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Multilingualism and Identity in Intercultural Couples: The Case of Ethio-French Couples Living in Addis Ababa

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Urban sociology reveals that one of the effects of globalization is diversity, or the change from ethnic identities to socio-cultural identities (COOPER et al. 1976; BLOMMAERT 2010). But until now, we have very few studies about how this plays out in African cities, making it very difficult to understand the impact of multilingualism such an evolution (EDGAR, 2004). In Addis Ababa, Amharic is the *lingua franca*, while other languages may be used for vernacular purposes, including foreign languages (TAMRU 2007; FICQUET *et al.*

[1] Université de Rouen (France) Project MIXCLASIS, EA 4701 (DYSOLA : Dynamiques Sociales et Langagières).

2007). Social diversity is traditionally recognized as one of the main characteristics of this capital city. Partition between private and public territories can be seen spatially and linguistically: houses are hidden behind walls, and individuals are likely to choose different languages according to this guiding principle: "Do we want to be understood or do we accept not being understood? (TAKKELE TADESSE 2004). Thus, walls cannot be taken down, but everybody can switch from one language to another for the purpose of including or excluding "others". In that way, language is a very strong piece of evidence for social movement: how does it help to accommodate individual identity as well as group membership? The perception speakers have on the status of a specific language does not depend only on the general use in society, nor on their degree of bilingualism. It is also related to the way they perceive the cultural value of those languages at the individual level (HAMERS & BLANC 2000). I do not consider here cultures as universal attributes but as discursive constructions made by the participants themselves (MYERS SCOTTON 2006; PILLER 2007).

In order to understand how people categorize their language practices and the main factors they select to do so, I undertook a qualitative inquiry with several intercultural couples living in Addis Ababa for more than 10 years. I will present here some results of a more international research currently being conducted on five different countries.[2]

The category which I employ here – "intercultural couple" – does not have a clear and objective definition. According to the different definitions, it may depend on factors such as, but not limited to, the nationality/ethnicity, the languages spoken, and the social or religious origins of the couples (VARRO, 2003). In the literature, we may find terms like: "interracial couples", "intercultural couples", "Multicultural or mixed couples", "interlingual families", or even "cross-border couples" (DERVIN 2011b). Independent of these different categories, all researchers recognize that the category is constructed by crossing two subjective perceptions: the one of the couple itself and the one of the social group they live in (PILLER 2002). So couples here not only feel "mixed", but are also recognized officially as such by

[2] Project "Mixclasis", University of Rouen - France (EA 4701) Since "mixed couples" is a sociologic category very ambiguous and often related to language practices as relevant factors, a team of 12 French researchers on linguistics has chosen a qualitative approach to understand impact of language practices on communication of couples recognizing themselves as "mixed". This qualitative methodology explores discourses and practices of couples living, in Egypt, in Ethiopia, in France, in Germany, in Tunisia.

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others. In an attempt to consider all pertinent aspects of a couple's identity in a comprehensive way, sociologic and sociolinguistic Francophone researchers in this field use mainly the expression "mixed couples" (DERVIN 2011a). Although this expression might sound a bit strange for Anglophone readers, I will use it because it is employed both in French and in Amharic, and it makes sense to all people I observed or interviewed.

All the couples who were studied in the "Mixclasis" project have been included in this corpus because of their different nationalities, and their different mother tongues. But beyond those characteristics, all couples have a common factor with "non-mixed couples": the expression of identity. Thus, their bilingualism is strongly related to their identity within the context in which they live. This is the case for the three Ethio-French couples I will present here.

First, I will introduce the sociolinguistic framework of multilingualism in Addis Ababa and the variables of the interactions for those couples. These elements will provide the context necessary to understand their respective linguistic backgrounds before they met. In a second part, I will analyze their discourses collected through interviews to see how they make coherence out of the tensions between the various languages they employ in each relationship. I will then present how they communicate in French after ten years of marriage. When they met, they considered communication as a private understanding and used English. After ten years their social frame of interactions has become much larger, as they have developed multilingual skills and sociolinguistics strategies. These strategies reveal creative ways of crossing and redefining language boundaries. Finally, I will discuss the emergence of what can be called a "multilingual stance" as a modern cultural categorization.

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Urban Multilingual Context for a Qualitative Enquiry

Language in Addis Ababa: Vernacular and Vehicular Functions

In Addis Ababa, according to the last census of 2007, 70 % of the population declares Amharic as their mother tongue, while only 47 % declare to be Amhara. This result is similar to the 1994 census.

As we can see on the table below (annex 1), some ethnic groups declare being from one ethnic group while their mother tongue is not the language of the group. This tendency could increase from 1994 to 2007 for a large group (Tigrigna: - 11.56% declaring this language as a mother tongue) and for smaller groups (- 14.74%).

This evolution is not attested for all groups neither related to their size; it depends on areas, cultural beahaviors and socioeconomic interests (MIGUEL ADDISU 2014); thus, some national languages seem to be more transmitted than others. It is also true for foreign languages used as mother tongues: more people declared a foreign language as a mother tongue in 2007 than in 1994 (from 0.2% to 0.5%) but the data does not allow us to distinguish foreign languages here.

These trends are obviously related to the national linguistic policy as well as the ethno-federal organization of the country. Since they are quite different from other Ethiopian areas, here it shows the impact of migration and urbanization, noticed also in other multilingual contexts such as Nairobi[3] or towns in Mayotte Island for example.

Urban social dynamics develop a lingua franca (here, Amharic) and also more diversified language practices (variation into the same language, more languages declared also). In our case, this focalization on plurality as a sign of expressing one's identities seems to be neither favourable to the international languages nor to the languages spoken by a large ethnic group.

Addis Ababa is also a place where many foreigners coming from non-East African countries live for professional reasons. Most of them work for international structures. They need an international language at work and Amharic from time to time. Within these communities, international languages are maintained for vernacular purposes. Then languages have different functions according to the practices of the communities. The data collected suggests that the more multilingual the society is, the more a unique language is used for different functions. The multilingual couples we have observed give us a clear example of this phenomenon at a micro-level.

Toward a Dynamic Scheme of Sociolinguistics Functions

The practice of diglossia goes with modernity when we talk about couples made of an Ethiopian and a foreigner. In fact, modernity is associated with "the idea of the world as open to transformation, by human intervention, a complex of economic institutions, a certain range of political institutions. Largely as a result of these characteristics, modernity is vastly more dynamic than any previous type of social order. It is a society—more technically, a complex of institutions—which, unlike any preceding culture, lives in the future, rather than the past" (GIDDENS 1998: 84).

[3] World Urbanization Prospects: The 2009 Revision, ONU (DESA), 2009.

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Since mixed couples have to manage their identity at three levels to assure their future (the individual, the couple, the social group), they are open to transformations and they develop dynamic social postures—providing hints to the question of modernity, especially in Ethiopia.

The figure in annex 2 higlights the plurality of interactions in different linguistic contexts: everyone implied in such relationships constantly has to use different languages and different types of sociolinguistic rules and norms. How do they do this?

The social and sociolinguistic factors identified in previous researches about language practices of mixed couples are:

- **At macro level:** **a.** Linguistic ideologies in both contexts (of the two countries involved here). **b.** Socio-economic status
- **At meso level:** Linguistic proficiency due to previous use and current use of languages (including mother tongue)
- **At micro level:** **a.** Couples' perceptions of their family and social networks. **b.** Value and projects for the future (especially about children). **c.** Perception of culture and individual identity

Those factors are important to clarify because previous studies on bilingual practices showed that locutors have linguistic choice within a macro-context made of linguistic ideologies present in the living context but also in the context of the first socialization (France and Addis Ababa here) (VARRO 2003). Those factors are neither totally external nor totally dependent on personal choice. For example, language proficiency depends on the exposure to the language and on the investment in learning. The representation both partners have of their couple depends on their relations in private but also on the image they get from their respective communities. From this perspective, social actors refer to a "cultural behaviour" according to the "cultural attributes" recognized in the social context in which they live.

Corpus for a Qualitative Methodology

Through semi-directive interviews focused on linguistic biographies, each partner has explained how he/she communicates in the family and how he/she mixes with the group speaking the language of the other spouse's community. The guide below shows that a diachronic point of view was privileged to focus on the actual practices. Each interviewee answered to the following questions:

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Previous life

- Where did you grow up? Using which languages?
- How did you meet your spouse? What language did you use? How did you understand each other?
- How did you pass from this language to the current one?
- Did you learn the language of your spouse? How? When? Why?

Today

- Today, what language do you speak, how and when?
- How do you communicate with your family-in-law? (yesterday and today)
- How did/does your spouse communicate with your family? (yesterday and today)
- What type of discourse do you mainly use with your spouse? And your spouse with you?
- What language do you use when you quarrel with each other?
- How did you choose the names of your children?

Understanding of the research

- What is a "mixed couple" for you? Do you consider yourself as mixed couple?
- Was this interview interesting for you? Why?
- Would you like to add some more information seem to be important for you?

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The data examined and presented here are related to three couples who share the same sociologic and sociolinguistic profile: all couples are composed of an Ethiopian wife and a French husband. They have good income, due to the professional status of the husband. All have already one child or more. All the Ethiopian wives grew up in Addis Ababa, they spoke several languages at home but mainly Amharic. None of them are Amhara. They all learned English at school but they do not use it often to communicate. Since they are around 20 years old, they all grew up in a place where multilingualism has a positive value at the national level. None of them had contact with the French language until they met their partner. All work, occasionally or regularly.

All men grew up in a monolingual environment (in France there is no doubt about French as the only national language for inhabitants). They all came to Addis for professional reasons and they have continued to use French at work. They have learned English at school but they do not speak it well; they did not know anything

about the Amharic language before they came to Ethiopia, 15 years ago.

The names of the first couple are Gregoire and Guenet; the names of the second couple are Hubert and Bezawit; and the third couple's names are Quentin and Nahome.

The interviews show different ways of managing similar communicative situations. A significant evolution could be noticed in all the linguistic biographies. In this perspective, we will first present the initial contexts of the "love stories". We will then show how and why spouses have switched from one language to another. Finally, we will discuss the influence of the "communities of practices" on their communicative strategies. I will show how they construct a unique identity in relation to a plurality of multilingual and multicultural situations.

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Identifying "others": individual and couple-hood issues

Falling in Love: A Private Story with International Tools

When they met, they started to communicate in English as the lingua franca. Even if their communication "skills" in English could be quite different from one person to another, all of them remember the simplicity and the ease of their understanding: "I could understand easily," "It was not difficult," "I don't remember any problems," etc. They all remember that they could understand each other, whatever the subject and no matter how they were able to express it linguistically. Their low proficiency in English did not prevent them from meeting. It even made it more "special" and "interesting": since most of them associated this recollection with positive feelings, as if language contact was not a barrier between them but actually helped them to be more thoughtful to each other.

Some remember that they mixed languages. But it has been noted in other research about bilingualism, that the categorization of language use could be quite different from one person to another (BAKER 1992; HELLER 2006). Thus, Bezawit mentions that they would create a "Ketena language" with Hubert, mixing French, English and Amharic together. She is proud of it even if this designation comes from her Ethiopian friends in a pejorative way: they were not able to understand them at all. In his point of view, Hubert remembers that they used to talk in English and it was fine for communication, but more difficult when it came to cultural habits (being on time to appointments, for example).

So what could be considered as a handicap or even impossibility to communicate for some people (especially for monolingual persons), became, in this case, a creative way of building a common identity. For them, it seems that using a lingua franca was a way to develop a unique couple's identity through a specific means. Such statements can be associated with what BAKER (1992) called "bilingual creativity".

After this first phase, the interviewed couples declared they did not communicate in this way for a long time. Today, most of them have switched to French, the mother tongue of the foreign spouse, even if Amharic is also used from time to time. While they declare they use one main language, code-switching is nonetheless often used. It has a prestigious value for each partner. It is still a creative way to develop a common identity for the couple. But the organization of the languages is much more complex today because of social interactions with other people. This variable was not that important at the beginning of their "love story". Before analyzing how these social interactions, we have to understand how they switched from English to French for their private interactions.

Making sense of tension: languages and roles in groups

Wives: Active Mediators

In each couple, it is the wife who has decided to learn French. All wives mention different reasons: it could be related to the attraction of the beauty of the language itself, or for its international status, it could also correspond to a personal challenge. One wanted to discover the literature, another one to be able to communicate with French people in France. It could even be a curiosity for a new language in general. Beyond the diversity of reasons, all of them said they knew it was very important for the sake of the couple. Nahome mentioned also her children: she was afraid of losing her children by not being able to communicate easily with them; she knew that they would go to the French-Ethiopian Lycée. All mention as well that at the beginning of their relationship, when they had to mix with the French community, they felt "transparent", "stupid", or even like a "vegetable", and they did not accept this role. All of them clearly expressed a paradox: it was their personal decision to learn French but, at the same time, they did not have the choice since the whole family would benefit from it. So, family is highly valued for them and they have to find their own individual position to make the family stronger.

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Husbands: Insecure Participants

Today verbal interactions are still mixed but more than 90% of them are in French. So what about the husbands? At home, husbands speak Amharic only when it is about simple things, related to daily life and they recognize it is not enough. They regret it. At the same time, they are all proud to say that they use the Amharic language in France in front of "strangers", showing here their difference.

In their interviews, all husbands remember the progress of their wives with pride. They are touched and they judge themselves badly: they said they are not "good" at learning languages, not able to learn since their wives "absorb" languages, they are like "sponges". They all say their wives have a good level in French. All of them mention the same example, with regard to their mother living in France: the first year they had to be translator and they did not like it. The second year, the wives and mothers-in-law could speak together without their help. So, in a mixed couple, the role of "translator" is important. We shall develop this point in more detail later.

All husbands mention a few common reasons: French is their work language, they are not good learners, and they are tired when they go back home, so it is difficult to speak another language. It is stated by all of them, even by Gregoire, who had taken many courses, including at university. He can write and read and interact with strangers in Amharic. Quentin is handicapped by the writing system, Hubert stresses that he intended to take an academic course but finally he did not and now his children laugh at him because of his "French Amharic style". Two of them have lived for many years with their Ethiopian family at home; all of them have French speaking and Amharic speaking friends, so they are exposed to both languages on a daily basis.

When the subject of the interview shifted to the Amharic language use, discourses turned out to be really different within the husbands' group, but also between partners. They all have created different types of sociolinguistic accommodation. All husbands recognize they do not participate enough, and they provide different reasons for that. Quentin relates it to "gender" difference: conversations between women are not interesting for him. And he respects also his wife's privacy. Hubert insists on the fact that he needs translation and translation does not allow him to follow the conversation "in time", so he prefers not to be involved unless he leads the conversation. Gregoire notices that he could follow them a few years ago but now he is a bit "lazy" and he does not know why. This expression of "linguistic insecurity" is

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recurrent although they mention that they can follow up to 80% of the exchange when the conversation turns to subjects they are familiar with.

Wives and Husbands: Common Accommodations to the Group

Their wives express their regrets but at different levels; and they have developed different strategies to accommodate to this.

Guenet, Gregoire' wife, is proud of his knowledge of Amharic. She first translates and then she directly talks to him in Amharic in front of people so that he can answer. But if it works at the beginning, after a while Gregoire stays quiet, and listens without participating. Sometimes, he participates in French, asking her to translate. For this couple, the main criterion is the integration of individuals into the conversational group.

Bezawit, Hubert' wife, translates what he says according to the importance of the subject, so it can be few words here and there. She summarizes or even finally goes into the conversation without translating. Sometimes she changes the meaning of the sentences when she thinks it could be too difficult for Hubert to understand the cultural part of the situation. But on other occasions, she speaks in French with him in front of everybody when she knows that what she says will not be misjudged by the group. In that case, other people are not included. For this couple, the cultural part of verbal interaction is the first criterion used.

Nahome has developed her personal social life, with her group of female friends; she does not try to include him. But she tries to be present and to participate in French when French friends are with them. When they visit her family, Quentin comes with a French friend so he does not feel lonely: communication cannot be established with the entire group but, at least, there are verbal interactions. This strategy was chosen by both of them. For this couple, the main landmark for intercultural communication is to occupy or not the "communication land", to be present, whatever the language is.

To sum up, all of them are accustomed to consider communication in group as a great challenge. But women and men do not react the same way in such situations. Men expect their wives to help them (by translating, by learning or even avoiding the exolingual situations). Women are more "active": they decide to talk, or to translate, or even to develop the "exolingual identity" of the group within which they are supposed to interact.

For both spouses in each couple, the reasons of these kinds of sociolinguistic accommodations are facework, undertaken at individual, couple, and social levels together (GUMPERZ 1982). In

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order to communicate, each social actor has to challenge linguistic insecurity and identity. In this way, each couple creates its own way of making a sociolinguistic dynamic out of different languages. Skill proficiency, then, appears as the stable part of the framework but it is not the factor that will initiate / give the impulse to factor for the dynamic of the communications.

Mixed couples: Multilingual Stance and Identity

The six interviewees recognize themselves as members of "mixed couples" but do not know exactly what this kind of couple is supposed to be. They insist on the fact that they feel mixed because of the way they are seen by "others", be they French, Ethiopian, or from other nationalities. At the same time, they insist on being an "ordinary" couple in their daily life, like any other couple.

It is clear that their exposure to different languages obliges them to deal with different types of communication, wherever they are, in France or in Ethiopia. So it makes them more aware of the socio-cultural consequences of their verbal interactions. Furthermore, it impels them to give an explicit priority to the sociolinguistic framework of the verbal interaction in general, more than on the linguistic contents and forms. Thus, their conversational collaboration always involves a process of negotiation, in whichever language. That is what I call the "multilingual stance": this posture reveals an integrative communication, based more on social effects than on linguistic effects.

Understanding is considered as efficient only if sociolinguistic insecurity is recognized by the other as a base of the communication frame. Since sociolinguistic insecurity differs according to the cultural background and the social integration of each person, it is always evolving and the only way to deal with it is to accept that linguistic norms are subject to change according to social norms. We can see that this is the case, even if tensions may sometimes provoke a break up between the "community" formed by the couple and the social community, or even between the two spouses. Of course, this posture is developed only if each person involved perceives the other as totally different and completely identical at the same time. This is called "alterity" or "otherness" (KRISTEVA 1991; RICOEUR 1992). And when it comes to couples, I can also call it "love".

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Personal Identity, Couple-hood and Socialization: A Complex System

In a synchronic perspective, this study suggests that there is not only one language for one function. Linguistic proficiency is one of the characteristics of the challenge but it does not change the ground rules by itself.

In multilingual situations, languages seem not to be the most pertinent categories to describe sociolinguistic practices. At macro, meso, and micro levels, diglossia could be seen in a dynamic perspective, since the same language could be used with different functions.

For example, according to Guenet:

- The language to express individuality is **Amharic**
- The language to express differences between the couple and the group is **French**
- The language to express links with a family group is mainly **French with some Amharic**
- The language to express links with a public group as a family' member is **French**
- The language to express links with a public group as a group' member is **Amharic**

Language choices are different from one person to another. But those social functions are the same for everyone living in the same context.

Looking for a "multilingual stance" could then help understand dynamics of verbal interactions in situations of language and cultural contacts. It helps identify how people become active participants of their socialization, including languages they do not master. The issues at stake are related to the expression of identity as a member of national group, family group, and social group together.

When values differ from one person to another, or from the couple to the group, "cultural differences" are declared as "alibis" for misunderstanding (HELLER & LEVY, 1991). When both partners attribute the same value to the sociolinguistic interactions, accommodations created seem to function efficiently. Thus, dynamics and movements are enhanced at the level of the couple and at the level of the community.

At the micro-level, this research suggests that sociolinguistic accommodations are realized differently according to the gender, the sociolinguistic background, and the life projects. However, a

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qualitative approach does not enable us to know which factor could be more influential than another. With references to those couples, the main variable seems to be love, or what we can call a common life project, in which the intention of "making community" is much more important than any other factors.

At the macro-level, multilingual stances could be noticed in an empirical way in a multilingual environment, especially in cities like Addis Ababa. It is much more difficult to identify those dynamics in a monolingual context. The effects of this complex system probably depend on the linguistic ideologies and the impact of globalization. That is, then, a great challenge, since any theoretical framework is developed in a specific scientific field.

In this way, developing sociolinguistic research on bilingualism in Ethiopia could teach us a lot about language practices in different contexts. It also gives us some hypotheses concerning the change of sociolinguistic practices in Ethiopia.

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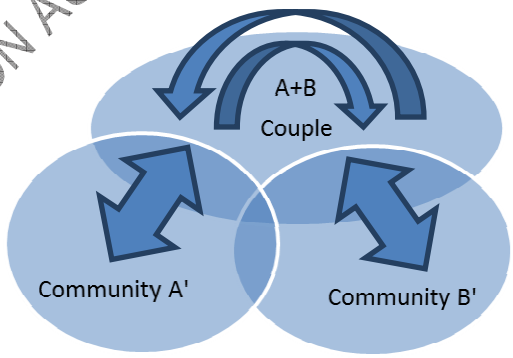
Annex 1: Table: Mother Tongue and Ethnicity in Addis Abeba (Source: CSA, 1994 and 2007)

First language declared in Addis Ababa (%)			**Inhabitants declaring an ethnic identity (%)**			**First Langage /Ethnicity**	
	1994	2007		1994	2007	1994	2007
Main L1 declared by 90 000 locutors or more.	**93,13**	**93,69**	**Ethnic groups (90 000 people or more)**	**89,89**	**89,08**	**103,60**	**105,18**
Amharic	73,06	71	Amhara	48,92	47,05	149,35	150,90
Oromiffa	10,01	10,72	Oromo	19,5	19,51	51,33	54,95
Guraguegna	5,11	8,37	Gurague	13,72	16,34	37,24	51,22
Tigrigna	5,41	3,6	Tigray	7,75	6,18	69,81	58,25
Other ethiopian L1 declared (less than 90 000 people)	**6,85**	**5,81**	**Ethic groups (less than 90 000 people)**	**10,11**	**10,92**	**67,95**	**53,21**
Foreign languages	**0,2**	**0,5**	**Foreigners (data missing)**				
Total	100	100	Total	100	100		

Annex 2: Figure: Social Groups and Verbal Interactions (Intercultural Couples)



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