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2018

Linguistic Imperialism in Post-Colonial Ghana: Access to Written News Media in the Local Languages

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Citation of this paper:

Bergen, Rikki N., "Linguistic Imperialism in Post-Colonial Ghana: Access to Written News Media in the Local Languages" (2018). *Anthropology Presentations*. 11.
<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/anthropres/11>

250855816

Anthro 4412

Tania Granadillo

Final Essay

April 18th, 2018

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Linguistic Imperialism in Post-Colonial Ghana:

Access to Written News Media in the Local Languages

Before delving into the content, it is crucial that I first acknowledge the limited perspective that I am able to offer to this discourse. Despite extraneous research into the subject, I am limited in terms of experience. I am not of Ghanaian descent, and while I have visited the country – my visit was limited and my experience does not compare to that of the individuals and communities living these realities everyday. I enter this conversation from a position of privilege, for as an anglophone I have always had access to materials in my native language. My background, therefore, does not permit me to fully comprehend the situation of the country nor the experiences of its people. I will however strive to do the situation justice to the best of my ability in my analysis.

Ghana is a linguistically rich and diverse nation. The number of languages spoken in the country is debated, with the highest number consistently stated in literature standing at eighty-one (Ethnologue 2018). Part of the reason for the discrepancy is the lack of clarity regarding whether different varieties of speech ought to be considered dialects of the same language or different languages altogether. Kropp Dakubu defines dialects as “varieties or forms of one language that are noticeably different, but not so different as to prevent mutual understanding” which is functional if trying to determine the genetic origins of a language, but neglects to consider the social, historical and political reasons that communities may chose to define their languages

separately (2015). This is especially important in the context of Ghana and other African nations where communities that have been separated by political borders imposed by colonisers utilize their joint language to maintain their shared history (Ansah 2014). An example is how the ethnic Ewe group is split between Ghana and Togo, although originally all members of the Ewe group lived as one ethnic group in one geographic location (Edu-Buandoh 2016). Regardless of the exact number of languages however, the languages in Ghana are not given equal social or political standing.

The local languages spoken in Ghana are linguistically organized into approximately (there remains some debate regarding several languages) six language groups. In the interest of space, only some of these languages will be able to be explored in great depth, however a mention of each of the language groups is important to fully exhibit the linguistic context of Ghana as a whole. The majority of the languages in the northern half of the country belong to the 'Gur' language group (Kropp Dakubu 2015). Until the last several decades, most of the languages belonging to this group did not have a standard written form. There are few speakers of these languages, "in the Northern and Upper Regions of Ghana there are some 2-3 million people speaking about 25 Gur languages" and they have been subject to little linguistic study (Kropp Dakubu 2015). A second language group consists of the Volta-Comoé languages. The Volta-Comoé group is home to the most widely used first language in Ghana, Akan (40%). Akan is an interesting language however as the name Akan was adopted in 1950 to refer to a collection of mutually intelligible 'dialects' including Agona, Akuapem, Asante, Bron, Fante, Gomua, Twi, and Wasa (Kropp Dakubu 2015). The decision to label these varieties as a single language however is somewhat problematic. First of all, as previously mentioned, solely considering mutual intelligibility neglects to take into

account social and political histories of the groups involved. Further, these ‘dialects’ are not even all mutually intelligible, Kropp Dakubu points out that:

For example the extent to which speakers of different dialects can understand each other is affected by distance, so that while dialects that are adjacent to each other may be mutually intelligible, such as Fante and Asante on the one hand, and Asante and Bron on the other, mutual intelligibility between Fante and Bron is very low, because they are geographically very far apart, and a Fante speaker will be right in looking on Bron as a different language. (2015)

As a result, many speakers still refer to the ‘dialect’ name when discussing the languages they speak. As far as the written word goes, “among the Akan dialects, Akuapem, Fante and Asante have different officially recognised orthographies...there is now a unified Akan orthography...that was set up at the time the name Akan was officially adopted as the name of the language” (Kropp Dakubu 2015). The next language group is Ewe. The term Ewe refers to a collection of ‘dialects’ used across Ghana and Togo that share a written standard. Ewe was used as a language of instruction by Evangelical Presbyterian missionaries in the late 1800s and 1900s, and many texts were produced during this time, however, “the original roman alphabet with diacritics was replaced by the Africa alphabet in 1930” (Kropp Dakubu 2015). Very few materials remain from either before or after the alphabet change, “only the Evangelical Presbyterian Book Depots in Ghana and Togo have kept much stock of Ewe books...the Ghana Library Board keeps none” (Kropp Dakubu 2015). The next language group encompasses Ga and Adangme. Both languages are spoken in and around Accra-Plains, and Ga is the indigenous language of the Accra area. Both languages have official orthographies: Adangme has had a standardized written form for approximately twenty

years, and Ga has been written for well over a hundred years (Kropp Dakubu 2015). Another language group is highly debated in classification, but for simplicity here it will be referred to as the Central-Togo group (though some argue that at least some languages should belong to another classification, called Kwa). There are many Central-Togo languages spoken in Ghana, but very few speakers of each. Further, “none of the Central-Togo languages are recognized by the Ministry of Education for classroom use or for publication, and none are to be heard on radio or television ... no Central-Togo language has a standardized orthography, and there has been very little independent publishing” (Kropp Dakubu 2015). Finally there is the Mande group. The Mande languages are spoken by settled communities interspersed around the country, and likely did not originate in the Ghana area but have been present there for many centuries (Kropp Dakubu 2015). The other languages spoken in Ghana are non-local languages, generally from Europe or other parts of Africa. With the complex linguistic context broadly explored, the remainder of this paper will focus primarily on Akan, Ewe, Ga, and the use of non-local languages.

Throughout Ghana, English is given a high priority as the remnants of linguistic imperialism linger, “English has become a measure for literacy and upward social mobility, thereby making it easy for some portion of the populace to be represented as ‘illiterate’ or ‘local’ while others are seen ‘literate’” (Edu-Buandoh 2016). The power that the English language holds over the local languages is high and individuals who do not speak it are systematically disadvantaged in their own country. In “Ghana, because the policy favors English, most textbooks are written and published in English rather than the indigenous Ghanaian languages, because there is a higher economic motivation for publishers to publish textbooks and other learning materials in English” (Edu-Buandoh 2016). Not only are most of the textbooks published in English, but as are most of the news media.

Prior to independence, several newspapers published by Christian missionaries were available in local languages in what was then the Gold Coast. The Catholic Mission founded /Mia Holo/ (Ewe – meaning Our Friend) in 1894 and /Nutifafa Na Mi/ (Ewe – meaning Peace Be With You) was published in 1903 by Basel Mission (Anyidoho 2016). While missionary publication was happening, Ghanaian individuals also established local-language newspapers in 1935 City Press launched the newspaper /Asenta/ (Akan – meaning News), two years later /Amanson/ (Fante dialect – meaning People) was published. Another newspaper, /Amansuon/ (Fante-dialect - meaning All Nations), was established in 1943 (Anyidoho 2016). Local language publications were being produced during this period by both Ghanaian locals and Christian missionaries for the Global North. “The Catholic Mission in the Gold Coast introduced the /Akan Kyerema/ (Akan Drum) in 1948 primarily for missionary activities, but it covered secular news as well” (Anyidoho 2016). The newspaper Duom (Akuapem-Twi dialect – meaning Move On) was established in 1953 by an independent writer. It was not until 1951 that the government got involved when the Bureau of Ghana Languages published /Akwansosem/ (Akan – meaning Aim of the Visit). It also produced a series of short newspapers that were adapted and translated to selected local languages and dialects. The goal of the series was to supplement adult literacy programs in local languages. These newspapers included the Nkwantabisa (Akan – meaning Enquirer about the Road Map [Direction]). /Nkwantabisa/ was published in the three different Akan dialects (Fante, Akwapim, and Asante), and had with versions in six different Ghanaian languages: Motabiala (Ewe), Lahabali Tsunu (Dagbani – Gur Language Group), Mansralo (Ga), Labaare or Labaari (Kasem – Gur Language Group), and Kakyevole (Nzema – Volta-Comoé Language Group). This series of government-sponsored, rural newspapers survived from 1951 to 1970 (Anyidoho 2016). Despite the abundance of newspapers of local-language newspapers during this period, most of them did

not survive more than a few years due to difficulties with funding, circulation, printing and access to qualified writers in local languages.

Following independence in 1957, the push for news-media in local languages continued, however without the money brought in by Western missionaries, the industry struggled more than ever. In 1976 the Ghanaian government also produced /Kpodoga/ (Ewe – meaning Gong) which ran until 1983. External sources occasional helped fund local language materials “UNESCO co-sponsored other newspaper projects in Ghana as well. It helped to publish the non-professional newspaper /Wonsuom/ (Fante dialect – meaning Nation)” (Anyidoho 2016). The Ministry of Education and Non-Formal Education of Ghana also published a local-language newspaper, Atumpani (Ewe – meaning Talking Drum) in 1989. The goal of this paper was to help enhance literacy amongst adults aged fifty and older, who had not obtained sufficient English language education in childhood and an equivalent of the newspaper was also published in Asante-Twi. From 2001 until 2004, another missionary-initiated newspaper, Midim (Ewe – meaning Seek Me), was published. Even with a decent number of local language materials at this time, the readership is lowering due to lack of literacy in those languages. With English being the medium of instruction in schools, local languages are suffering (Opoku-Amankwa 2009). In 2005, an unnamed editor of the Graphic Corporation revealed that the Daily Graphic (the only nationally-distributed newspaper in the country) produced on average about 90,000 copies during peak periods such as electoral campaigns. The Daily Graphic “circulated about 4000 copies in the Volta Region, where Kpodoga, Midim, the Ghanaian Times, the Daily Guide, and other newspapers also circulated. During the same period, Kpodoga and Midim circulated only 1000 copies each within the same region” (Anyidoho 2016). Slowly, due to an increased lack of funding, local language newspapers became fewer and fewer throughout the country.

According to the National Media Commission, as of 2006 Ghana had 106 registered newspapers (although the number has surely changed since then, the public information has not since been updated). At that time, all 106 of those recognized newspapers were published in English (Kafewo 2006). The following year however, a Ewe language newspaper was supposed to be launched in the capital of the Volta Region entitled /Nutifafa/. The paper was said to be published quarterly and to cover topics including religion and social issues. Since the original announcement was made by the Ghana News Agency, however, nothing has been said about whether or not the paper was actually published. Though the focus of this paper was on a limited number of languages, it is worth noting that no written news appears to have been published in other languages in recent year (at least not by “registered” newspapers).

The lack of access to local-language materials disproportionately disadvantages certain populations. Individuals living in Northern communities where the poverty rate is higher and the access to schooling is more difficult are less likely to have a solid grasp of the English-language needed to understand the multitude of news-media published in the language (Ansah 2014). Due to the difficulties associated with frequent travel, Ghana is organized by ethnic and religious groups and therefore limiting the understanding of certain geographical locations very specifically limits certain populations and communities. Further, as girls are less likely to have access to formal schooling in Ghana, they are also less likely to have an understanding of the English language. The cost of newspapers has also gone up, reaching GH¢2.50 a copy, turning the prospect of buying a newspaper into a luxury for many. As Yeboah-Afari argues “in our context, in the African situation, affordability of newspapers needs to be seen as another side of access to information and a fundamental right” (2016). The right to understand what is happening in ones own country should be afforded everyone.

Words: 2163

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