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The Language of Greetings and Power Dynamics among the Babanki and Fulɓe of North-West Cameroon

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Abstract

The Babanki and Fulɓe of North-West Cameroon live together and interact with each other on a regular basis necessitating an incessant exchange of greetings. However, the two communities have distinct ways of greeting which come into contact when individuals from both groups meet. This study seeks to determine the manner in which the two cultures interact during greetings, paying attention to the influence exerted by the participants from each community. Data collected through observation of real life greeting situations in Badem, Babanki Tungo provide evidence that the larger, more powerful host community (Babanki) members tend to be controlled more in a greeting context than the minority pastoral Fulɓe group members who moved only recently into the Babanki community. This leads us to reconsider the traditional understanding that the host group is more likely to dominate and influence the new comers in situations of contact both in terms of language and culture. This study provides a new perspective to contact linguistics which has tended to focus on contact induced change on grammatical systems (Siemund and Kintana 2008) while neglecting socio-cultural changes that might result from language contact. Although this is a classic situation of a study of language in contact, a critical discourse analysis of interactions will give greater insights into language and power relations during such cross ethnic linguistic interactions.

Keywords: *Language contact, greetings, power dynamics, Babanki, Fulɓe*

1. Introduction

As it is worldwide, greetings constitute a norm and an integral part of communication in African contexts. They play a key role in the stabilization of the society and the maintenance of social relations. They tend to determine how people will relate with each other after the greeting and also foster a peaceful co-existence with other members of the society. However, greetings in any society do not only play the role of phatic communion but signal certain relations of power among the members of the society. Various studies have pointed out that greetings are not meaningless or used only for phatic communion (Schegloff 1968, Finnegan 1969, Irvine 1974, Foley 1997, Ameka 2009). In West Africa in general greetings are a type of activity in which ideologies relating to honour and status are enacted. This is especially

heightened when those greeting are from different linguistic communities and cultural backgrounds. They employ different linguistic strategies in the greetings to obtain different objectives.

The Babanki and Fulɓe of North-West Cameroon live together and interact with each other on a regular basis necessitating an incessant exchange of greetings. However, the two communities have distinct ways of greeting which come into contact when individuals from both groups meet. This study seeks to determine the manner in which the two cultures interact during greetings, paying attention to the influence exerted by the participants from each community. This is motivated by the fact that an encounter between members of the two communities is one between two different languages and cultures. It is possible to sometimes hear either Babanki or Fulfulde spoken in a greeting situation but, in general, Cameroon Pidgin English is used. It is often always the case that the minority Fulɓe who only recently migrated and settled in the Babanki community perform most of their greeting tasks, asking as many questions as they can when they meet a Babanki. This means that the larger, more powerful host community members tend to be overshadowed in a greeting context. This leads us to reconsider the traditional understanding that the host group is more likely to dominate and influence the new comers in situations of contact both in terms of language and culture. By considering the socio-cultural effects of language contact, this study provides a new perspective to contact linguistics which has tended to focus on contact induced change on grammatical systems (Siemund and Kintana 2008). The data for this study come mainly from secondary sources and from participant observation of greeting sessions during a field trip in August 2017 in Badem, Babanki Tungo by the first author.

Power relations in greetings involve discursive factors that engender the relations. An understanding of these discursive factors requires a broader sociolinguistic consideration of the context of language use, language perceptions and language ideologies. It requires an inquiry into how broader relations of power can be deconstructed by narrowing down relations in conversations between individuals where linguistic practices of the different language groups empower or disempower their speakers (Galiè & Farnworth 2019). This implies that the absence or presence of specific discourse practices within a language group can empower or disempower someone during a speech act. These issues are examined in this paper which is organized as follows: information about the two communities is given in section 2 followed by a presentation of their greeting patterns in section 3. Section 4 contains a discussion of the interaction between the two communities during greetings and a brief conclusion is given in section 5.

2. About the Babanki and Fulɓe communities

2.1 Babanki

The Babanki are located in the North-West Region of Cameroon and speak Gaʔa Kejom (also known as Babanki), a Central Ring Grassfields Bantu language with ISO code 693-3 [bbk] (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig 2020,

Hammarström et al. 2018). The language is spoken mainly in two settlements, Kejom Ketinguh (Babanki Tungo) and Kejom Keku (Big Babanki), but also to some extent in different parts of Cameroon as well as in diaspora communities. Eberhard, Simons and Fennig (2020) state that the number of speakers is increasing; however, the figure of 39,000 speakers they provide likely overestimates the number of fluent speakers in diaspora communities. The two main settlements exhibit slight phonetic, phonological, and lexical differences but are mutually intelligible. As pointed out by Faytak and Akumbu (2020), the Babanki language has 25 consonant phonemes /b, t, d, k, g, m, n, ny, ŋ, f, v, s, z, sh, zh, gh, pf, bv, ts, dz, ch, j, l, w, y/, 8 vowels phonemes /i, ɨ, ʉ, u, e, o, ə, a/, and two underlying tones /H, L/. The segments combine into the CV, CGV, CVC and CGVC syllable structures, where *G* stands for glide. The six syllable coda consonants are /m, n, ŋ, f, s, k/. In this position, /k/ is realized as [ʔ]. Vowel length is not contrastive in this language. This study is based on the situation in Kejom Ketinguh (Babanki Tungo). This locality is located between latitudes $5^0$55' to $6^0$30', north of the Equator and longitudes $10^0$15' to $10^0$22' East of the Greenwich Meridian. It occupies a surface area of 125km square (Akumbu & Wuchu 2015). The Babanki Tungo people are historically farmers who practice subsistence farming. They also grow livestock including chickens and goats which play an important role in their daily sustenance. Women, who are believed to make the soil more fruitful, are responsible for planting and harvesting crops. Men are responsible for clearing the fields for planting and also practice hunting. Complex age grade groups also help to structure the community. Religiously, the people reserve allegiance to their lineage ancestors. Greetings are an integral part of their culture and usually set the scene for any interaction when people meet. Like in other societies, children are trained to greet from childhood as they wake up from bed or come in contact with others during the day.

2.2 Fulɓe

The Fulɓe began to enter the Grassfields in the 1910s, driven by their continuous search for pastureland. Their movement from northern Nigeria toward the east and south were guided by ecological and political considerations, with the central goal of sustaining their pastoral economy. Because the western Grassfields provided exceptionally favourable conditions that promoted the growth of their herds, many families settled in this area and have remained for several decades, becoming part of the local community. The Fulɓe included in this study first moved to Babanki Tungo between 1935 and 1940, but left in 1958 because of grazing land disputes. They were warmly welcomed by their hosts because of their economic input reflected in the cattle they introduced in the village and the allegiance they paid to the Babanki Tungo Fon. The quest for grazing land in the context of an increasing population of farmers put the Fulɓe on daily conflicts with Babanki Tungo farmers. The Fulɓe were, therefore, regarded as intruders and forced to leave. They were able to return in 1970 to settle in their present locations, mostly in the hilly grasslands on the outskirts of Babanki Tungo. Originally, they perceived themselves as

politically marginalized but the hostilities that prevailed between the two communities have reduced in the last three decades, and the Fulɓe are now considered as members of the Babanki village to the extent that some Fulɓe are members of the Babanki village ruling council.

According to Akumbu and Asonganyi (2010), Fulfulde uses 28 consonant phonemes /p, b, t, d, c, ɟ, k, g, ʔ, ɓ, ɗ, ƴ, m, n, ny, ŋ, f, v, s, h, mb, nd, nɟ, ŋg, l, r, w, y/ and five vowel phonemes /i, e, a, o, u/. Consonant doubling is a widespread feature, involving all consonants except the glottal and prenasalized stops. Vowel length is contrastive. All Fulfulde syllables begin with a consonant; words that are spelled with an initial vowel are spoken with an initial glottal stop (e.g. *ʔowari* 'he came'). Every syllable has a short or long vowel and may or may not end with a consonant. If the vowel is long, the syllable cannot end with a consonant (e.g. *baaba* 'father'). Fulfulde is a stress-timed language, and almost all words of more than one syllable carry penultimate stress.

When a Babanki person meets a Fulɓe they are likely to use Cameroon Pidgin English unless the Fulɓe has learned the Babanki language.

3. Babanki and Fulɓe greeting patterns

3.1 Babanki

When two Babanki people meet the younger one initiates the greeting. If those involved are of the same age range any of them can start greeting. One particular feature of greetings in this community is the shaking of hands as people meet and begin to greet. As in many other Grassfields cultures the older person is the one to offer their hand to the younger one. If the younger person first offers their hand it is considered impolite and may be ignored or accepted only reluctantly. It is unlikely and nearly impossible for Babanki people to embrace or kiss each other as a form of greeting. Apart from shaking hands, the only other observed form of contact involves a mother or grandmother massaging a loved one's arms and legs to express joy at their meeting. While this is happening, it is perfectly acceptable to look at each other in the face and smile or laugh as much as they like. Both parties stand if they meet on the way, or if at home, the host may continue to sit or stand up if they are highly excited with the arrival of the guest. Each of the people may speak during the brief greeting session insofar as they wait to take a turn when the other is no longer talking.

The Babanki people recognize only two divisions in a day in greetings. This is determined by the position of the sun during the day. From morning to approximately noon, they ask *àchúʔə́ láyn lí à*? 'Is the day clean?' and answer *àchúʔə́ láyn lí* 'The day is clean.' In the afternoon, evening and night they ask *àchúʔə́ ɟɨ́ lí à*? 'Is the day dark?' and answer *àchúʔə́ ɟɨ́ lí* 'The day is dark.' The greeting could be limited to the above but it is also possible to ask a question such as *kə́ mbɛ́ nsɔ́ʔ (ghɔ́)*? 'Any news/What makes news?', *kə́*

dìʔ á lέ? 'How is it?', *kə́ ŋgáʔ á ghɔ̀?* 'What says?' The answer could be *kə́ kô sɔ́ʔ* 'no news.'

After the response the other person could also ask *ŋkà wù sɔ̀ʔ ghɔ́*? 'Any news from you too?' The response could be *(àìʔ) kə́ kô sɔ́ʔ* '(nothing), no news.' The question could also be asked in one of the following ways: *wù dìʔ á lέ?* 'How are you?' */ wŭ ŋgáʔ á ghɔ̀?* 'What do you say?' */ wù nè á lέ?* 'what have you done?' The answer could be *(àìʔ) tă ŋkàyn* '(nothing) I'm fine.'

3.2 Fulɓe

Greetings among the Fulɓe are performed with the principal objective of inquiring about the well-being of others, their family, and the state of their affairs. Virtanen (2003) has noted that when two or more Fulɓe meet they do not usually start greeting each other immediately. They could talk about a few other things while giving enough time to the one who has arrived to settle and calm down before greeting. There are rules that must be respected when taking a greeting position. For example, a daughter-in-law must sit lower than her mother in-law before greeting her. Greeting positions generally reveal who the older one of the two participants is. Nephews and nieces cannot greet an uncle or aunt while standing; they must squat to show respect. In general, the younger participant has to show respect when greeting and squatting, or sitting down even if the older participant is not a relative. When the right position has been taken they would then start greeting by inquiring about the time of the day, for example, *A hirti jam na*? 'You passed a good night, yes?' or *A nyalli jam na*? 'You passed a good day, yes?' This could be followed by asking about bodily health: *jam ɓandu*? 'Is your body well?' It is possible to repeat the question in a strengthened form as if to confirm the previous reply: *jam ɓandu boodum*? 'Is your body very well?'. More questions could be asked about one's physical well-being, *noy comri?* 'How is it with tiredness?' or *noy peewol/guldum*? 'How is it with the cold/heat?', or about one's activities, for example, *noy kuugal* 'How is your work?' More questions would inquire about the condition of the respondent's family and belonging. The responses could be a negation, e.g. *comri walaa* 'There is no tiredness' or *guldum walaa* 'There is no heat'. The word *koydum* 'easy' could also be given as a response. Nevertheless, 'it is possible to respond with the simple word *jam* 'well' or *jam, walaa koodume* 'well, there is nothing wrong', which can then be followed by the Islamic phrase, *maadalla* 'As God wills' (Virtanen 2003)'. It should be noted that sometimes, Islamic wishes are used as greetings, *Alla hokke jam*! 'May God give you good health!' or *Alla woonane*! 'May God be good to you!'. The response could be the simple word *barka* 'blessing'.

4. Greetings and Power Relations

Language ideologies in African contexts and especially within the Grassfields region of Cameroon have prescribed norms of interaction between participants. These interaction norms also border on power relations between individuals and determine control of discursive practices based on variables such as age, sex, title (traditional authority), and sometimes ethnicity. These ideologies are

harnessed on language and power relations (see Atanga 2010, Fairclough 2001). Language use in greetings is generally indicative of power relations between the participants, either as individuals or as groups of persons (Schegloff 1968, Foley 1997, Ameka 2009). Hardly are there issues of ethnicity in Cameroon in relation to power. The case between the Fulɓe and the Babanki is peculiar. As mentioned above, when the Babanki meet with the Fulɓe they greet each other in ways that are peculiar to their own language and culture. The general perception of the Fulɓe in the Grassfields region is that of inferiority. The Fulɓe are perceived as strangers, nomads, and an inferior group. Culturally, such a perception leaves an understanding of more powerful Grassfields Bantu people and less powerful Fulani people. But as this study shows, language use and interactions between the Fulɓe and the Babanki indicate different power relations. This relationship is complicated. As a people, the Babanki are more powerful but in one on one interactions, a discursive analysis shows the Fulɓe in control of interactions, indexing them as more powerful. Control and power are intimately weaved and controlling turn taking, topic choice and duration of an interaction are markers of power in language. Issues such as the initiation of greetings, information sought, gestures, postures, and turn taking are indicative factors. Greetings between members of the two communities can be either in Cameroon Pidgin English, Fulfulde or Babanki in that order, depending on whether the Fulɓe has learned Babanki or not. As the lingua franca of the community, it is common for them to use Cameroon Pidgin English but if the Fulɓe thinks that the Babanki person can speak Fulfulde, they will try using it. However, if the Fulɓe has learned Babanki then they use it when they meet.

4.1. Greetings and Power Relations among the Babanki

In Babanki, greetings carry along power relations among the individuals involved. Generally, it is the younger person who initiates a greeting. It is, therefore, this younger, less powerful person, or the one who has a lesser authority that has access to the first turn. On the other hand, the more powerful interlocutor, the older person, or the one in a position of authority responds to the greeting of the other. At the same time, it is the older person who can stretch their hand towards the younger one for a handshake at this opening stage. If the younger person stretches their hand the older person might simply ignore it. Any reversal of roles may be seen as rude and not acceptable or may even be seen as confrontational. When the younger person or the one with a lower status greets first it is seen as a form of acknowledgement of the power or authority of the older or socially, financially, academically dominant person.

Given that greetings mark politeness, initiating a greeting, answering or refusing to answer one can be indicative of whether one is challenging the power relations between individuals, and therefore a subversion of power relations or can also mean conforming to the norms. Breaking the norms of who greets first, answers a greeting, or gets to take the turn of querying can also challenge the power relations. If a child refuses to greet an older person, or

refuses to answer when greeted, it can be seen as outright confrontation leading to a breakdown in communication and the sequence of communication changes.

4.2. Greetings and Power Relations among the Fulɓe

While greeting, those involved stay physically and emotionally as detached from each other as possible while looking down in different directions. "It is not unusual either that people greet from behind the hut walls, thus escaping even the slightest risk of having eye contact with those greeted" (Virtanen 2003). This implies that actions such as shaking hands, embracing or kissing are impossible during a greeting. In addition to lowering the eyes, voices are kept low during the greeting. As soon as the person who is hierarchically higher in the relationship begins to greet, the one who is lower in status must squat or sit down on bare ground or a chair where available. This must be done no matter the place where they are found, such as in a market, along the road, etc. They will maintain that position throughout the greeting session. In the case of an in-law (father or mother of a wife) the other participant must sit down or squat even if they are older than their in-law. When a female is greeting her in-laws particularly those that are older than her husband, she must cover her head and body with a wrapper or headscarf. Each person is allowed to take turns to greet. When the person questioning says *usekɔʔ* 'thank you', the other understands that it is their turn to start questioning.

4.3. Greetings and Power Relations among the Babanki and Fulɓe

The dynamics of greetings are different in the two communities as manifested when members from both meet and greet each other. With the Babanki, the person with a lower status first greets the one with a higher status and the communicative activity is short and limited without going into details. Like most greetings, these could serve as an entry point into a conversation and to establish a relationship between the speakers acknowledging their positions in relation to the power dynamics. Meeting with a Fulɓe and greeting changes these dynamics as we will see below.

In general, the Babanki person involved would initiate the greeting irrespective of age and/or sex considerations. This is interesting because when two Babanki people meet, the one who is lower hierarchically begins to greet. On the other hand, when two Fulɓe meet it is the one who is higher in the hierarchy that initiates the greeting. While this suggests, from the Babanki perspective, that the Fulɓe dominate the Babanki, it can be interpreted as the manner in which the Babanki show hospitality towards guests. In other words, the Babanki use the opportunity to show that they are the ones receiving or hosting the Fulɓe settlers.

Concerning the kind of information sought during greetings, the Fulɓe are clearly seen to impose their extensive information-seeking pattern on the Babanki. They ask as much information from the Babanki as they can whereas the Babanki might have asked only a single question at the beginning of the session. This is certainly so because, as seen above, the Babanki would

normally start by asking about the time of the day and then one question about news or well-being. The Fulɓe on the other hand would ask about the day, or night, well-being of the interlocutor and that of the members of their household, property, work, etc. This is illustrated by the following greeting excerpt between two male participants, the first being an older Babanki man and the second a younger Fulɓe man (B=Babanki and F=Fulɓe):

B: *I salute*. 'Greetings.'
F: *Morning morning*. 'Good morning.'
B: *How for you*? 'How are you?'
F: *I dey fine*. 'I'm fine.'
F: *How for you*? 'How are you?'
B: *I dey fine*. 'I'm fine.'
F: *You come which day*? 'When did you come?'
B: *I come yesterday*. 'I came yesterday.'
F: *How for compound*? 'How is your home?'
B: *Yi dey fine*. 'It's fine.'
F: *How for Mami*? 'How is your mother?'
B: *Yi dey fine*. 'She's fine.'
F: *How for da your brother*? 'How is that your brother?'
B: *Yi dey fine*. 'He's fine.'
F: *How for pikin dem*? 'How are your children?'
B: *Dem dey fine*. 'They're fine.'
F: *How for work*? 'How is work?'
B: *Work dey fine*. 'It's fine.'
F: *Usekɔʔ*. 'Thank you.'
F: *When you go you salute mami*. 'Greet your mom when you return.'
B: *Okay*. 'okay'
F: *Usekɔʔ*. 'Thank you."

Based on this excerpt, it is evident that the greeting style of the Babanki is flaunted in the conversation. In a traditional Babanki greeting situation, the Babanki would keep it simple, as indicated above in section 4.1. The younger or less powerful person would initiate the greeting and be subjected to answering the queries of the older and most powerful participant.

In an intercultural situation, the norms of greeting are challenged with the Fulɓe taking the more powerful position subjecting the Babanki to providing responses. They are reduced to an answer of *I dey fine* 'I'm fine' and also letting out information about themselves without receiving from the other participant. Power relations here definitely weigh in favour of the one who determines the turns and gets the information.

This situation leads us to consider contact induced change on socio-cultural issues rather than focusing only on grammatical changes. Several studies on contact linguistics have addressed changes that languages in contact undergo

(Weinreich 1953, Thomason and Kaufman 1988, Aikhenvald and Dixon 2001, Curnow 2001, Ross 2001, Thomason 2001, Johanson 2002, Winford 2003, Heine and Kuteva 2005, Aikhenvald 2006) but have neglected the socio-cultural changes. As seen, it is also possible for contact to induce change in areas other than the grammar of languages involved.

5. Conclusion

Although the Babanki are the host and more dominant group than the minority migrant Fulɓe, the linguistic analysis of greetings in this paper has shown that the Fulɓe tend to dominate conversations and portray the Babanki as hierarchically lower during greetings. Since the tone a greeting takes determines the power relations between the interlocutors, it is possible that in most conversations, the Fulɓe would dominate the Babanki and determine the flow of the conversation. It can then be concluded that the Fufulde culture tends to dominate the larger Babanki host culture in certain circumstances. This is further manifested when Cameroon Pidgin English is used by interlocutors from both communities and the Fulɓe still dominate the conversations. Since the host culture is rather dominated by the incoming culture it suggests that as with grammatical systems, the influence on culture in situations of language contact can also be bidirectional since the host culture can influence the migrant culture and vice versa. This perspective illustrated in this paper using greetings adds to the understanding that contact induced change can affect both grammatical and socio-cultural systems.

A curious questioning after the results would be that, why is it as a people the Babanki are perceived as more powerful but as individuals they are dominated in language use? What relationships exist between power in language and other forms of power such as cultural capital? What justifies a people to perceive themselves as more powerful than another yet in intimate interactions, these notions of power become deconstructed through control? We could also ask if this display of power in language use is conscious and intentional with the Fulɓe aware that they are in control or is simply dictated by the different language structures? What power relations exist between Fulɓe themselves during greetings and who controls turn-taking and topic choice? What determines who has power during Fulɓe-Fulɓe interactions. These are questions that could be further explored in subsequent research.

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