating for each individual their domains of language use, their social networks and the attitudes they hold towards the languages they speak and circumstances of use. Adult parents and guardians were also interviewed for the purpose of contrastive analysis.

3.1 Participants

In all, five teens, 2 males and three females, were interviewed for this study ranging in age from 13 to 19 years old. Four of the five teen participants were recruited from Dinka Sudanese participants attending Saturday morning ESL tutoring sessions at the Western suburbs centre of the Sudanese Australian Integrated Learning (SAIL) programme. Four of the teens had lived in Kenya and one in Egypt prior to their migration to Australia. For the purpose of this study, the term *transition country* will be used to refer to the country or countries in which the refugee

participants resided after leaving Sudan and before coming to Australia. In order to ensure participants' anonymity and to help bear in mind the features of age, gender and transition country, teen participants were coded first by letter, K for Kenya or E for Egypt, followed by 'm' or 'f' for male or female and finally the numbers for their age. Thus the five teen participants in order of age, gender and transition country are Km19, Km18, Kf15, Kf14 and Ef13. Four adults related to the five teenagers were also interviewed.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

All of the data for the study was collected in a semi-structured face-to-face interview which was conducted in English and audio-recorded. The interview comprised a background questionnaire and three methodological frameworks outlined below. In addition to the audio recordings, field notes were made on domain and social network maps. The data collection instrument was pilot-tested on one participant before being finalized for formal data collection. The four components of the final instrument developed for this research are:

1. **Background questionnaire** – This initial questionnaire enabled the researcher to ascertain details of a range of mitigating factors that were thought would influence language use. These included the range of languages known and used in the past and present by all participants, the country of birth, the number of years (if any) lived in Sudan and in other countries as refugees before coming to Australia and the self-reported proficiency levels in each of the listed languages. Data collection for this component also involved some discussion of educational experiences in all of the countries in which participants had lived.

2. **Domain Analysis** – The second part of the response form for each participant was a pictorial map of domains with English, Arabic, and Dinka listed as possible language choices along with the open category of 'other'. Comments were able to be made next to each language regarding the frequency or nature of language use in that domain as described by the participant, for example 'occasionally' or 'mixed with X' or 'just some words'.

This aspect of data collection was designed to give a broad brush-stroke perspective on the use of languages across various domains. A number of domains and their relationship to language use were investigated and compared in the analysis. The domains investigated include – home, transition country, school, workplace, neighbourhood, organizations (including SAIL, church or religious centre, sporting teams and clubs) and literary (reading and writing) if applicable, with a final category of 'other' to include any other unspecified domains that varied between individual participants.

3. **Social Network Analysis** – The third aspect of data collection involved mapping participants' social networks onto several pictograms with each one reflecting a particular domain as described in the domain analysis map. This layered mapping was designed to enable cross-referencing during the analysis phase so it could be determined what

commonalities and/or contradictions or complexities were evident in the participants' responses compared to the reported language practices of the domain analyses. In this way a more detailed micro-view of a participant's language use with different individuals in particular domains could be gained.

Within each domain-oriented network, first order contacts that constituted primary relations for the individuals were identified. Nomination of those people constituting primary relations for each participant was done in lieu of other scoring or classification methods that seek to define more exactly the degree of closeness between participants and various network members². This was done partly in view of the fact that with limited time in which to engage and interview teen participants, the more time consuming and detailed questioning involved in obtaining this information was not feasible and likely to deter teens from wanting to participate.

4. ***Qualitative Interview questions*** - The fourth aspect of data collection involved qualitative questioning of each of the participants. Qualitative responses to interviews were analysed to identify themes and patterns emerging across the range of interviews as well as to identify individual differences in behaviour and attitudes. These were then considered in light of the results obtained from the domain and social network stages.

In order to elicit participants' attitudes to the use of language and maintenance of community languages, a series of qualitative questions was prepared as a guide. While initially these questions were asked in sequential order at the end of the interview, on some occasions the interviews began with the questions when it was judged that it would be helpful to 'warm up' the participants for discussion about language. This was particularly true when interviewing the teens as it often seemed easier to get them to talk about their feelings first off before proceeding to the more technical aspects of recording domain and social network information. In addition to the set questions, the analysis was illuminated more fully by unsolicited opinions and the responses given to spontaneous questions occurring throughout the interview process. For example, on discovering that Kenyan based teens who had developed proficiency in Kiswahili were still using this language in Australia, the interviewer asked 'Why do you speak Kiswahili now that you are here?'

4. Results and Discussion

Throughout the course of the interviews, the value of being flexible with the interview format and instruments became more apparent as the participants relaxed and initiated topics of potential interest that did not fit the structure of a consecutive three-tiered approach. In addressing our research question – What is to be gained by NOT standardizing methodologies? – we will illustrate how maintaining flexibility in our research approach allowed 1) for the collection of additional data; 2) for the focus to shift in light of the new data; and 3) for novel findings to arise. These are addressed and exemplified in the following discussion.

² See De Bot & Stoessel (2002) for a discussion on various examples of social network research and different scoring methodologies employed and how these have combined with more qualitative research methods.

Data were collected in interviews with five Dinka teens. The teens are grouped in Figure 1 below with codenames indicating gender, age and their transition country. The large oval surrounding the Kenyan teens in the diagram indicates that it was these four teens from Kenya who were interviewed first. The rectangular box surrounds those teens who were current participants in the SAIL programme and who were interviewed in that setting. The dialogue boxes indicate comments made by some of the teens at various stages during the interview process.

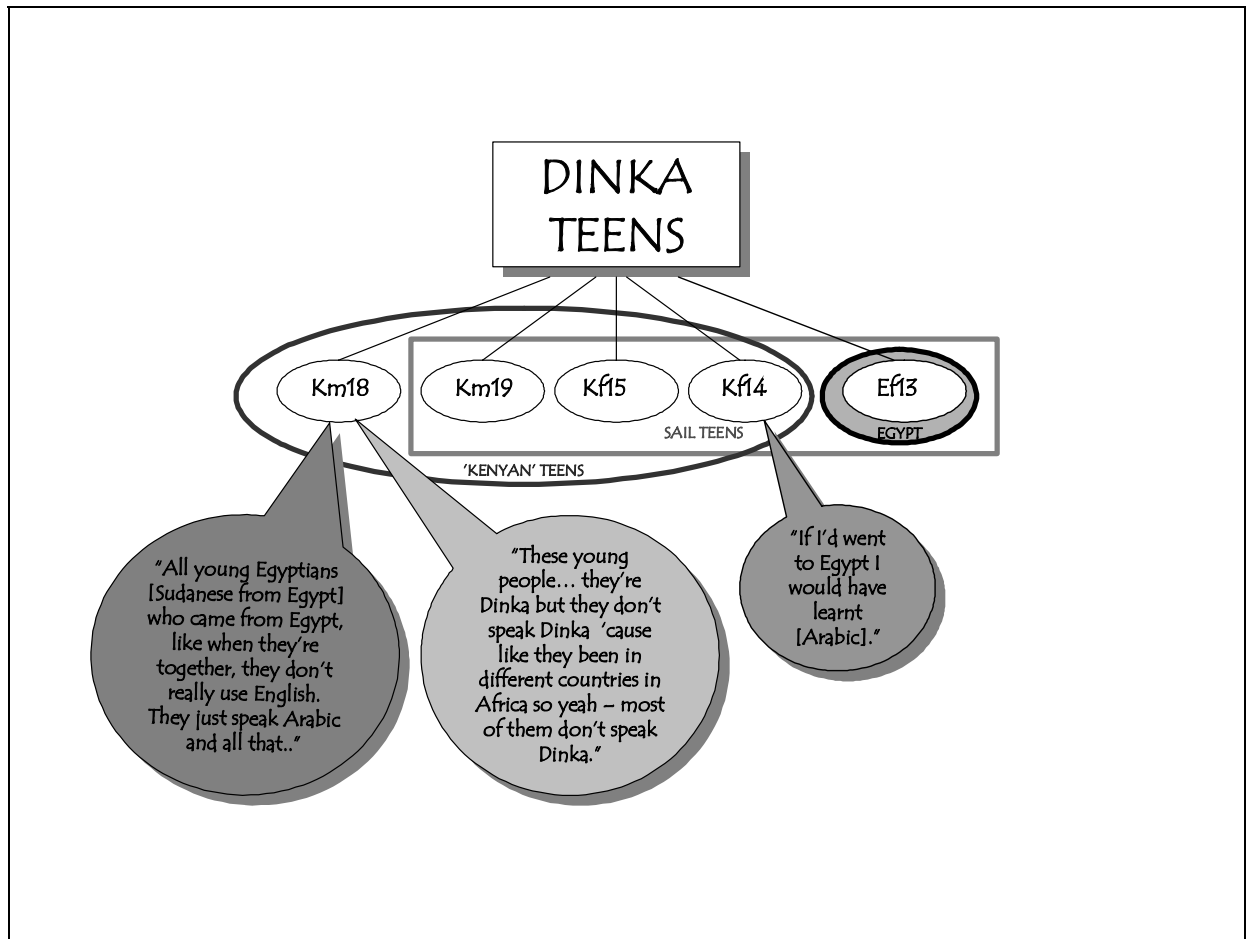


Figure 1. Study participants' comments on transition country effects on language use

Figure 1 above illustrates the way in which unexpected information came to light by virtue of the flexible format which shaped the progression of the study. In the first four participant interviews, it was discovered that the teens had all lived in Kenya prior to coming to Australia. Comments made by them highlighted the fact that there was an identified 'other' group of Dinka teens who had lived in Egypt prior to coming to Australia. The teens' comments suggested that those coming from Egypt were experiencing a quite different linguistic situation here because the main language spoken in Egypt was Arabic. Specifically, the comments related to the fact that teens who have been in Egypt tend to speak Arabic to each other – *"All young Egyptians [Sudanese from Egypt] who came from Egypt, like, when they're together, they don't really use English. They just speak Arabic and all that."* (Km18). Other comments relate to the effect the transition country experience has on the use of the Dinka language. *"These young people...*

they're Dinka but they don't speak Dinka 'cause like they been in different countries in Africa so yeah – most of them don't speak Dinka” (Km18). In discussion with all participants it became clear that those who had lived in refugee camps in Kenya had continued to use Dinka as the language of daily life amongst their community. In Egypt, however, families had not lived in a refugee camp but rather amongst the Egyptian population and hence had been deprived of consistent and concentrated use of Dinka. Instead they had had increased exposure to and education in standard Arabic, as Kf14 acknowledged when she stated, “If I'd went to Egypt I would have learnt [Arabic]” (Kf14).

This new information prompted a desire to recruit for the study a Dinka teen who had lived in Egypt in order to see what the differences were for teens coming from Egypt. The final participant then was Ef13 and a closer look at the complex picture of results that emerged from the interview with her serves to illustrate the benefit of the flexibility this methodology enabled.

Background information: Ef13

From the information gained in the background questionnaire, we learned that Ef13 left Sudan at the age of five and lived for five years in Egypt with her family. She and her family lived in an apartment with other families, not in a refugee camp, unlike the children who had lived in Kenya. In 2002, at the age of ten, Ef13 arrived in Melbourne, Australia as a refugee with her family where she has lived since that time. With regard to the languages she speaks and her own rating of her language proficiency, she claimed Dinka as her first language but considered that she is now only quite good at speaking her mother tongue. While Arabic is the language she reported speaking most frequently with friends, she rated English her best language for oral and written proficiency after her 3 years in Australia.

Triangular Methodology: Ef13

The chart in Figure 2 below shows Ef13's domains of language use and social networks across three languages, Dinka (D), Arabic (A) and English (E). The domain analysis is represented by the blue boxes in the diagram and contains the names of the various domains asked about in the interview, including school, family, transition country, neighbours, church, literary, SAIL and basketball. For each of these, we can see by the letters in each box, which language(s) Ef13 usually uses in each of these domains. Notable is her use of Arabic across every domain except literary as she is literate only in English. Her use of Dinka occurs mostly in her family, with neighbours, at school, and with family still in Sudan or the transition country. Of particular interest is her language use in the SAIL programme, which she attends most Saturdays. Despite this being a location where Ef13 encounters many Dinka speakers, she reports predominantly using Arabic in this domain. This can be seen by looking at Figure 2 below.

The picture of what is going on in Ef13's domains of use becomes clearer when we then examine the social network map on the right of the diagram in Figure 2 below. This social network map illustrates the range of friends with whom Ef13 interacts when she attends SAIL. The three to the right of the map (EfF1, EfF2 and EfF3) are Ef13's closest friends and the multiple lines connecting these four girls represent the multiple ties they have across a number of domains with each other. (This shows a 'dense' network grouping in which all participants know each other and interact in multiple settings.) The array of dotted lines to the left of Ef13 represent

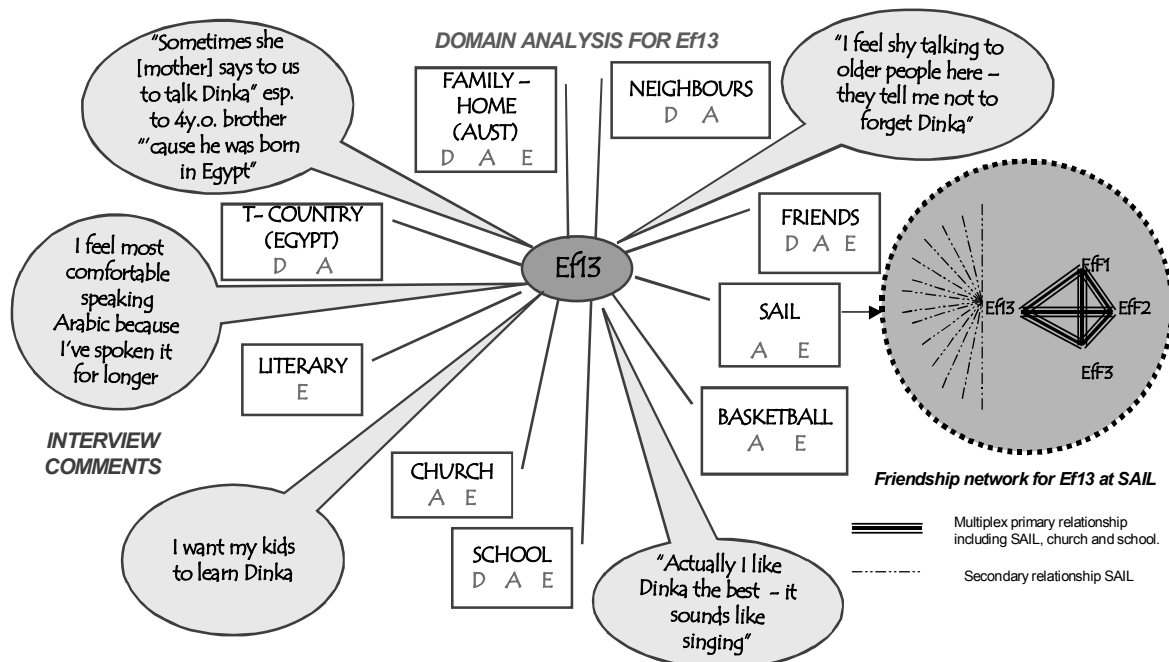


Figure 2. Domain analysis, social network analysis and qualitative question results for Ef13

the fourteen other teens that Ef13 named as 'secondary' friends, that is, people with whom she does not have a close friendship but whom she still counts as friends and with whom she interacts at SAIL on a weekly basis. With all the friends in this network diagram, Ef13 reported that she spoke Arabic. While she may on occasion speak Dinka with other children, my observations of her at SAIL confirmed the self-reports of her behaviour, and that she did predominantly interact with other children there in Arabic, occasionally code-mixing with English.

The dialogue bubbles in the diagram contain comments made by Ef13 throughout the interview, both in response to the specific qualitative questions the researcher had devised to gauge attitudes and others delivered unsolicited as part of the flow of conversation that constituted the overall data collection process. The comments are spread amongst the domain and social network data in part to illustrate the sporadic way in which this information was expressed.

Looking at the results data for Ef13, what can be seen is the build up of information coming from the three core analytical frameworks used in the study. Despite a tentative start, the chatty semi-structured nature of the data collection was very effective for putting Ef13 at ease and allowing her to talk in a relatively free and open manner.

What was most illuminating about the overall flow and tone of the interview as it progressed was the ambivalent nature of her attitudes to the various languages she used. On the one hand Ef13 acknowledged her more frequent use of Arabic, claiming that it was the language she was

more comfortable using, *“because I’ve spoken it for longer”*. On the other hand, her comments during the interview also made clear the greater affection with which she viewed Dinka, *“Actually I like Dinka the best – it sounds like singing”*. Her admission, *“I feel shy talking to older people here – they tell me not to forget Dinka”*, reveals her awareness of the importance placed on Dinka by others, particularly elders, in the community. This attitude, along with a recognition of the potentially detrimental effect on Dinka use that life in Egypt has had, is present in her mother’s directive to Efl3 and her siblings to speak Dinka to their 4 year old brother, *“cause he was born in Egypt”*. In view of this comment, it was also interesting to hear that despite her own reported declining use of Dinka, Efl3 was unequivocal in her view that it was very important that her future children also be able to speak Dinka.

Overall, we have demonstrated that creating tools that are open to modification and variable use means a researcher can accommodate the needs and circumstances of the target group, in our case Dinka teens who arrived in Australia as refugees, as well as for individual participants within that group.

4.1 Implications for research methods

Let us now look again at why the chosen research methods worked with the Dinka teens. There were several motivations for combining these tools and working with them simultaneously in a face-to-face interview. Firstly, this approach was designed to facilitate a more natural conversational flow that would help establish a rapport between the researcher and the participants in what for logistical reasons associated with the nature of the SAIL program could only be a relatively brief encounter. Secondly, a one-off interview was designed to make the process less intimidating and less arduous for participants than it was felt longer questionnaires and other data collection instruments used in previous studies were likely to do. For this reason, research approaches and instruments from previous studies were modified and the most suitable elements chosen with characteristics of the sample group taken into consideration. Primary amongst these were the potentially variable literacy levels of prospective interviewees which background research had highlighted as a likely issue, thus making an oral interview the most suitable format.

5. Concluding remarks

We’ve shown throughout this paper that variability in research design and flexibility in methodology are strengths in working with non-standard communities. We now return to our overall research question: what is to be gained by NOT standardizing methodologies? In this sociolinguistic study of a group of Sudanese teens, the flexible design and use of research methods and instruments has enabled the complexity of the target group’s linguistic situation to be drawn out. The contention of this paper is simple, but one that seems often to be overridden by the concern that researchers sometimes have with making the research process easily comparable across studies. It is reasonable to acknowledge that standardisation and replicability may at times be desirable, as in the case of large-scale studies. However, it is equally clear from the plethora of previous research that what distinguishes sociolinguistic studies is their focus on the multitude of factors that may influence language behaviour and attitudes. Attempting to devise a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach is not only extraordinarily difficult, but ultimately counterproductive as it diminishes the richness of the diversity we are attempting to explore.

What we are arguing is that in many circumstances, it may be necessary to forego our own desire as researchers to have a methodological model that can be easily replicated and compared elsewhere for the benefits of delving deep to understand the complexity of a particular group in a particular set of circumstances.

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