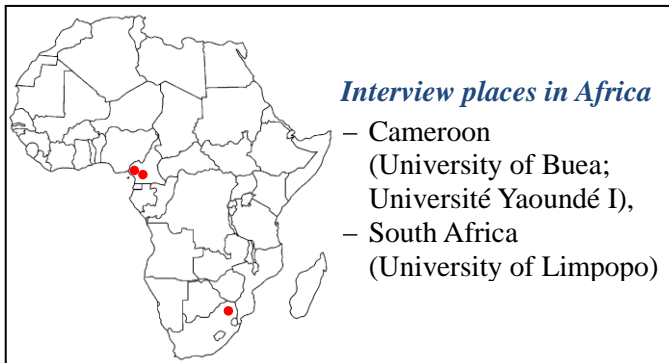7th World Congress of African Linguistics (WOCAL7), University of Buea, Cameroon, 20-24 Aug. 2012

Language Choice in African Mobile Telephony

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Mobile phones are part of a major growth industry in the Third World, and as in other places, the use of this technology radically changes communication behaviour. We investigated the influence of these changes on indigenous social structures with a mixed-type questionnaire that targeted parameters such as in-group vs. out-group communication, involvement with dominant industrial culture and the use of financial resources. Data were collected in Cameroon and South Africa; control data were collected from indigenous representatives at international meetings, as well as in Germany. The results of the survey reflect a widespread use of mobile phones among Africans. Mobile phones facilitate moves from village to town, with the opportunity of frequently being in touch with other in-group members, be it those who remain in the village, or those who also have moved to town. The use of mobile phones, on the one hand, has a segregating effect within the indigenous communities; on the other hand, it enhances in-group communication, and especially the use of the indigenous language.

Interview places in Africa
  – Cameroon
    (University of Buea;
    Université Yaoundé I),
  – South Africa
    (University of Limpopo)

Subjects (N=159; mean age: 24.81;
          56.6 % male, 40.9 % female):
- Students in Cameroon (n=32; mean age:
  22.94; 59.4 % male, 40.6 % female),
- Students in South Africa (n=47; mean age:
  20.02; 53.2 % male, 46.8 % female).
Controls:
- Indigenous representatives (n=27; mean age:
  38.54; 77.8 % male, 14.8 % female),
- Students in Germany (n=53; mean age:
  23.80; 47.2 % male, 49.1 % female).

Results

mobile phone use	%
Cameroon	93.8
South Africa	97.9
IR	96.3
Germany	100.0
Total	*97.5*

"How common are mobile phones in your cultural group?" (%)					
	Cameroon	South Africa	IR	Germany	*total*
high	34.4	61.7	40.7	75.5	*57.2*
middle	28.1	34.0	14.8	9.4	*21.4*
low	12.5	4.3	33.3	1.9	*10.1*

Communication increase due to mobile phones within own cultural group (%):					
	Cameroon	South Africa	IR	Germany	*total*
with family	68.8	59.6	59.3	34.0	*52.8*
with friends	68.8	76.6	77.8	66.0	*71.7*
no increase	3.1	2.1	11.1	30.2	*13.2*

Special effects (%)	leave village	m.p. users segregated
Cam.	90.6	34.4
S. Africa	91.5	19.1
IR	48.1	18.5
German	37.7	28.3
Total	*66.0*	*25.2*

Results (cont.)

Subjects ranked purposes of mobile phone use in their own cultural group (%):

	Cameroon	South Africa	IR	Germany	*total*
in-town business					
most	21.1	4.3	33.3	17.0	*17.0*
second	12.5	14.9	7.4	43.4	*22.6*
third		23.4	11.1	5.7	*10.7*
fourth		48.9	7.4	15.1	*20.8*
in-town friends					
most	59.4	27.7	37.0	73.6	*50.9*
second	6.3	19.1	18.5	17.0	*15.7*
third	6.3	38.3			*12.6*
fourth		8.5	3.7		*3.1*
town to village					
most	25.5	23.4	18.5	3.8	*16.4*
second	9.4	42.6	14.8	7.5	*19.5*
third	12.5	23.4	18.5	62.3	*33.3*
fourth		4.3	3.7	7.5	*4.4*
village to village					
most	3.1	40.4	3.7	3.8	*14.5*
second		17.0		15.1	*10.1*
third		6.4	11.1	11.3	*7.5*
fourth	21.9	27.7	22.2	50.9	*33.3*

Ingroup phone language.
Subjects indicated if mobile phone users from their cultural group, when telephoning with each other, spoke their indigenous language, or the colonial language, or if the language use depended on the circumstances **(%)**:

	Cameroon	South Africa	IR	Germany	*total*
indigenous	25.0	51.1	51.9	67.9	*51.6*
colonial	34.4		7.4	7.5	*10.7*
depends	34.4	46.8	40.7	5.7	*29.6*

Structural Analysis of Cultural Systems

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