

Language Maintenance and Shift in Dilling and Khartoum

Abstract

This paper investigates the process of language maintenance and language shift among ethnic minority groups living in Dilling city, the Nuba Mountains, and Khartoum, the capital city of Sudan. A 22-item questionnaire was used to collect data on language proficiency, language use, and language attitude. The results show that a considerable number of younger-generation migrants have adopted Arabic as their primary language. Arabic was also used predominantly in most domains of communication. Although many respondents showed a positive attitude to their ethnic languages, they actually did not make any efforts to maintain them. The analysis suggests that language shift to Arabic in Dilling is more pronounced than that in Khartoum. The main reason behind this difference is that a significant portion of the sample population in Khartoum belongs to the Southern groups who proved to be bigger in size, more homogeneous, and highly proud of their ethnic and cultural identity. Another possible reason is that while ethnic individuals from the same groups tend to live together in certain areas in Khartoum, those in Dilling live in scattered areas around the city.

Introduction

Holmes (2000) contends that language shift tends to be slower among communities where a minority language is highly valued. That is, positive attitudes toward a language will help its speakers make every effort to maintain it. Negative attitudes, on the other hand, may lead to lack of such efforts and consequently accelerate the process of language shift toward the dominant language. This assumption has been confirmed by Slavik (2001) who found a strong correlation between negative attitudes towards Maltese and rapid shift to English among Maltese migrants in Canada. Studies on language attitudes in the Sudanese context indicate that ethnic migrants in Khartoum are undergoing a significant shift to Arabic in spite of the positive attitudes they hold toward their own languages (Miller and Abu Manga 1992; Mugaddam 2005). Positive attitudes toward a language, then, do not necessarily lead to maintenance efforts (Fasold 1987; Fishman 1972).

Negative attitudes appear to have played an important role in the endangerment of many African languages. The introduction of European languages such as English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese in Africa was associated with the demoralizing conditions of master and servant, superior and inferior social interaction (Adegbija 1984). This situation was reflected in the status of African languages classifying them as the languages of slaves and poverty against the languages of power and high prestige, the European languages. Accordingly, a many Africans were forced to look down on their languages and learn the European ones in desperate search of social and economic upgrading. After independence the dream of creating a sense of nationhood in multilingual countries right has been the major concern for many countries. The promotion of a national language was one of the most effective strategies to realize that dream. In order to address this problem, some governments adopted indigenous languages as national or official languages based on their roles as media of wider communication. The newly adopted policies added nothing positive as far as minority languages retention is concerned. The only difference made was that regional African languages replaced the European ones in oppressing vernaculars in a variety of African countries (e.g., Swahili in Tanzania and Hausa in Northern Nigeria).

In Sudan, the largest African country, a prolonged debate on the linguistic diversity of the country has taken place among the country's scholars as well as the successive governments, the focus of the debate being which language should play what role in the socio-economic and socio-political life of the people of Sudan. This growing concern was initiated by the widespread dissemination of Arabic and its increasing role in people's everyday life. The first reaction to this situation was made by the British colonial

administration (1885-1956) that exerted serious efforts to stop the spread of Arabic in Southern Sudan and the Nuba Mountains. In line with a general policy in a number of their colonies, the British stimulated not only the use of English, but also the instalment of ethnic languages in the educational system. In 1928 six of these languages were selected for development and use in education in Southern Sudan.

After independence in 1956, Arabic received more empowerment in the entire country. This policy resulted in a more exclusion and neglect of the remaining Sudanese languages. Arabicization of the medium of instruction in schools and universities in 1970s and 1990s, respectively, was a very strong blow to the county's rich linguistic diversity. As a consequence, people's attitudes toward ethnic languages have changed negatively. Many Sudanese see vernaculars as having no grammar, primitive, and incapable of communicating modern ideas in science and technology. This attitude together with other socio-economic and socio-political pressures to use more Arabic has convinced many ethnic speech communities to shift to Arabic (Mugaddam and Dimmendaal 2005).

With the signing of peace agreement by the government of Sudan and the Sudanese People Liberation Movement (SPLM) in 2005 ending a 22 years war, a significant change in Sudan's language policy is expected to take place. The agreement stated clearly that all Sudanese languages are national languages that should be respected, promoted, and developed. English and Arabic are named as official languages in the entire country. These developments will at least change people's negative attitudes toward ethnic languages and consequently increase their chances for survival. The aim of the present paper is to investigate language maintenance and shift in two cities in Sudan: Dilling and Khartoum.

Subjects

A total number of 2336 subjects were surveyed in Dilling City in the Nuba Mountains (1496) and Khartoum (840) respondents belonged to three different age groups: 40 years and above, 20 to 39 years, and 9 to 19 years. A respondent's ethnic identity was determined by their parents' ethnicity. Thus an ethnic Nuba, for instance, is the one who identified one or both of his/her parents as a member of a given ethnic community. While the sample population in Khartoum covers 14 language groups (i.e., Dinka, Shilluk, Madi Viri, Nobiin, Beja, Gulfan, Ama, Miri, Fur, Zaghawa, Fur, Massalit and Daju), its counterpart in Dilling registered more than 37 groups 3 (i.e., Ama, Gulfan, Dilling) of which, the biggest, were selected to represent the main ethnic groups in the city. The remaining groups were classified as others (includes groups from and outside the Nuba Mountains).

Instrument

A 22-items questionnaire was used to collect data on language proficiency, language use in different domains, and language attitudes. The questionnaire consists of three sections. The first section is designed to obtain biographical information (ethnic identity, age, gender, birthplace, education, parents' job). Section two asks questions on the language(s) respondents use in the home domain, outside the home, and on social occasions. The third section deals with language attitudes. Attitudes were determined by the extent of agreement or disagreement to statements such as the ethnic language is important; the ethnic language is attractive; Arabic is important; Arabic is attractive; that there should be maintenance of ethnic languages; that there should be a shift to Arabic. In addition, questions on the language(s) respondents prefer to speak in different domains, and the language(s) parents prefer for their children to learn are asked. For the purpose of this paper only the latter questions on attitude will be treated.

The survey was conducted by research assistants belonging to the same groups to be examined. The research assistants were selected on two bases. First, they had to be able to speak to and be understood by the respondents. In many of the areas surveyed bilingualism in Arabic and vernacular appeared to have been very important as respondents felt comfortable when giving information about their own ethnic groups to someone they could trust (i.e., from the same ethnic group). Second, they have lived in the target area or are currently living there.

Results

Data analysis is organised in three main sections: distribution of primary language, language use in different domains, and language attitudes. In this section we will consider the distribution of primary language among different ethnic groups in the cities under investigation. Table 1 and Table 2 give the distribution of primary language in Dilling and Khartoum, respectively.

Table 1 clearly shows a significant rate of language shift among the sample population in Dilling city. More than 70% reported Arabic as their primary language. Ethnic languages were spoken as primary languages by less than 30% of the respondents. Among those who reported ethnic languages as their primary languages, Ama (the largest group, with 385 subjects) was represented by 9.49%, Dilling by 4.07%, Gulfan by 5.14%, and others by 10.29%. The analysis suggests a significant language shift across the different ethnic groups under investigation. The shift is particularly striking among the Dilling group, given the fact that Dilling is being lost in its own homeland. Only 4.07% of the group indicated that they

knew Dilling as a native language. Social and economic changes in the Nuba Mountains have brought to Dilling city people from various ethno-linguistic backgrounds, thereby increasing the likelihood of the shift towards Arabic. This is because Arabic is the single lingua franca whereby these different ethnic groups can communicate, as well as the sole medium through which their children can get access to education. (All educational institutions in the city, including the university, use Arabic as the only medium of instruction.)

The table also shows that the shift away from ethnic languages increases as we move from the first to the third age groups. Arabic was spoken as a primary language by 45.30% of the first group, 67.41% of the second group, and 87.13% of the third group. Maintenance of ethnic languages, on the other hand, was reported by 54.47% of the first group, 32.59% of the second, and only 12.87% of the third. It is clear that the third age group, the youngest, displayed the lowest rate of ethnic language retention across the various ethnic groups. This is a very strong indication that ethnic languages in the area are moving rapidly towards death, as they are no longer spoken by the younger generation. While languages such as Ama and Gulfan are being maintained in their original territories, Dilling is losing ground in its own homeland, Dilling city, and hence can be considered among the most endangered languages in the region. Density of population, which was found to have played a decisive role in language maintenance in a number of earlier studies (Al-Khatib 2001; Dorian 1983; Miller and Abu Manga 1992; Mugaddam 2002), proved to be of no help in this particular context. The Arabic-medium education, and the multilingualism in which Arabic is the only available lingua franca, must have had the lion's share in the process of language shift in Dilling city.

Similar rate of language shift appeared to have taken place in Khartoum among certain Nuba groups as well as Northern and Darfurian ones as suggested by Table 2.

As Table 2 shows, the shift to Arabic differs significantly from one group to another. The highest rate of shift was registered by Gulfan, followed by Massalit, Zaghawa, Miri, Dongolese, Nobiin, Daju, and Fur, respectively. The highest rate of ethnic mother-tongue retention, on the other hand, was reported by Viri, Dinka, Shilluk, Madi and Beja. A closer look at mother-tongue shift reveals a consistent decrease of mother tongue maintenance as we move from adult to children across the entire community. Language shift among children was strongly evident in Daju, Dongolese, Gulfan, Zaghawa, Fur, Massalit, Nobiin, and Miri. More interestingly, the results indicate that four language groups which took the lead in ethnic language maintenance (Viri, Dinka, Shilluk, and Madi) belong to the same geographical area, Southern Sudan. This is mainly because these groups represent the biggest population in Khartoum. As a result of the severe war in their homeland an estimated total number of four million of these southerners have made their way to Khartoum. They were resettled in separate town areas, they go to their own churches, and they send their children to certain schools. Their relatively high mother-tongue retention rates demonstrate the potential effectiveness of high population density in slowing language shift.

The table also shows that the Madi and Beja groups displayed almost the same rate of ethnic mother tongue retention although they belong to different geographical areas. Madi is doing less well than other members of the southern Sudan group, and Beja is doing better than the rest of the northern group. As for the former, the relatively small size of the group and the fact that its members live in scattered areas in Khartoum seem to have contributed to the shift it has experienced. The latter group, on the other hand, is one of the most conservative groups in terms of language and cultural identity. A considerable number of Beja-speaking communities have great interest in having the language as a subject as well as a medium of instruction in the Beja areas.

Comparing language shift in the two cities: Khartoum and Dilling, we may observe that Nuba groups in both cities tend to shift away from their own languages this is particularly evident among the Gulfan and Ama groups. The same tendency proved to have been true among the Northern and Darfurian groups. Language maintenance, on the other hand, appeared to have been pronounced among the Southern groups in Khartoum.

2. Language use

In this section we will examine language use in different domains among ethnic groups in the two cities.

It is obvious from Table 3 that Arabic is used as a primary language in the home domain by a vast majority of the population under study in Dilling (71.18%). The use of Arabic predominantly appears to be prevalent across the age groups with the largest group of speakers is the age range 9-19 years (83.27%). The results suggest that parents have given up using ethnic languages with their children within the family context. This comes in line with the finding that many parents in the present survey wanted their children to learn Arabic. Parents believe that if they continued speaking ethnic languages at home, children will not do well in school because their Arabic would be poor. In such a situation children will find very little chance to learn ethnic languages, which seriously affects the survival of these languages.

Although language shift in Khartoum is progressing significantly, ethnic languages are still maintaining some grounds. This is obvious from Table 3 which gives a summary of language use in the home domain by age. The table indicates that more than 54% of the sample population use Arabic primarily to talk to their family members in the home domain. This suggests that Arabic is used predominantly by 45.59% and sometimes by the remaining 54.40% within the home context, which is a very strong indication that language shift among ethnic minority groups in Khartoum is progressing significantly. The table also shows that the use of vernaculars in the home declines by age. Children and youth reported that they used Arabic more than adults did. In fact the use of vernaculars by these immigrant communities proved to be confined to older generations. That is, while adults use ethnic languages to communicate with each other, and Arabic with the younger generation, children and youth use

only Arabic when talking to their own age groups and Arabic and very little vernacular to adults.

While the function of language at home is in most cases restricted to family members and family business, its role in the streets, markets, and schools covers a wide range of activities. People from different linguistic and ethnic backgrounds come together and get involved in different socio-political and socioeconomic activities. In such a context, Arabic, the sole lingua franca, is expected to assume an absolute dominance of the communication events. This is clearly shown by Table 5 and Table 6 where more than 87% of the respondents in both cities reported that they used Arabic as a primary language outside the home domain. Use of Arabic predominantly in this domain is evident across the age groups. Again, the highest rate of Arabic use was reported by the third age group, the youngest.

Although the question of whether Arabic or the ethnic language is used for interaction depends on the people involved, it is obvious that Arabic is assuming the highest value. This becomes evident if we take a close look at the patterns of Arabic use in the two cities, Dilling and Khartoum, as shown by Table 5 and Table 6. By so doing, we discover that a vast majority of respondents use Arabic (over 87%) in their everyday communication outside the home domain. The results suggest that a tiny minority of the population use their ethnic languages outside the home domain. The tables also reveal that most of those who reported dominant use of vernaculars were adults. Contrariwise, the younger the generation the less the vernaculars are used. In Khartoum, for example, while children and youth reported use of vernaculars by 6%, and 7.5%, respectively, adult reported 25%. If we compare these figures with those in Table 5 (Dilling), we will discover that vernaculars are used outside the home domain by almost the same rate in the two cities. In addition, the use of Arabic and vernaculars separately indicates a consistent shift to Arabic across the different age groups.

Table 7 shows that Arabic dominates communication on social occasions. Use of Arabic exclusively and together with vernaculars was reported by 69.65% and 18.38% of the sample population, respectively. This means that vernaculars were used predominantly by less than 12% of the population (no use of vernacular exclusively was reported). Moreover, dominance of Arabic on social occasions is evident in each of the three age groups. Use of Arabic predominantly in this domain was reported by 81.62% of the first age group, 88.32% of the second age group, and 90.43% of the third age group (Arabic and Arabic/Vernaculars are taken together). The results suggest that, unlike the Oko language in Nigeria, ethnic languages in the Nuba Mountains are only minimally represented in the cultural activities organized by their immediate speech communities. This surely reflects the extent to which the people of the Nuba Mountains have accepted Arabic as the appropriate general medium of communication. In this case, people's unwillingness to use their own languages indicates that these languages have very likely lost their function as important media of communication in the region.

Given the fact that ethnic celebrations are in most cases attended by people from the entire ethnic group, the use of Arabic exclusively by 24 % and 39.9%, alongside with vernacular as suggested by table 6, is pronounced. The table suggests that almost two thirds of the sample population have been strongly influenced by the shift to Arabic in this particular domain. This tendency is especially evident among the Darfurian (i.e., Fur, Zaghawa, Massalit, and Daju), the Nuba Mountain (i.e., Ama, Gulfan, and Miri) and the Northern respondents (i.e., Nobiin and Dongolese). However, some groups tend to resist this growing role of Arabic. In the wedding celebrations, for instance, two main parties are organized. The first takes place at the bridegroom's house, in which only vernaculars are used. In the second, (normally attended by many people belonging to different groups) Arabic songs are exclusively used. Interethnic marriage plays a substantial role in the choice of Arabic in this domain. The southern ethnic groups (Dinka, Shilluk, Viri and Madi), however, use their ethnic languages exclusively in their social occasions. But when different southern tribes come together, in a religious gathering, for instance, Arabic is used more frequently as it is the only common lingua franca among these communities.

It is obvious from the two tables above that ethnic languages are maintaining more grounds in Khartoum than they are in Dilling. This is mainly because the Southern groups, the biggest in size, use their own languages almost exclusively in all aspects of communication on social occasions, which is not the case with most of the groups living in Dilling.

Language attitudes

It is well established that all languages and all varieties of a given language are equal and that no language or variety is inherently better than any other. Judgments that certain languages and varieties are more precise, efficient, beautiful or correct than others are purely social in nature and have no scientific basis. However, people's perceptions of such attributes can help shape negative attitudes towards a language or a variety and automatically influence its status as regards language maintenance and shift. In this part of our analysis we will investigate language attitudes among the groups surveyed and measure their effects on the process of language shift that the groups are undergoing. Table 8 and Table 9 summarize respondents' answers to questions on the language(s) they preferred to use in different domains; these questions are intended as an indicator of the respondents' language attitudes.

Table 2 shows that Arabic is the most preferable language across the age groups (63.7%). Preference of Arabic appears to be especially striking among the third age group (77.94%), the youngest, followed by the second (60.39%), and the first (52.65%), respectively. The results suggest that younger generations prefer Arabic more than their older counterparts do. Conversely, older generation reported preference of vernaculars more than the younger generations did. The table also shows that a significant number of respondents preferred English with members of the second age groups taking the lead (100 respondents). If we add those who preferred English (157-10.49%) to those who preferred Arabic, we will discover that more than 73% of our population do not prefer their own ethnic languages. In recent decades many of these communities have experienced increasing socio-political and socioeconomic pressures to become more incorporated into the dominant Arabic-speaking societies. Accordingly, they were willing to learn Arabic and used it widely in all domains of

communication, which negatively affected ethnic languages. The effects of such pressures extend to the language parents prefer for their children.

In Khartoum preference of ethnic languages versus Arabic tends to be higher than that in Dilling. Over 48% of the subjects claimed that they preferred their ethnic languages, while 42.21% and 9.28% of them reported preference of Arabic and English, respectively. The figures suggest that more than 51% of the subjects do not prefer their ethnic languages (Arabic and English are taken together). The table also shows that language preference differs significantly as we move across the different age groups. Children and youth seem to prefer Arabic compared with adults who showed more preference for ethnic languages. Socio-economic pressures must have played a significant role in shaping people's attitudes towards their languages this way. The fact that Arabic dominates all aspects of communication in the workplace, schools, universities, markets, etc., presupposes its mastery by ethnic migrants. Local languages, on the other hand, are no more than symbols of the group's ethnic identity.

Conclusion

An analysis of language proficiency, language use in a variety of domains, and language attitudes among different ethnic group members in Dilling and Khartoum suggests a significant shift to Arabic. Statistics on language use in the home, outside the home, and on social occasions further enhances this conclusion. Arabic was found to have replaced vernaculars at a considerable rate in all domains of communication. The analyses also indicate a strong correlation between age and shift towards Arabic, in that the younger a subject is the more likely s/he adopts Arabic as a primary language. This is because younger generations are more extensively exposed to Arabic as compared with adults. They have to use Arabic in the neighbourhood, schools, universities, markets, and streets.

The degree of language shift was also found to be different across the groups surveyed particularly in Khartoum. While Nobiin, Dongolese, Gulfan, Miri, Ama, Zaghawa, Fur, Daju and Massalit were strongly affected by the process, Dinka, Shilluk, Viri and Madi showed a significant rate of ethnic language maintenance. In Dilling, on the other hand, language shift towards Arabic was found to be consistent across the different groups investigated with Dilling taking the lead in the process. Demographic factors such as the group size, its degree of solidarity, and interethnic marriage were among the factors responsible for this difference. The effect of these factors is clearly seen in the high rate of ethnic language maintenance experienced by the Southern ethnic communities in Khartoum who live in separate neighbourhoods have their own religious and cultural institutions.

While positive attitudes toward Arabic contributed significantly to its being adopted as a mother tongue and to its predominant use in a variety of domains, a positive attitude contributed very little to ethnic language maintenance. A good number of the sample surveyed view ethnic languages as symbols of their ethnic identities, but Arabic remains for them the language of education, social interaction, and religious and economic activities.

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