

**Multilingualism, solidarity, and magic.
New perspectives on language ideology in the Cameroonian Grassfields**

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Abstract

This paper elaborates on Blommaert's (2007) re-appraisal of current Africa's sociolinguistic reality—one in which ethnolinguistic units are recognized as fluid and language purism and denotational clarity as illusions. The case study is offered by the languages and societies of Lower Fungom, a small area located at the northern fringes of the Cameroonian Grassfields characterized by striking linguistic diversity and a language ideology which at the same time sees villages as embodying separate linguistic communities and fosters individual multilingualism. Thanks to data collected in the field in 2010 and 2012, it is shown that this apparently contradictory language ideology is crucial for individuals to represent affiliation in as many separate networks of solidarity as possible. It is also suggested that this social phenomenon is ultimately rooted in traditional beliefs in magic. The ethnographic data analyzed largely align with anthropological studies on African societies so as to allow generalization of some preliminary results and hypotheses at a supra-regional level.

1 Introduction

As to linguistic diversity, sub-Saharan Africa is suggestive of contrasting scenarios such as the huge Bantu continuum as opposed to the so-called sub-Saharan Fragmentation Belt (Dalby 1970). By contrast, when one comes to consider individuals' linguistic competence, it soon becomes evident that multilingualism is the norm in most African contexts (see, e.g., Bamgbose 2000). In fact, multilingualism is so diffuse in sub-Saharan Africa that we could legitimately regard it, with Paul Richard (quoted in Fardon & Furniss (1994: 4)), as "the African lingua franca". Although we lack documentary evidence, it is impossible not to regard this as a proof that "multilingualism has been a fact of social life in Africa for a very long time" (Whiteley 1971: 1).

Any Africanists would endorse such a statement. Yet, only few scholars seem ready to actually integrate this perspective into their own research. Linguists who fully acknowledge the potential consequences that widespread individual multilingualism may have on the definition of language communities and on the description of languages themselves are still a minority (such as, e.g., Childs 2003:20–23, 175–176).

As for africanist sociolinguists, no doubt all of them condemn the application of what Silverstein (1996) termed "the monoglot view of language in society", especially in African contexts (see Blommaert 2007 for a vigorous critique). Nonetheless, most of them have led research on multilingualism in urban environments, that is, in contexts whose linguistic ecologies have been largely shaped during colonial times and where non-African languages take on prominent social functions (see, e.g., Juillard 1995; McLaughlin 2001; Myers-Scotton 1993).¹ Rural settings, where the import of colonial legacy, at least in terms of social structure and associated ideologies, though not negligible is surely less significant than in cities, have remained nearly untouched by sociolinguistic studies except for a handful of studies, the most noticeable of which are Connell (2009), Lüpke (2010a, 2010b), and Cobbinah (2010) (we must note that Whiteley 1971, and 1974 were also led with a special attention to rural contexts).

This impressive research gap has brought to implicitly identify African multilingualism as a mostly urban phenomenon tightly connected with social processes that took place in colonial and post-colonial pe-

¹ In the few cases in which rural settings are mentioned (such as, e.g., the papers contained in the issue n. 34/1982 of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*), they have been approached in exactly the same way as cities, that is, without acknowledging any substantial difference in rural as opposed to urban contexts with regard to the development, loci, and motivations of the local forms of multilingualism.

riods. Such a distortion has meant losing sight of the historical, i.e. precolonial, roots of African multilingualism. These, instead, lie at the core of the research presented here.²

Such a teleological difference necessarily correlates with some methodological divergence between this and most of the mainstream sociolinguistic studies mentioned above. The latter, due to their urban orientation, have largely applied the same concepts and interpretive categories used in Western urban contexts. This research, instead, is directed towards exploring the potential fruitfulness of adopting a bottom-up approach: that is, I will try to show how a non-superficial ethnographic knowledge of the target communities (i.e. “bottom”) can shape the tools to be used to interpret the social motivations of language choice (i.e. “up”) so as to adhere more closely to the observed sociocultural realities.

Although this is the professed standard procedure in sociolinguistics (see, e.g., Eckert 2012), at a closer look one finds that its application in African contexts is still the exception rather than the norm. As the title of this paper provocatively suggests, this procedure can disclose (to us) unexpected perspectives. This being said, it is important to keep in mind that most of what is written in this paper reflects the current stage of development of a still ongoing research. It is hoped that in the future the working hypotheses presented here will be reviewed in the light of new evidence and of more comprehensive analyses.

2 Lower Fungom: linguistic and ethnographic overview

Located in the Grassfields’ northwest periphery within the North-West Region of Cameroon, Lower Fungom is an area around 240 square kilometers in size—i.e. about the size of the Mediterranean island of Elba (see figure 1). No less than eight distinct languages, or small language clusters, are spoken in Lower Fungom’s thirteen recognized villages, four of which are restricted to a single village.³ The resulting language density totals about one language per thirty square kilometers, making Lower Fungom one of the linguistically most diverse micro-areas of the Cameroonian Grassfields—itsself a well known area for its remarkable degree of linguistic diversity (see, e.g., Stallcup 1980: 44)—if not of the entire world.⁴

Culturally, on the surface these villages are quite similar to each other, though I have indicated elsewhere (Di Carlo 2011) a number of historically crucial differences between them. All the societies of Lower Fungom show some signs of incipient political centralization around the figure of the village chief.

In general, it must be noted that it is the kin-based “quarter”, not the village itself, the basic building block, as it were, of these societies. Quarters are residential and exogamous units, that is, all the members of a given quarter as a rule (i) are the exclusive residents of a delimited area included in the village and (ii) have to marry people coming from quarters or villages different from their own. Furthermore, quarters are corporate groups in terms of economy (i.e. members of one and the same quarter typically collaborate during farming and market activities) and, importantly, quarters enjoy a certain degree of political autonomy within the village context.

Ritual, on the contrary, seems to be the principal, if not the only, dimension of life of these societies in which the village is a meaningful social unit. Suffice it to recall here⁵ that chiefs typically represent their power by saying that it is their own prerogative to provide their fellow villagers with “chop, bush, pikin”—i.e. Pidgin for English “produce, game, offspring”—and that they are able to do so through ritual-magical means. Furthermore, as elsewhere in the Cameroonian Grassfields (cf. Fowler 1993, 2011), chiefs are conceptualized as sorts of “sacred kings” whose spiritual powers must be given by village-based secret associations.⁶ Both aspects indicate that one of the main *raison d’être* of the village, i.e. of a supra-kin group, is to be found in the localized management of ritual power (cf. Horton 1972).

² The research on which this paper is based has been supported by generous funding from the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (under Individual Postdoctoral Fellowship 0180) and the U.S. National Science Foundation (grant BCS-0853981). I would like to thank my two collaborators in the field (and students), Angiachi Demetris and Angela Nsen Tem, as well as our many linguistic consultants who made this work possible. A special thank goes to George Bwei Kum Ngong, for his fatherly collaboration during fieldwork, and to Jeff Good, for his moral and scientific support to this and related multidisciplinary research in the Grassfields. Responsibility for the content of this paper is of the author’s alone.

³ While the languages can all be reasonably classified as Bantoid (see Good et al. (2011)), five of them do not have any established close relatives outside of the region, nor can they be straightforwardly shown to be closely related to each other.

⁴ By way of comparison, the famously linguistically diverse country of Vanuatu (see, e.g., Evans (2010: 214)), has about one language per 100 square kilometers.

⁵ A detailed treatment of this topic would require more space than it is possible here: the interested reader can refer to Di Carlo (2011: 70ff.) for an overview of some sociopolitical features in the area and to Horton (1972) for a general view on the importance of mainly ritual institutions in the emergence of so-called “stateless societies”.

⁶ This is an important aspect of social life throughout West Africa, on which see Horton (1972) and, for the Grassfields, Kaberry (1962) and Fowler (1993, 2011). Di Carlo (2011: 65ff.) is the only source for Lower Fungom in this regard.

One side of local cultures that is particularly relevant for the purposes of this paper concerns the local language ideologies. Lower Fungom is characterized by an extremely localist sociolinguistic attitude (in the sense of Hill 1996): according to natives, each village has its own “talk” (i.e. language), although they would readily accept that at least in some villages people speak “rhyming talks”, i.e. closely related language varieties.

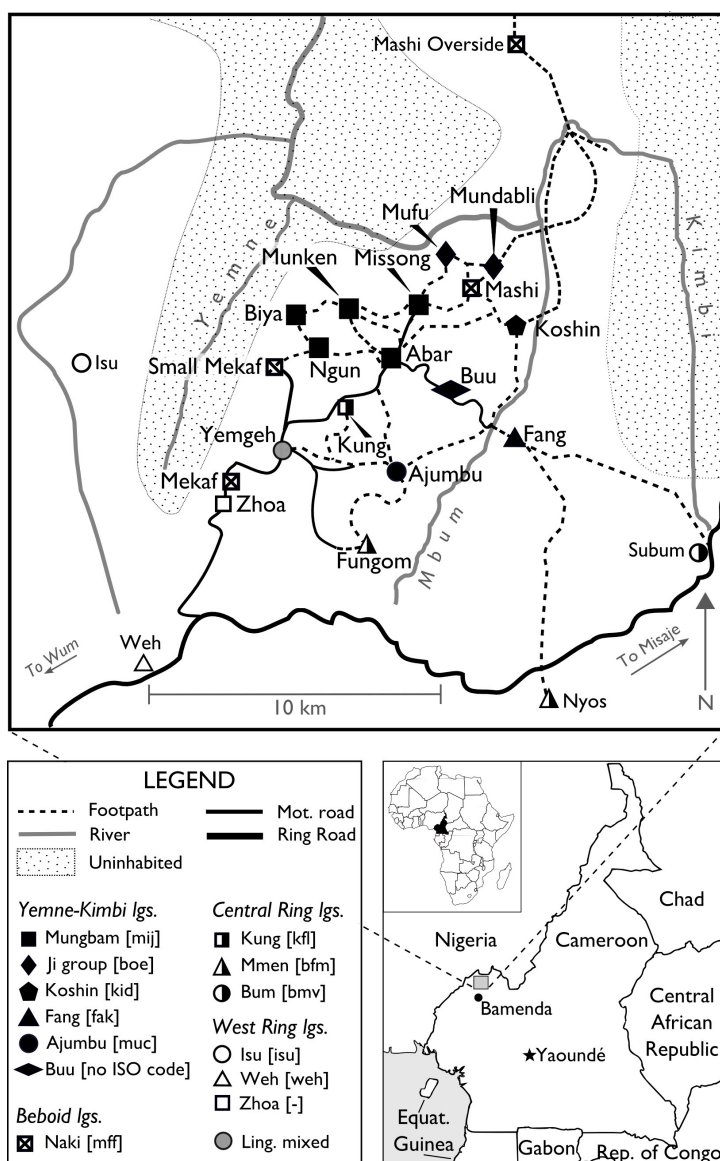


Figure 1: Linguistic map of Lower Fungom (top) within Central West Africa (bottom right).

If, in this context, we recall that eleven out of the thirteen villages have less than 1,000 inhabitants, that most villages lie within easy reach of each other, and that cross-village intermarriages are common, then we may well expect to find relatively high rates of individual multilingualism in the area. Over the past few years, different linguists who have visited the Lower Fungom area have collected anecdotal observations concerning the local rates of multilingualism that, not surprisingly, seemed to be remarkably high. These sporadic observations called for a systematic verification. The first aim of the research presented here was to raise, from a state of impressionism, the degree of our knowledge about the distribution and social motivations of multilingualism in Lower Fungom.

3 The 2012 Lower Fungom sociolinguistic survey

3.1 Methodological remarks

The data I briefly describe and comment here come from a twenty-day survey I carried out in the Spring of 2012 with two Cameroonian postgraduate students (see footnote 2). Unlike “normal” sociolinguistic sur-

veys, we did not aim to produce a statistically relevant sample. Our starting point was the well-rooted suspicion that, mostly on account of the increasing diffusion of Cameroonian Pidgin English as an inter-village language of communication (see Warnier (1979:210-212) and Menang (2004)), multilingualism in the area is an endangered practice. This led us to favor the inclusion in our sample of elderly people, especially of men, as these could be crucially instrumental in getting insights into the oldest language ideology reachable, i.e. the one we suspect used to support the development of amazingly high rates of multilingual competence in the area prior to the diffusion of Pidgin (i.e. before ca. 1950's). Time was not on our side: we could interview a total of 97 individuals (54 men and 43 women; only 17 respondents aged 40 or less) from six villages which, over a population of about 15,000 people distributed over 13 villages, contributes to the status of this survey as not being statistically relevant. By contrast, this research was designed in order to explore what sorts of norms and values structured the attitudes that the interviewees' (i.e. multilinguals') had toward the different languages they reported to know.

The tool we used during this survey is a questionnaire composed of three parts. In the first, we aimed to obtain as many details as possible about the biographical factors that could be connected with the respondent's reported rates of multilingual competence. This is to say that we included a number of questions regarding the provenance not only of the respondent's father, mother, and partner(s) but also of their parents and, if possible, also of some earlier ancestors.

The second part was intended to produce a list of all the languages or lects (see below) the respondent claimed to be competent in, accompanied by self-evaluative remarks about the claimed competence in each language or lect.⁷ The third part was aimed to get insights into the ideas the respondents associated with each of the languages or lects they claimed to be able to hear or speak, so aiming to uncover portions of their language ideology. Before proceeding further, it is necessary to spend one word on the presence of "lects", along with languages, among our targets.

As I said in section 2, within Lower Fungom we find both one-village languages and clusters of varieties. Most of our respondents came either from one of three villages where related varieties are spoken (Abar, Misong, and Munken, all Mungbam varieties) or from one (Buu) where a separate language is spoken.⁸ Due to the extremely localist sociolinguistic attitude found in Lower Fungom, we decided to capture data connected not only with multilingualism but also with "multilectalism", i.e. with the reported ability to understand and speak assumedly related varieties. Besides being suggested by the fact that our current knowledge does not allow to establish, for all the vernaculars, whether they must be considered separate languages or varieties, this methodological choice was dictated by our aim to adhere to the locals' conceptualizations of the different idioms, an indispensable feature in an ethnographically-oriented inquiry as the one summarized in these pages (see section 1). What I want to stress here is that any analysis implying clustering together some local vernaculars into one "language" has no correspondence in the locals' language ideology (see also Hamm et al. 2002: 15). By contrast, the latter prescribes the coincidence between "languages" and villages, i.e. perceived sociopolitical (and ritual) units, be they single-village chiefdoms (such as, e.g., Abar, Munken, or Ajumbu) or chiefdoms of higher order (such as, e.g., Bafut and Kom, both spoken as native languages in more than one village but located outside of our target area). These chiefdom-distinctive idioms are what we define here "lects".

3.2 Basic results

For our present purposes, and for reasons of space, it will suffice to recall the following figures concerning the rates of self-reported multilingual / multilectal competence:⁹

- 1a. There are virtually no monolingual speakers: at the very least, people speak one local lect plus Cameroonian Pidgin English;
- 2a. As an average, men have passive competence in 6.6 distinct languages, and can speak about 5 distinct languages;

⁷ Whenever possible we have tried to assess whether the respondents were lying or not and in very few cases we found positive evidence of this. Relying on self-reported information is a limit not only of this work but of most of the existing studies on African multilingualism. We plan to start dealing with this limit in the next future thanks to Nsen's doctoral dissertation on the ways of assessing multilingual competence.

⁸ The status of Buu as a separate language, a possibility mentioned but not adopted by Hamm et al. (2002: 12), is a recent development due to studies led by Doriane Ngako (Master's student at the University of Yaounde 1) and Rebecca Voll (doctoral student at Leiden University). In previous studies such as Good et al. (2011) and Di Carlo (2011), Buu was considered as a divergent variety within the Ji group.

⁹ Reasons of space do not allow adding more here. The interested reader can contact the author to inspect summarizing charts and graphs.

- 3a. As an average, women have passive competence in 5.3 distinct languages, and can speak an average of 4 distinct languages;
- 4a. As an average, men have passive competence in 10.4 distinct lects, and can speak about 6.2 distinct lects;
- 5a. As an average, women have passive competence in 8.6 distinct lects, and can speak about 5.2 distinct lects.

As for what concerns the motivations people adduce in order to explain their passive multilingual competence, all of the interviewees have reported that the main motivation is to be able to detect evil plans or gossiping that others may be making against them. Coming to active competence, we can sum up the diverse situation by saying that:

- 1b. In general, all the interviewees have stressed the fact that, by using a given local vernacular fluently with other fluent speakers, their main goal is to induce in the latter a feeling of trust, unity, and friendship. This, of course, is hoped to have direct positive consequences on their personal relations (such as, e.g., obtain favors or protection, if needed).
- 2b. Cameroonian Pidgin English is universally recognized as a very convenient lingua franca that allows anyone to communicate freely in the whole of the surrounding region at large.
- 3b. English and, to a lesser extent, French, are conceptualized differently from both local vernaculars and Pidgin English. Schooling is the only means through which one can learn them but, on the whole, schooling has remained a mirage for the overwhelming majority of people in Lower Fungom until recently. Therefore, except for purposes of communication with the very few European and American visitors to the area, these languages are typically used to accrete the perception of the speaker's high social status and, hence, authority. Interestingly, several people told us that they use English when they want to rebuke their children.
- 4b. Apart from English and French, none of the other languages is reported to be spoken in order to increase one's prestige.
- 5b. Respondents stated explicitly that fluency in a number of languages is highly prized on the account of the fact that, by so doing, one is able to "feel at home in different places". Some men even pointed out that, should their social condition deteriorate in the village where they are currently residing, the chances that they could get incorporated in other villages would be significantly higher thanks to their ability to speak fluently the local vernacular.

One of the most noticeable hints we get from this highly succinct and partial overview comes from points 1b–4b above: language choice implying any of the local lects is made irrespective of notions of prestige that are, in fact, projected only on the colonial languages. This indicates that the Lower Fungom "linguistic market" (Bourdieu 1991) is structured in a way that largely escapes the model of polyglossia scales, dominant in mainstream sociolinguistics, where each language or variety is found at a given "rank" reflecting the degree of prestige attributed to its speakers. The fact that Connell (2009) found the notion of prestige to be absent also in the linguistic market of another rural area along the Nigeria-Cameroon borderland, i.e. Mambila, is probably a sign of a common ideological background in non-urban, more traditional social contexts in opposition to urban ones in this part of the world. In the next few pages I will concentrate on the possible interpretations of these phenomena.

4 Indexes, ideologies, and multiple social identities

4.1 Essentialist vs. indexical language ideologies

The fact that prestige, except for the languages connected with the colonial era and modernity— such as English, French, and Pidgin English—is not among the symbolic assets negotiated in the local linguistic market, has tremendous consequences on our understanding of the local language ideology. Instead of the indexing of a social identity implying personal prestige, what we seem to be uncovering here is suggestive of a language ideology more oriented towards the indexing of affiliation with a given group, devoid of any behavioral or moral reflexes.

Thus far, I have not been able to find, in the available literature, anything comparable to this situation. The reason of this, I believe, lies probably in the fact that scholars, even the closest to anthropology (such as, e.g., Le Page & Tabouret-Keller (1985) or Kroskrity (2000a)), have interpreted phenomena of language choice in terms of what Irvine & Gal (2000) have called "iconization process". Through this process "[I]n-guistic features that index social groups or activities appear to be iconic representations of them, *as if a linguistic feature somehow depicted or displayed a social group's inherent nature or essence*" (Irvine & Gal 2000:

37, emphasis added). It is this assumption, apparently informing the epistemological repertoires of practically any sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists that seems to be fundamentally questioned by the preliminary findings from Lower Fungom as well as from the other rural areas researched so far, i.e. Mambila (Connell 2009) and Senegal Casamance (Lüpke (2010a) and Cobbinah (2010)). At the very least, then, our findings open an entirely new window on the social motivations of traditional, i.e. pre-colonial multilingualism in sub-Saharan Africa.

What I want to stress here is that the use of a given set of phonological variants of American English in a North American city as well as the switch to the language of the former colonial masters in a sub-Saharan metropolis are intended indexes of certain social identities only because they are underpinned by a whole system of widely shared, interconnected, and mutually conditioning assumptions about certain social groups and their distinctive linguistic behaviors. Although the standard term to refer to these acts in literature is “indexes”, these are, in fact, not “nothing more than a semiotic pointer to something else” (McIntosh 2005: 1921) but, rather, essentialist claims. That is, these acts are means through which one can produce symbolic projections of one’s (imagined) inner essence to be seen by others.

By contrast, when a young man from Lower Fungom uses his father’s language (lect X) with his paternal uncle and then switches to his mother’s native (i.e. mother’s father’s) language (lect Y) when he meets an important man from his mother’s village and, then, switches to his mother’s mother’s native language (lect Z) when he meets a man from the Z-speaking village—although everyone could speak in Pidgin English—he appears to be doing nothing relevant to the definition of his personal qualities. On the contrary, he seems to be just representing himself, depending on the context, as a member of the groups known to speak respectively X, Y, or Z. He is doing nothing more than this, at least as to the behavioral and moral implications of his language choice.

It does not seem to be too much of an audacious claim to say that here multilingual competence would allow one to symbolize affiliation with multiple groups. There are a number of social facts that corroborate this view. Naming customs, for instance, move in the same direction.

4.2 On the importance of having multiple social identities

Throughout Lower Fungom (and beyond) every child receives at birth two names: one is given by their (social) father, the other by their mother’s father. Under normal circumstances, the former is more likely to become the most used, and ultimately the only name recognized by the state. The latter, which is a real personal name taken from the repertoire of names peculiar to the mother’s agnatic kin group, is used only by the child’s maternal kin. If the child’s parents come from two different villages and, hence, are speakers of two different lects (if not two different languages according to the linguist’s standard), then the child is expected to learn both idioms and use them in the appropriate circumstances. Simplifying somewhat, the father’s language is the exclusive code to be used for communication with the paternal kin, whereas the mother’s language must be used with the maternal kin. In essence, the child acquires distinct identities with respect to each kin group and this is crucially sanctioned through both personal names and linguistic competence (see also Di Carlo & Good (2014) and Mbunwe-Samba et al. (1993)).

Existing anthropological literature (such as, e.g., Ranger (1983) and some of the works contained in Kopytoff (1987a)) confirms that, far from being an isolated pattern, this tendency towards the construction of multiple identities and, hence, of creating and maintaining (often latent) multiple networks of solidarity, was common in traditional sub-Saharan African societies. Due to space restrictions I can only hope the reader will be content with the following quotations:

Almost all recent studies of nineteenth-century precolonial Africa have emphasized that far from there being a single ‘tribal identity’, most Africans moved in and out of multiple identities, defining themselves at one moment as a member of that cult, at another moment as part of this clan, and at yet another moment as an initiate in that professional guild. These overlapping networks of association and exchange extended over wide areas. (Ranger 1983: 248)

[E]ach person was attached to several groups of solidarity. Depending on the context, one expected support from each and offered it to each of them. In times of conflict, one tried to mobilize the maximum contextually relevant group. Since traditional African societies were structured in terms of corporate groups, individual survival was possible only by being under the protective umbrella of one or another such group, and the larger and more powerful it was, the safer one was. (Kopytoff 1987b: 24)

It is difficult to understand why anthropologists have rarely, if ever, considered the possibility that multilingualism (and multilectalism) could be the main symbolic means through which these multiple identities could be enacted. Even before the issue becomes scientifically verified, it is hard to dismiss the idea that there can be a strong link between this well-known cultural tendency and the diffusion of multilingual competence. Available evidence suggests that in Lower Fungom this link existed and, to some extent, still exists.

5. Multiple affiliations as a response to invisible threats

What I have outlined thus far would already be sufficient for the reader to realize that research in rural areas can potentially lead to novel—and surely more complete—views on a practice, such as African multilingualism, that has remained long known but has not been really understood by scholarship due to its “complicated” nature (Childs 2003: 175). In this last section, however, I want to make one further step in the direction of exploring the possibility of providing a system-internal account for the observed phenomena, i.e. an account rooted in what we can access of the culture-specific matrixes giving social significance to certain linguistic behaviors.

In the previous section we have seen how the development of multilingual competence can legitimately be seen as being instrumental in constructing multiple social identities. Availability of a number of distinct social identities to be activated depending on the context, anthropologists tell us, means being able to represent oneself as member of a corresponding number of (latent) networks of solidarity, a response to a need for security that was and, apparently, still is widespread in much of Africa. No doubt, as the two quotations above suggest, these “identity movements” are to be generally connected with considerations of personal interests, of more or less immediate advantage on the part of the individual. These interests and advantages can take countless forms in daily life, and it would be pointless to deal with this surface level here. Rather, I would like to briefly outline some suggestions coming from anthropological literature that offer the possibility to translate why such need for security is so present in African societies, both traditional and postcolonial.

Generally speaking, as secularized Westerners we are naturally inclined to interpret notions like “advantage” and “personal interest” mostly in material terms *tout court*. It would be a mistake to take it for granted that the same happens everywhere. For instance, in much of sub-Saharan Africa—no doubt including the Cameroonian Grassfields—local interpretations of the world seem not to admit the possibility that any given event may happen in the material world unless it is paralleled by some analog in the invisible world (see, e.g., Ellis 1999:13ff, Geschiere 1995). Tensions towards the occult and, more in general, “spiritual preoccupations” are so pervasive in African societies at large that Ashforth wrote “[n]o one can understand life in Africa without understanding witchcraft and the related aspects of *spiritual insecurity*” (Ashforth 2005: xiii, emphasis added). In other words, what these and a wealth of other studies indicate (such as, e.g., those in Moore & Sanders 2001) is that in no way can we isolate a material-only economic sphere of social life in African societies since *everything material is generally perceived as being caused or shaped by occult forces and agents acting in the spiritual world*. If so, it would be consequential to acknowledge “spiritual insecurity” a very high (if not the top) position within the individual’s list of daily preoccupations.

How can one overcome such an all-embracing feeling of spiritual insecurity? This seems to be a matter of agency: since the supernatural powers required to gain access into the invisible level of existence as an agent (as opposed to patient, which is believed to be the default condition of most people) can hardly be purchased individually, the overwhelming majority of people have to rely on the services of specialists. It goes without saying that this belief, central in much of sub-Saharan African societies (e.g. Ashforth 2005 for South Africa, Ellis 1999 for Liberia, Geschiere 1995 for Cameroon), has a direct consequence in the conceptualization of political power and of those who hold it. For one thing, if the invisible determines the visible, then who is powerful in the visible must also be powerful in the invisible, either directly or indirectly. Geschiere (1995) offers countless examples of such an assumption at work, mostly from Cameroonian contexts, and furthers the discussion so as to show that such belief may have been deeply intertwined with the development of certain sociopolitical models. Put roughly, Geschiere suggests that in societies organized politically as “acephalous” groups—i.e. where there are no social units acting corporately beyond the level of kin-based groups—invisible agents (“healers”) were for the most part individuals living outside of the society and whose services could be requested in exchange of some sorts of payment. In centralized societies, by contrast, possession and management of spiritual powers were the prerogative of the village

chief, in addition to other figures of political and ritual influence, if present. Simplifying the issue somewhat, we could say that in the semi-centralized model of political organization we find in Lower Fungom (see § 2), those who have political power are also those who are responsible for the handling of the occult within the society and, as such, are perceived to have tremendous importance for the well-being of the group as a whole.

This recalls something I said in section 2 above, when I recalled that villages are to be recognized as social units mostly on the basis of ritual, and that the chief is a sacred figure expected to provide villagers with “chop, bush, pikin” thanks to his agency in the invisible world. Seen from this perspective, village members constitute the group of people who benefit from the village chief’s agency in the invisible world.

At this point it must be recalled that the only other dimension where the village as a whole has a clear social significance besides ritual is language: as we have seen (section 2) the local ideology prescribes the coincidence between “languages” and chiefdoms, the latter nearly perfectly coinciding, in Lower Fungom, with single villages. As a result, in a context where social identity is fluid to a degree unknown to western societies, speaking in the language distinctive of a given chiefdom can legitimately be seen as the only symbolic means for representing, no matter how provisionally, one’s affiliation with that village community. Logically, this can be seen as the key way for representing (subconsciously) oneself as being part of the group that can benefit from that given chief’s protection in the invisible world. In such a cultural universe, being multilingual could grant the potential of getting the spiritual protection from one or the other chief, depending on the cases.

6 Conclusions

In this paper I have tried to show that, by approaching multilingualism in non-urban settings and following a strongly ethnographic methodology, we can uncover a completely different state of affairs than that found in cities. Absence of prestige in the local linguistic markets of Lower Fungom and Mambila (Connell 2009) stands out as incontrovertible evidence that there are still wide margins for original sociolinguistic research in rural Africa, and that its results may turn out to be highly influential also for the discipline’s theoretical advancement: I have suggested that one field where such a focus can be fruitful is research on language ideologies (section 4.1).

The inductive chain of arguments I have tried to describe here is a case in point: starting from the recognition that high rates of multilingualism are the norm in Lower Fungom and that, except for colonial languages, the local linguistic market is not informed by iconization processes connected with the notion of social prestige, I have tried to show that an authentic bottom-up procedure can reach a depth unimaginable if we were to use other, “lesser ethnographic” methods.

I am aware that, of the two subsequent interpretive steps I have proposed in my search for cultural correspondences to multilingualism, acceptance of the first (section 4) will be less problematic than acceptance of the second (section 5). That multilingualism is the major way to maximize the number of latent networks of solidarity through the construction of a set of distinct social identities, though not banal, is not only logical, but also apparently corroborated by anthropological evidence and our survey results. That this tendency towards multiple affiliations is underpinned by spiritual insecurity may look verisimilar to the Africanist, though less so to the non-Africanist. That the localist language ideology I am uncovering in Lower Fungom intersects this process and projects it on the figure of the village chiefs as invisible agents is of now appealing, at best. I hope I will have the opportunity to devote future publications to this topic so as to make it appear not only an eccentric and intriguing hypothesis, but also a convincing one.

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