

SOCIAL LEVELLING FACTORS IN EUROPEAN LANGUAGES OF SUB-SAHARIAN AFRICA: CLASS, GENDER, MIGRATION AND LANGUAGE

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Abstract: The article deals with the social levelling in European languages of Sub-Saharan Africa. The authors glance on such social levelling factors as class, gender, migration and language. The aim of the article is to show the impact of these factors on the language variation in African societies. The actual material is based on various works of French-, English-, Spanish-, Portuguese- and Russian-speaking scientists from all over the world.

Keywords: Social levelling factors, European languages, Sub-Saharan Africa, Class, Gender, Migration.

INTRODUCTION

In this work we attempt to draw together the threads of other articles of ours in the light of the depiction of the linguistic situation in the Sub-Saharan territories under scrutiny, beginning with three of the main aspects of social levelling: social class, gender and migration. We evaluate their sociolinguistic effects before moving on to issues of ideology and cultural hegemony. We aim to summarise, firstly, what can be argued from documented evidence of vernacular French, English, Spanish and Portuguese forms, and secondly, the cases where social and ideological changes have favoured the maintenance and/or valorisation of a traditional ancestral variety.

RESEARCH METHODS

Methods of the analysis are defined by objectives, a theoretical and practical orientation of the research, and a character of the presented material. In the paper the authors implied various types of the analysis: the intralinguistic analysis; the geolinguistic analysis; the functional analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Social class: As stated, many studies have had recourse to education as a social-class indicator, and the raising of levels of educational achievement since the mid-20th century can be shown to have had clear consequences for linguistic behaviour. Higher levels of educational expectation and achievement have encouraged the abandonment of traditional vernaculars and marked regional forms of French, English, Spanish and Portuguese in Sub-Saharan Africa. The social embedding of both types of variety has been shown in several locations to correlate with age,

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low level of education and often the economic dominance of a traditional staple industry (agriculture, textiles, coal), producing a high degree of class solidarity. The usage of the most recent, least well-educated generations in the same communities points at most to varieties that retain a reduced range of regional features occurring variably, although use of marked vernacular variants has in certain cases remained viable at least until the latter part of the 20th century.

Along with greater educational achievement has come an increase in service-sector employment, which even in its more modest forms tends to favour frequent encounters with strangers of various social classes, and thus to multiply occasions when a more neutral, levelled style is called for. Even in the locations referred to as examples of vernacular maintenance, signs of *moyennisation* appear.

For instance, the considerable maintenance of the traditional apical /r/ variant of French correlates with a relatively modest level of education, proletarian values stemming from the traditional staple industry and a strong sense of local identity distinct from that of the capital of the country. By contrast, increasing participation in higher education usually entails study at an institution and interaction with speakers of a less locally marked variety, one where apical /r/ and other features are likely to be marginalised. This upward drift of educational attainment is thus a significant entry point where mainstream values and practices invade local social space.

With increased levels of educational attainment comes obviously improved mastery of the reference variety, or at least an impression of this. Some education professionals argue that this sense of mastery is based on shaky foundations (Caitucoli, Delamotte-Legrand and Leconte, 2003), while recent work like Hambye's (2005) has shown that young graduates manifest what Bourdieu termed a certain *désinvolture*, seen for instance in the wider range of stylistic variation in the use of schwa, compared to older, less well-educated speakers. The emergence of new prestige stylistic features, of which the strongly articulated variant (SAV) /r/ seems to be one, is compatible with the need to mark more formal styles, and the arguable emergence of hyperstyle variables where, as Gadet (1998: 67) observes, the diaphasic aspects of variation assume greater salience. While this principle is illustrated through Baghana's work on Central Africa contries, there is no particular reason to suppose that such behaviour is specific to that country, for it is quite plausible that young educated Africans are behaving in this respect like their European counterparts although, for the moment, the data required to demonstrate this are lacking.

The generalised upward mobility of the post-World War II decades gave rise, as Klinkenberg (1992: 40) observes, to much linguistic insecurity in French, English, Spanish and Portuguese Sub-Saharan Africa, given the dominance of the ideology of the standard in the European educational and social traditions, seen perhaps even more acutely in French and Protuguses territories. Social French commentators like Mermet (2008: 204) claim that this unprecedented period of

upward mobility has now ended and as Chauvel (2005: 82ff) argues, many young people more highly educated than their parents, face the prospect of downward social mobility, higher property prices and fewer available jobs. This is particularly true since, as Chauvel cogently argues, the expansion of the public sector in the period 1945-1975 in France has left a pensions burden that limits the possibilities of job creation. Such trends are, however, too recent to reverse the ongoing trend of levelling in Africa, where linguistic divergence seems unlikely, despite other manifestations of social fragmentation, although these trends might contribute to the consolidation of differences that have been maintained in different African countries. That said, the considerable body of perceptual studies suggest that one can conceive of French, English, Spanish and Portuguese former colonies as a set of internal markets overarched by the pan-European linguistic market dominated by France, England, Portugal and Spain, but capable nevertheless of acting with some independence in their own territory. Thus, public figures can speak, although not all do, on national media with audibly local accents without the kind of social censure to which they would be subjected in France, for example.

Different linguistic markets within the same country or city may be associated with different degrees of tension, in a manner reminiscent of Labov's notion of attention paid to speech, the effect of which is measurable in style shift. If, as has been argued for other locations, destandardisation is increasing, then style shift depends on awareness of legitimised norms, as well as the linguistic competence needed to comply with them. Bourdieu claims that legitimised norms can only be symbolically contravened, as in his classic example of a mayor who switches to local patois. Such ostensible breaking of the normative hierarchy serves in fact only to reinforce it, for both speaker and hearers are perfectly aware that it is a temporary switch and that the speaker has mastery of the standard.

Gender. The 'sociolinguistic gender pattern' (SGP) (Labov, 1990) states that in the majority of cases of stable variation, men use more vernacular variants than women with comparable social characteristics. In cases where variation is indicative of change, women will usually adopt the innovative form earlier than men, irrespective of whether the change constitutes convergence to or divergence from a prestige form. These generalisations apply in western societies where gender equality and parity of educational opportunity prevail and gender roles are overlapping and increasingly converging. In societies where these conditions do not apply (in particular, if gender roles show little or no overlap), markedly different varieties may be used by men and women (as in some Amerindian tribes) or prestige variants may be used to a greater degree by men, as in certain Arabic-speaking communities where males still have greater access to education (e.g. Haeri, 1987).

Documented female-led changes in the French, English, Spanish and Portuguese of Sub-Saharan Africa largely concern cases where there is no difference between

the prescriptive norm, Reference French and supralocal French, e.g. Lefebvre (1991) and Armstrong and Unsworth (1999).

No doubt that the variant which is the most ‘advanced’ both phonetically and socially shows clearly the patterns of age and (especially) gender of interest in French, English, Spanish and Portuguese-speaking countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. Although the male informants are not behaving in a homogeneous fashion, the females are, especially the younger group, and we can suggest very tentatively, in the absence of collateral studies, that any change in progress is being led by them.

Milroy and Gordon (2003:102-3) suggest that women are capable of legitimising non-standard variants, such that a feature like the glottal stop in English may gain prestige by the very fact of entering into female usage. Although it is certainly too early to affirm this for *t*-glottalling in intervocalic position, the ‘ideologised’ character of fronted /o/, to use the term introduced by L. Milroy (2003), appears to be fairly clear.

Since all changes in European languages in Africa point clearly to advergence, it will be of interest to look at (apparent) exceptions, which Pooley (2001b) classified as follows:

- vestigial variants;
- changes towards supralocal (as opposed to a standard) variants;
- use of vernacular variants correlating with membership of social networks.

Cases of feminine vestigial variants or heavier vestigial use of a regional vernacular by women have occurred largely because of their greater longevity and their more restricted mobility in the lower strata of society until well into the first half of the 20th century.

While in African English a number of cases have been observed of women leading the adoption of changes towards supralocal as distinct from prestige variants, comparable recent examples in French are harder to demonstrate, given the degree of levelling now seemingly present in the reference variety. Studies of African varieties of English shown women leading the adoption of intervocalic glottal stops, historically a feature of London vernacular. The closest parallel case in French is the adoption of fronted variants of /o/.

In Sub-Saharan Africa there is no lack of examples of traditional communities where men were economically dominant, if at modest income levels, with as a result considerable degrees of separation between the genders. Activities like fishing (Léonard, 1998), mining (Hornsby, 2006b) or livestock farming involving transhumance (Ott, 1981) obliged men and women to live much of their lives in separate groups.

If it is impossible to tell whether contemporary variation in French will result in social divergence in the long term or differentially paced levelling, the shift

from regional languages undoubtedly illustrates the latter trend. Women, generally speaking, abandoned the autochthonous vernaculars sooner than men, for reasons which overlap with those which have been shown to correlate with differential use of vernacular European forms, many of which arose out of contact between the national and the minority language.

Urban youth vernaculars. As with Baghana's study of French Africa (2010), most studies of youth vernacular have concentrated on lexis. The way in which perceptions of the phenomenon changed over the last two decades of the 20th century has been analysed by Boyer (2001: 77) who distinguishes three periods of media coverage of the phenomenon: in the 1980s, the press referred to youth language before narrowing it down to certain underprivileged young people, and then by the mid-2000s, pushed it still further to the multi-ethnic and multilingual elements of the poorer communities, most of whom are of central Sub-Saharan extraction.

While media exaggeration and certain cinematic representations suggest the formation of a new dialect or dialects more or less incomprehensible to most of the population, the suggestion does not resist the scrutiny of accountable, contextualised fieldwork (Lepoutre, 1997: 430; Fagyal, 2004: 43).

Eastern immigration at the end of the 20th century has given rise to relatively high concentrations of poor Africans who generally form the majority of the ethnic-minority population in certain multi-ethnic areas, either in old inner-city quarters. In popular perception history can be said to be repeating itself as the better-off sections of the community leave the undesirable older industrial areas for better-quality housing in the green periurban communes within easy commuting distance, creating wide disparities of ethnic composition between these and the old industrial heartlands. This has given rise to certain sociolinguistic phenomena, at least in the popular perception, notably reverse assimilation which sees young people using Arabic words.

While the French language remains a respected, indeed a totemic institution, and is certainly less vehemently decried than other social institutions, the reference variety has undergone some degree of levelling through simplification, exemplified by the loss of distinctions such as /œ/-/e/ and /a/-/a/, and some destandardisation as described by Willemys (2007), seen most notably in the middle-class adoption of fronted /o/.

The ideology of the standard, along with the dominance of Europe in every aspect of public affairs as well as in demographic weight, has favoured levelling. What is more, France, England, Spain and Portugal remain the main source of linguistic innovation.

In some countries the transmission of such ideology and the influence of Europe countries have undoubtedly been weaker, despite widespread concerns about correctness. The persistence of old-fashioned standard forms is now plainly under

threat, even in the public domain, as is that of vernacular regional forms. African speakers may feel some pride in the way that they speak but the prestige they derive from it is largely confined to the internal linguistic market, where valorised sub-regional differences are being eroded. Internationally, all Africans recognise the extraterritoriality of the reference variety and are generally aware that their distinctive traits are hardly held in high regard by the French, English, Spanish and Portuguese. Compared to Quebec, the affirmation of prestige national norms in French Africa is weak, although stylistically appropriate practices, despite clear indications of levelling, retain some vitality and internal valorisation. While as variationists we applaud a plurality of norms and the encouragement of francophones of all regions to express ownership of their language through its variable use, we can hardly deny that the ideology of the standard and the cultural dominance of France, although not unquestioned and in some respects undermined, still face no serious challenge, particularly in Central Africa.

CONCLUSION

With regard to the historical contact varieties, the ideological position of European countries in particular has softened, according some recognition as languages to traditional dialects no longer perceived as a threat to national unity. Some countries of Sub-Saharan Africa have chosen not to follow this initiative, while others, riven by ethnolinguistic conflict, dare not contemplate it. The African approaches may paradoxically have the effect of investing a greater identity value in their regional (effectively national) forms. The cultural hegemony of the African society, although unarguably pervasive, seems by contrast less of a preoccupation, yet the revalorisation of the regional languages has had the rather perverse effect of promoting artificial normalised varieties which were spoken historically.

These have the potential to alienate native speakers of the varieties acquired through family or community and now used as the principal, if now largely symbolic, focus of the linguistic aspects of regional identity; they are capable too of divesting further the regiolectal varieties of French, English, Spanish and Portuguese of their symbolic role.

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