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Multilingualism among the Mbororo of the North-West Region of Cameroon

An Overview

Pius W. Akumbu and Esther P. Chie

1. INTRODUCTION

This study examines the languages used by the Mbororo living in Badem, Kejom Ketinguh (Babanki Tungo), in the North-West Region of Cameroon, to shed light on the factors responsible for their multilingualism.¹ The North-West Region has been recognized as one of the country's most linguistically heterogeneous regions (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2019), with about a hundred languages spoken by around two million people in a total surface area of 17,812 square kilometers (UCCC 2014). Many people in this region, like in the rest of English-speaking Cameroon, are multilingual in their mother tongue, Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE), and at least one other language. The seminomadic Mbororo cattle-rearers dispersed throughout the region are highly multilingual, but no study thus far has sought to understand the conditions of their multilingualism.

Observations, questionnaires, and discussions with speakers reveal that most of the Mbororo in Badem above six years of age are multilingual in at least Fulfulde, CPE, and Babanki, the indigenous language of Kejom Ketinguh. The Mbororo hold a language ideology where Fulfulde is "primary" and other languages are learned for specific purposes (integration, grazing, trade, travel, etc.); for this reason, their children are monolingual during their early years before they begin to acquire other languages.

This study begins with some historical information on the migration of the Mbororo and the methods used to collect data. The languages used by the Mbororo are presented in section 2, while the conditions of their multilingualism are discussed in section 3. In section 4, we attempt to draw lessons from

the situation of the Mbororo for the understanding of rural multilingualism in Cameroon, before summarizing the conclusions in section 5.

1.1 Historical Background

The Mbororo are a pastoralist people who live in at least twenty-three countries across Africa.² Amadou (2017) reports that the Mbororo began to enter the Cameroonian Grassfields in the 1910s, driven by their continuous search for pastureland. They left northern Nigeria in the early nineteenth century, slowly migrating to the east and the south. Their movements were guided by ecological and political considerations, with the central goal of sustaining their pastoral economy. Because the western Grassfields provided exceptionally favorable conditions that promoted the growth of their herds, many families settled in this area. The Mbororo live in an isolated way in small remote communities and have frequently come into conflict with their majority host communities, who despise them as illegal immigrants or land-grabbing invaders. This has resulted in conflicts between the indigenous farmers and the Mbororo graziers, which in some cases have led to exploitation, oppression, harassment, and humiliation of Mbororo people.

The village of Kejom Ketinguh (see figure 1.1) was originally inhabited only by the Babanki. In 1916, it witnessed the arrival of some thirty Fulfulde-speaking Mbororo families under the leadership of Ardo Sabga. They settled in one of the quarters of Kejom Ketinguh, along the ring road that was later named Sabga

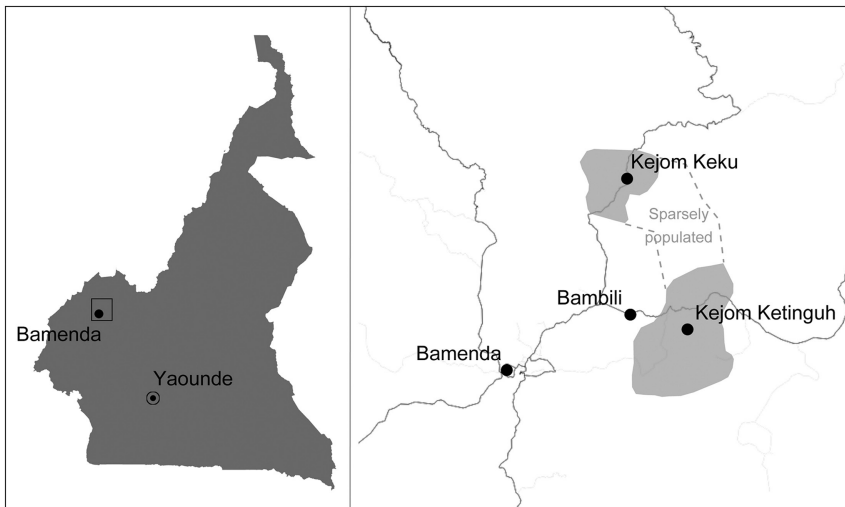


Figure 1.1 The Location of the Village of Kejom Ketinguh (the Lower Shaded Area on the Right) within Cameroon (Left). *Source:* Map created by the authors.

after the ardo. In 1940, some of the families moved to the more hilly outskirts of Kejom Ketinguh, settling in Badem, but they left in 1958 because of disputes over grazing land. They returned in 1970 to their present site but continued to perceive themselves as politically marginalized. The hostilities that prevailed between the two communities have dwindled over the last four decades, to the extent that the Mbororo now interact with the Babanki more closely and are generally considered to be part of the Kejom Ketinguh community. Many of them now own land and construct permanent houses for their families. It is even the case that one Mbororo was appointed as a member of the Kejom Ketinguh village traditional council in 2010 (Issa Bouba, personal communication).

1.2 Data Collection

In March 2017, the researchers spent two days in Badem, Kejom Ketinguh, administering questionnaires, to find out which languages the Mbororo use and the reasons why they use several different languages. The first author was born and raised in Badem, and he developed close ties with the Mbororo and interacted constantly with them until the age of thirteen when he left the area to attend secondary school. This relationship facilitated the data collection process—ordinarily, the Mbororo are highly reserved and would not easily agree to reveal information about themselves.

Of the community of approximately 200 inhabitants, 47 people—20 females and 27 males—participated in our study (see table 1.1 for a summary of the sex, age, and educational level of participants). In addition to responding to the specific questions we asked, the consultants usually stayed behind after answering the questionnaire, and we continued talking with them and hearing more about their experiences with the languages they spoke. We also

Table 1.1 The Number of Participants by Sex, Age, and Highest Level of Education

<i>Sex</i>	<i>Age Range</i>	<i>Highest Formal Education</i>	<i>No. of Participants</i>
Female	1–5	None	2
	6–10	Primary	2
	11–40	None	3
		Primary	7
	41+	None	6
Male	1–5	None	2
	6–10	Primary	2
	11–40	None	4
		Primary	12
	41+	None	6
		Primary	1

Source: Table created by the authors.

had the opportunity to observe interactions between the Mbororo and some Babanki who happened to be in the area when we visited.

During the two days of data collection, we spoke both CPE and Babanki. We explained to the participants that the data we collected were to be used only for academic purposes to help us understand the languages that people use and why they learn several languages. Most of the respondents were unable to write (because they lack any formal education), and so we read out the questions and wrote down the responses that they gave us.

2. LANGUAGE DIVERSITY

Based on the responses to the questionnaires, at least twenty languages were used by the forty-seven Mbororo consultants with whom we worked.³ There were four monolingual participants who could speak only Fulfulde; however, they were all aged five or below. A further seven participants could speak only three languages: in all cases, these were Fulfulde, CPE, and Babanki. Of these seven, four were aged between six and ten years, while the three others were women aged forty-one or older. The remaining thirty-six respondents, a large majority, use at least four languages. Indeed, four of them reported using more than ten languages, and one participant listed thirteen languages that he could understand.

Before looking in more detail at some of the languages and why they are spoken, it is worth noting, based purely on the data presented thus far, that age, sex, and level of education are all factors that affect the number of languages spoken by a member of the Mbororo community of Badem. In addition to their mother tongue, the Mbororo learn CPE and Babanki when they are approximately five to seven years old, with other languages learned after that. Since most Mbororo people speak more CPE than Babanki, we assume that CPE is learned before Babanki.

2.1 Cameroon Pidgin English

CPE is an English-lexified pidgin/creole spoken, in some form, by at least half of Cameroon's population. It is the major lingua franca, especially in the anglophone regions but also in urban centers throughout the country. A wide range of names are used for the language—Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig (2019) list Cameroon Creole, Cameroon Creole English, Cameroonian Creole, Kamtok, Wes Cos, and “Bush English” as alternatives. Kamtok has become one of the most widely used names, and Todd, Jumbam, and Wamey (n.d.) consider that there are up to five varieties, which they refer to as Grafi Kamtok (spoken in the North-West Region), liturgical Kamtok, francophone

Kamtok, Limbe Kamtok, and Bororo Kamtok (the variety spoken by the Mbororo in our study).

CPE is a broadly dispersed language, and is spoken by both the Babanki and the Mbororo. Unless a Mbororo has learned Babanki, CPE is, generally speaking, the only language he or she can use to communicate with a Babanki. Thus, a Babanki would first speak CPE to a Mbororo who is not known to speak Babanki. If, however, the Mbororo knows Babanki, they would then continue the conversation in that language.

CPE is the language the Mbororo learn first after acquiring Fulfulde. In our data, all participants above the age of five were able to communicate in CPE.

2.2 Babanki

Babanki is the language of the host community of the Mbororo of Badem. It is a Central Ring Grassfields Bantu language spoken by approximately 39,000 people, mainly in the two settlements of Kejom Ketinguh or Babanki Tungo and Kejom Keku or Big Babanki (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2019; Hammarström, Forkel, Haspelmath, and Bank 2015), but also to some extent in diaspora communities.

Those Mbororo who have learned Babanki use it when in contact with the Babanki people of Kejom Ketinguh. They consider that speaking Babanki facilitates their belonging in the community and enables them to achieve certain goals, such as hiring labor from the Babanki to work in their farms or to tend their cattle. Using Babanki also helps the Mbororo to more easily receive support from the Babanki when needed—for example, if their cattle are stolen, the Babanki can join forces with them to look for the thieves. In the event of conflict between members of the Mbororo and the Babanki, Babanki is used to negotiate, particularly when it is a member of the Mbororo that is at fault. Thus, one can say that the Babanki language serves as a uniting factor, facilitating the integration of the minority Mbororo into their host community.

All the participants aged between six and forty years claimed to speak Babanki, and we confirmed this by chatting with them in that language.

2.3 Other Languages

Apart from Fulfulde, CPE, and Babanki, seventeen other languages were reported as being used by the Mbororo who participated in our study. These languages fall into a number of different types. Firstly, English is used as the language of instruction in school and French is a school subject, and consequently those participants who had been to school were familiar with these two languages.⁴ Secondly, Hausa, Arabic, and Bamun are languages that are

used regionally in relation to Islam, and thus some Mbororo had learned them by associating with other Muslims. Thirdly, Pinyin, Bambili, Noni, Bafut, Lamnso, and Awing had been learned by those Mbororo that had lived for extended periods of time in areas where those languages are spoken. Finally, Kenswei Nsei, Vengo, Bamali, Bamunka, Nyong, and Bambalang had been learned by some of the men and boys when they moved in the dry season with their cattle to these neighboring lowland communities where there was green pasture. Many of these languages had also been learned as a result of contact with other speakers during cattle-trading. While this gives the bare outline of the reasons for the range of languages that are spoken by the participants, in the following section we consider the reasons for multilingualism as advanced by the consultants themselves.

3. MOTIVATIONS FOR MULTILINGUALISM

As has been noted, multilingualism among the Mbororo of Badem is the norm, and begins around the age of six. Before this age, children are monolingual in Fulfulde, and as they begin to interact with the broader community of Kejom Ketinguh they learn both CPE and Babanki. All participants who had attended school said they spoke English, while a few who had attended secondary school said they understood a bit of French. However, as we have seen, the participants reported using many other languages. Some reasons advanced by the participants themselves for this expansive multilingualism are presented here.

3.1 Communication and Integration

Multilingualism is common in situations where communities who use different languages come into contact, because of the simple need for communication between human beings with different linguistic backgrounds. One of the ways in which such a situation can occur is population movement, where a group of immigrants comes into contact with the existing population of a particular location, who speak another language. In order to communicate, members of each group need to have at least some command of each other's language (Edwards 2007). The participants in this study made it clear that the primary reason they saw for multilingualism among the Mbororo is the simple need to communicate with the Babanki and become part of a community where they had found grazing land and where they wished to remain.

While the Mbororo aged forty or younger are mostly fluent in Babanki (except those below the age of six), the majority of participants older than forty are not fluent speakers of this language. That reflects the fact that as the

Mbororo finally settled and were accepted as part of Kejom Ketinguh, Mbororo children could socialize with Babanki children and learn the language. A few of the older Mbororo can understand Babanki, but are unable to speak it. They noted that they did not learn it the way their children did because, in the past, the Mbororo had many problems with the Babanki, so they were unable to interact sufficiently to learn the language. As mentioned in section 1.1, over the last four decades, the Babanki have become more accommodating and have accepted the Mbororo as part of the community. This has made it possible for most of the Mbororo who are under the age of forty years to learn the language as soon as they begin interacting more extensively with the people of Kejom Ketinguh outside their own community.

The comments of the participants in our study reflect the need for Babanki to communicate and integrate into the local community. For example, one of the consultants, aged thirty-nine, said that they learned Babanki because “Dem born me for yah and I get for talk witi Babanke pipu” (I was born here and I need to communicate with Babanki people). Another, aged fourteen, said that “Nobi dem born me na for yah? Na ma kondri” (I was born here. It is my village). A sixty-year-old man noted, “Taim whe we kam for yah, we bi get for learn Babanke for sika say we bin wan place for sitop witi we kawu” (When we arrived here, we had to learn Babanki because we wanted grazing land).

The need to communicate with other people in Kejom Ketinguh and to integrate into the community is clearly the main driver for the Mbororo to learn Babanki, the language of their host community.

3.2 Grazing

As seminomadic cattle-rearers, the Mbororo move with their cattle during the dry season in search of green pasture. Kejom Ketinguh is in a hilly landscape, and the grass withers during the dry season, leaving the cattle with insufficient food. However, there are neighboring settlements in lowland areas with enough water to maintain green vegetation during the dry season, and so Mbororo men and boys move to such areas with their cattle and remain there throughout the dry season, which lasts approximately three months. During this time, they interact and communicate with members of those communities; in many cases, friendships and business networks are developed, making it possible for the Mbororo to return to those communities for visits or commercial activities.

All of this enables those Mbororos to learn the language of their temporary hosts. Twenty of the twenty-three male respondents above the age of ten could speak the language of one of the neighboring communities because they had been there with their cattle during a dry season; the other three could speak the languages of several other communities, because they

had taken their cattle to different settlements in different years. The villages of the Ndop plain, which lies below Kejom Ketinguh to the southeast—Bamessing, Bamali, Balikumbat, Bambalang, and Babungo—are the most popular dry season hosts. All twenty-three boys and men aged above ten speak one or more of the languages of these villages.

A thirty-two-year-old male consultant summed up the experience of learning languages as a result of moving with his cattle during the dry season. As he put it, “Me a di talk plenti talk. If na you you go talk da pipu dem talk. You di stay de for teri moon, you de witi dem plenti taim” (I speak so many languages. If you do it, you will learn those languages too. You live there for three months and you are with them most of the time).

3.3 Trade

Edwards (2007) points out that trade is one of the major reasons for multilingualism, and this is reflected in the experience of the Mbororo. The Mbororo depend on their cattle for their livelihood. Until recently, selling their cattle was the only way in which they were able to buy other basic needs such as food and household items. However, in the last two decades, they have been involved in farming—the main crops are beans, corn, and njamanjama⁵—hiring others from Kejom Ketinguh to cultivate their farms. Within the community, men are responsible for selling cattle and purchasing household items and clothing for the family, while women concentrate on household chores such as cooking and laundry.

A sixty-seven-year-old female participant reported that she spoke only Fulfulde, CPE, and a bit of Babanki. She said that for the forty-seven years since she got married and settled in Kejom Ketinguh in 1970, her place had been in the home. Her husband did not allow her or his other wife to go anywhere—if she left, it was to visit a relative for a specific reason (e.g., bereavement), and the only time she had gone to a market was when she was on the way to visit her sister and needed to buy something. She indicated that this explained her relative lack of multilingualism.

In contrast, many of the male consultants learned other languages while trading, often in the cattle markets. In the markets of the North-West Region, prices are not fixed, but bargained. Speaking the trader’s language is one of the factors that influence the negotiations: the buyer is likely to get a better price if they bargain in the language of the seller. It is therefore to the advantage of the Mbororo men to speak as many languages as possible to enable them trade with speakers of different languages. As a seventy-one-year-old male participant said, “If you no know da talk dem go cheat you, dem go take you planti moni” (If you don’t understand the language, you will be cheated and they will collect more money from you).

4. UNDERSTANDING RURAL MULTILINGUALISM

Early work on multilingualism in Cameroon and across Africa tended to focus on urban centers (e.g., Mc Laughlin 2009) while neglecting rural settings. Approaches to sociolinguistic studies and language documentation were also generally based on the mistaken notion that languages belong to and are spoken in specific villages or by specific tribes, and linguists sought to identify the ancestral code in each case. This left the impression that multilingualism was restricted to urban centers, whereas in fact rural multilingualism clearly existed before its urban counterpart was ushered in by colonization.

In recent years, however, the focus of such studies has often shifted to an examination of nonancestral codes (e.g., Childs, Good, and Mitchell 2014). Despite this, it seems that no study has yet attempted to understand the multilingual practices of the seminomadic Mbororo people, who do not have villages of their own but rather settle in remote areas in the outskirts of established villages, where they are considered “strangers” (Brooks 1993) or latecomers (Kopytoff 1987).

Many Cameroonians living in rural areas are multilingual, and for the Mbororo in the North-West Region, this involves controlling at least their mother tongue, CPE, and one or more indigenous languages—through the nature of their settlement pattern and their daily activities, the Mbororo have tended to learn the languages of their host and neighboring communities. Some who have been to school also understand English and French.

Multilingualism is conditioned by the language ideologies of speakers, that is “the cultural (or subcultural) system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests” (Irvine 1989, 255). In the case of the Mbororo, based on the data collected for this study, they hold a language ideology where Fulfulde is “primary,” and other languages are learned for specific purposes.

Multilingualism among the Mbororo is thus similar, in some ways, to that which is brought about by migration into urban centers and so is typical of the industrialized world (García and Fishman 2002; Extra and Yağmur 2004; Clyne and Kipp 2006a, 2006b). The Mbororo brought Fulfulde with them to Kejom Ketinguh; they acquire CPE, which is the lingua franca of the North-West Region; they learn Babanki, the language of their host community; and they also pick up any other language with which they maintain contact.

This kind of multilingualism reflects what Moore (2004) has found among the Wandala of northern Cameroon. Like children among the Wandala, Mbororo children grow up in a largely monolingual world, and languages other than their traditional language, Fulfulde, are learned later in life. CPE is required for wider communication, Babanki for integration into the host village, English and French for educational purposes, Arabic for religious

reasons, and other indigenous languages for the purposes of grazing, trade, and travel.

The situation described here for the Mbororo in Kejom Ketinguh, and indeed that in most rural areas of northwest Cameroon where the Mbororo are found, is slightly different from what Matras (2009, 48) describes for “rural border areas and ethnically mixed regions,” where he says that “languages are acquired through face-to-face interaction [and] there is more frequently an equal incentive for people from all communities to acquire each other’s languages.” Instead, the multilingualism described here is largely unidirectional: while the Mbororo in Kejom Ketinguh learn Babanki, the Babanki do not learn Fulfulde; and more generally, the minority migrant Mbororo people mostly learn the languages of their host communities, rather than the indigenous peoples learning Fulfulde.

Like in many rural African settings (cf. Moore 2004), the motivation for learning different languages and the choice of which language to learn are influenced by local ideologies, driven by the need people have to belong and to successfully carry out their daily activities. There is no indication of a bias toward some idea of prestige in the language-learning process among the Mbororo. The generalization to be made is that Fulfulde clearly dominates, and apart from that, none of the languages has any greater prestige than the others. Reporting on a similar situation for the Mambila language cluster in the Adamawa Region of Cameroon, Connell (2009) points to the fact that relationships among local languages in rural settings are not based on prestige. Instead, understanding multilingual behavior in such settings requires a knowledge of the details of the specific situation in which an interaction takes place. The assumption is that one language will be preferred over another depending on the respective domain of communication (Matras 2009, 45).

5. CONCLUSION

This study has examined a form of rural multilingualism among seminomadic cattle-rearers who live in the outskirts of Kejom Ketinguh, and showcases the pervasiveness of rural multilingualism. In total, twenty different languages are reported as being used by these pastoralist people, with four of the forty-seven consultants indicating that they were able to use more than ten languages each.

Mbororo children are monolingual in Fulfulde until the age of 5, after which other languages are learned for specific purposes. From this age, the need to socialize and communicate with non-Mbororo in Kejom Ketinguh motivates the Mbororo to learn CPE and Babanki. Subsequently, other languages are learned to facilitate their cattle-grazing activities, to assist them

in carrying out commerce, and to help maintain social ties with people in other communities. The relationships among the languages in this setting are not based on prestige, with the motivation to learn different languages and the choice of which languages to learn being influenced instead by local ideologies.

We believe that this kind of study could be fruitfully extended to other Mbororo settlements across the North-West Region, not only to determine the number of languages used and which languages are learned but also to examine why the communities are multilingual.

NOTES

1. In this chapter, we will use “Kejom Ketinguh” to refer to the village, while “Babanki” will be used to refer to the indigenous people of the village and their language.

2. The Mbororo are known by different names: Cattle Fulani, Bush Fulani, pastoralist Fulani, Mbororo-Fulani, Felata, Fula, Fulbe, and so on. Approximately 80,000 of them live in the North-West Region of Cameroon (Amadou 2017, 38), and about 200 in Badem. They are predominantly Muslim.

3. Some participants reported that they have a good command of the languages they speak, while others did not, only being able to understand and exchange greetings. As it was impossible to assess the proficiency level of each consultant to determine what would count as multilingualism, we consider everyone who could actively or passively use more than two languages in communication to be multilingual.

4. English and French are the two official languages of Cameroon, inherited from the colonial experience. English is the language of education and administration in anglophone Cameroon (the North-West and South-West Regions), while French is used in the other eight regions of the country (francophone Cameroon).

5. Njamanjama is a green leafy vegetable grown in Kejom Ketinguh in large quantities and distributed to most major cities in Cameroon, particularly Bamenda, Yaoundé, and Douala.

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