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Social Media and Linguistic Affirmation in Central Africa. Between Cultural Objectification and Cultural Mutation

Abstract

The success of social media among Africans and African diasporas have led to the creation of “Facebook groups” identified as ethnic groups. These networks can gather, among the five groups included in this study, up to 8,000 participants each. These spaces of community exchanges allow interesting observations on the preservation of linguistic diversity in the era of digital globalization, and on the mutations of ethnicity.

On one hand, we are witnessing the “spontaneous” encoding of languages that were not usually written, contributing to their current writing use, to the transmission of this competence and literary heritage, to its unification and homogenization.

On the other hand, these new linguistic registers cause profound changes in the status of these languages and in the organization of the associated cultural groups: the creation of a public space (which partially excludes other national languages) where diaspora members play a central role; the weaving of supra-national links with former parent groups in neighboring countries (reinvestment of neglected ethnonyms, rewriting of genealogies, reaffirmation of unifying origin myths); the projects of physical meetings, publishing policies, cultural festivals, supra-national political parties...

Introduction

The Eton language, spoken mainly in central and southern Cameroon, belongs to the numerous Bantu languages that spread from central to South Africa. Cameroon has 2 official languages (French and English), and around 200 native languages of which very few are written and taught, as school options. The Eton language is spoken by around 250,000 people. This language doesn't have a properly codified grammar, syntax and orthography, in the sense of specific and usual rules established to write it, and before

social media, there were few contexts for scribal practices and even rarer were written publications.

In a programmatic paper [Rivron 2012] we had presented a sort of collaborative process of scripture codification and practice of this mother tongue, on social media and forums that emerged around 2009. At that time, several studies identified similar phenomena for the Amazighs in North Africa [Azizi 2010], or the Hmongs in China [Mayhoua 2010], for example, showing how Web 2.0 resources could contribute to consolidate cultural communities. Since then, there has been a significant evolution of this field in Central Africa. As the local connectivity and the movement of cultural affirmation grow on the Internet, we now have new kinds of “cultural” or “ethnic Facebook groups” from that region, several of them consisting up to 8,000 members. There has been a scale effect by which the most popular “cultural groups” now join several inter-comprehension ethnic groups, upon the linguistic category of “Fang-Bulu-Beti” and across Cameroon, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea state frontiers.

The arising of current native literacy on Facebook is associated with a process of “patrimonialization”, a formal construction of cultural heritage: concentration, unification and codification of cultural capital [Bourdieu 1994]. This patrimonialization shows typical but also very specific characteristics, in which we have the illustration of a hypothesis that was formulated by Renato Ortiz [1995]: “The fixation of traditions always happens in a modernization process”. With fixation of traditions I understand “objectification” of culture in the sense of Jack Goody [1979]: the materialization of cultural traits through the production of communication supports that permits a systematization and a distant transmission, in time and space. And as Eric Guichard [2003] stresses, informatics and the Internet are based on scripture (from code to contents) and should also be analyzed as “intellectual techniques” which have social effects.

The present approach of linguistic and cultural affirmation is articulated to Jean-Loup Amselle and Elikia Mbokolo’s asserts in *Au coeur de l’Ethnie* [1999], where they develop a non-static comprehension of culture and ethnicity: these are relational constructions (isolated cultures are exceptions); those are dynamic, not “cold societies” as Claude Levi-Strauss would have said; the cultural categories and practices are polysemous and contextual, not essentialists... So, we’ll try to analyze here how the preservation and the transmission of languages, through their written codification and electronic sociability, take part of a transformation of how groups think and reconfigure themselves.

Eton Scripture in Facebook Groups

In 2009, I was very surprised at discovering several attempts of recomposing ethnic communities on one of the most famous web co-optative social network (or social media). These practices happened in a context in which Eton was sometimes affirmed by its speakers to be in a threat of getting disappeared or, more often, of being degraded by a lack of practice and a trend to mix with other languages like Ewondo. On the other hand, this mother-tongue is not registered in the UNESCO Atlas of threatened languages [Moseley 2010], and we could think that the claims of being in danger were strategies of affirmation of cultural value in a “rhetoric of loss” [Gonçalves 1996] that is common to the patrimonialization processes. In the absence of statistical documentation, we can daily make the confirmation of that intergenerational lack of transmission in the urban Eton communities, a lack mainly due to the processes of migration, urbanization, upward social mobility, globalization of cultural industries and creolization between neighboring inter-comprehensive thongs.

This mother tongue hasn't been specifically codified for a usual writing and until then, it was only written in exceptional conditions: by linguists, ethnographers, folklorists, artists, and probably in a few intimacy scriptures. The current written practice of Eton in a “public space” began sporadically through electronic networks. We first saw it in 2004 on static web sites and web forums (connivance and interjections only), before the Facebook groups saw the appearance of real written conversations. At the same time, this process showed a non-exclusive use of written Eton, beside French and English that occupy the main textual space.

Far from the futile conversations that we could imagine on these social networks, deep discussions emerged on how to speak correctly (up to bind the generational and geographical gaps), and how to spell this language. Further appeared redundant debates about etymology, rituals, history, genealogy, political structures, regional news...

Several times, we saw posts making reference to a French-Eton dictionary (which is in reality a PhD word that includes a lexicon), and a grammar of Eton (written in English) by the same author: the Belgian linguist Mark Van Der Veld [2003, 2008]. If these texts unify and systematize the spelling of the language, the author himself (in an interview with the author, January 12th, 2011) recognizes the need to develop practical tools for a usual scripture of this language. These two documents use complex linguistic considerations, with phonetic symbols that are not easily understandable or even available on common keyboards. So the reference to these two documents had probably a valorization impact but may practically be used only by the most erudite

members of these communities: within the thousands of members of these groups, we only have seen very rare people using its complex phonetic scripture (5 or 6 persons).

The short texts and conversations in Eton are mainly written in alphabetic characters, taking inspiration from the Ewondo scripture (a close language from Yaoundé, that was codified by missionaries and is eventually taught at school as an option). They often make total abstraction of the tonal aspects of the language, proceeding to a graphic reduction, in the sense of Jack Goody (the transcription reduces the richness of oral and contextual communication), but also in a sense pointed by Mark Van de Veld himself in our interview: the missionaries “heard” less tones than used in oral situations, having a lexical loss as a consequence. The emergence of this scribal practice, mainly in urban contexts, explains also the many borrowing from the Ewondo vocabulary, and the need to read at loud voice or with the lips, sometimes several times, to comprehend the text.

Effects of the Scripture: Objectification, Patrimonialization and Graphic Reduction

These Cameroonian “ethnic” or “cultural” groups on Facebook do not limit themselves to trying to compensate the lack of intergenerational transmission in the context of urbanization, migration and upward social mobility. They also make an appropriation of the generic resources offered by the Facebook platform, in order to integrate or project traditional sociability codes, procedures and rituals. The insistence on formal presentation for the new comers by passing through the “house of presentations” in one of those groups, or the existence of topics dedicated to marriage transactions or rumor spreading are intents to integrate electronic sociability resources into cultural patterns.

As well as the impact of “materializing” the speech by scripture, other “objectification” processes occur to preserve and transmit cultural traditions, producing at the same time new senses for the same linguistic categories that Ortiz [1995] mentioned when talking about the modernization implied in every attempt to fix materially the traditions.

One of those is the production of collaborative and public archives, when historical documents such as photos, videos and texts are progressively compiled into the news feed or into attached documents. It truly participates to the patrimonialization process, proceeding to a new kind of concentration, unification and capitalization of information of all kinds, that was initially spread in personal archives, into a same graphic support. Moreover it valorizes

visual symbols of ethnic belonging that had been partially erased, mainly by Christian conversion and colonial administration.

Another modernization effect, that can be noticed – even if it's implications do not come exclusively from these practices – is the territorialization of the ethnic imaginary. Computer resources and Internet spreading are followed by a vast cartographic production that is also present in the observed material. As Paul Bohannan [1963] showed, African ethnic groups are not always identified to a certain territory, and their settlement and territorialization result mainly from colonial and independent administration.

The general effect of these Facebook ethnic sociability and patrimonialization is the production of cultural pride: a positive perception of traditional belonging in a modern and globalized life where social mobility tends to depreciate mother tongue and ethnicity as archaisms.

Scale Effects and Revitalization of the “Ekang” Ethnonym

Quickly after the creation of two “Eton” groups on Facebook, which remained relatively small (up to 1,500 members), several Facebook groups were created with a much broader scope: the “Beti” and the “Fang-Bulu-Beti”. These appeal to a larger cultural definition of cultural group: the inter-comprehensive space between South Cameroon, Northern Gabon and Equatorial Guinea, that had initially been identified separately by linguists. Several groups have followed that broader concept and each of them can gather now from 3,000 to 8,000 members.

In Figure 1, we have concatenated¹⁰² 15 days (in November 2013) of interactions inside and between four “meta ethnic groups” of this kind, including another group elaborated specifically for the Cameroon Diaspora (A). The nodes correspond to posts made by individuals, and the links indicate shares, likes and comments by other members (interactions). The legend indicates the percentage of each group interactions or intersection between groups' interactions in the corpus. For the actual black and white publication of this figure, we had to add the approximate perimeters of the groups, and the interactions between the groups (multiple belonging of individuals and content circulation between different groups) do not appear clearly.

¹⁰² *With the great help of Simon Chameau, engineer at INRIA.*

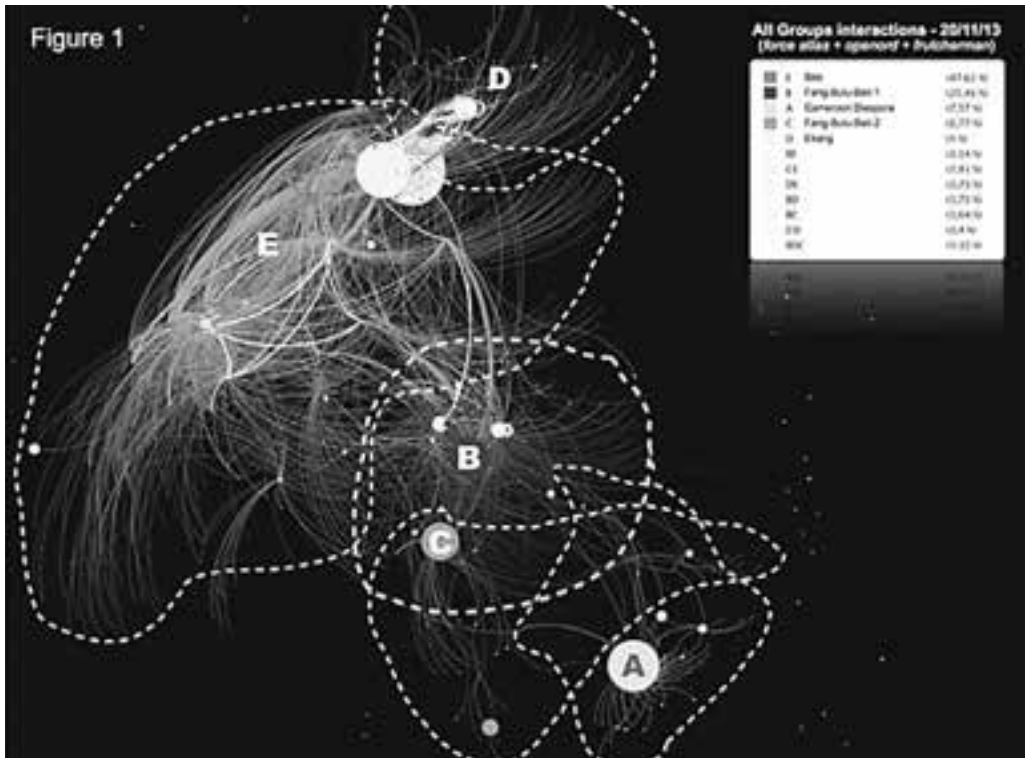


Figure 1. *Meta ethnic groups interactions*

The global topology of these networks reveals very different kinds of interactions and organizations. Groups A, B and C have a very centralized structure of interactions. For example, B has a main contributor/moderator that posts very regularly (almost every day) on cultural or linguistic topics through explicit questions, and the members react with answers also very regularly, but rarely contribute with their own posts. This group looks like a school or church interaction: a main actor driving all the publication initiative, and the students or believers follow in a very disciplined way. On the contrary, groups D and E have a very distributed structure corresponding to another publication dynamic: there are many contributors with posts on cultural, media, politic or commercial topics, and the interactions around these go even outside the group (for example here, the share of several contents from E, into D, and important contributors that work actively between these groups without centralizing the activity of the groups). The analysis of these groups' memberships also reveals an important interpenetration between these groups: some have up to 20% of their members belonging to one or more groups of this category.

If we focus on the two “Fang-Bulu-Beti” groups (B and C), they show a specific activity around patrimonialization, mother thongs scripture and cultural identity production. And they simultaneously led to the rise of a different ethnonym, “Ekang” or “Ekañ”, that became a topic of discussion and also the name of the further Facebook groups corresponding to the Fang-Bulu-Beti linguistic cluster. Working on Eton and Ewondo fields since the end of the 1990’s, we had never noticed that cultural category, even if we later confirmed its presence in cosmogony epics sang on the Mvet. A quick research through “Google Trends”, that counts the occurrences of keywords queries, also showed that “Ekang” wasn’t used on the web before 2011.

So we assist through these Facebook ethnic activities to the restoration or the reactivation of this category to designate a new kind of meta-ethnic group whose existence was limited before that, to the linguistic association of the Fang, the Bulu and the Beti. What’s noticeable about it, is that the cultural investigation initiated in these groups on linguistic proximities and etymologic considerations, finally led to the unification of common genealogies, to the formulation of common origin myths and the identification of common cultural patterns. The discourses about this Ekang reunification claim the revitalization of cultural and kinship relations that had been forgotten with colonization and state-building process.

Political Stakes of Community and Linguistic Process

The first approach could make us believe in a perfectly virtual (online), spontaneous and horizontal process, corresponding to the ideology of Internet promoters and distant education. But we soon discover the central role of specific and dominant components of these different ethnic groups. Processes on social media are not only factors, but also indicators of the actual dynamics of social, economic and political interdependences and organization.

A demographic approach of the Eton and the Ekang groups on Facebook – even if very basic because of technical limitations as well as due to the raw quality of the information on Facebook profiles – show that this ethnic affirmation and construction is driven mainly by urban, cosmopolite and diaspora scholars. And these characteristics are even more predominant if we consider only the main activists of these groups, which write mainly from France, the United States, Canada, Belgium and Germany, when they are not at Yaoundé or Libreville.

This is not surprising if we consider the still weak Internet and Facebook penetration in Cameroon, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea, compared to other countries in Europe or America, and the inequalities existing towards written and computer techniques. The composition of the Ekang Facebook activists

is neither surprising, if we consider the political stakes that are involved in this subsequent unification project, that even resulted on physical meetings and projects of cultural festivals (defended by a culture promoter and book editor). The arising of a Fang-Bulu-Beti public space, in the sense of Habermas, questioning political boundaries erected by colonization and state building, also ended to the hypothetic project of a supranational political party for the CEMAC (Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa).

Conclusion

From the initial observations about the Eton social media, to the actual Ekang dynamics on the web, we can clearly see that the Internet and Social Media are effective tools for preserving and developing mother tongues. However, several linguistic stakes remain: the development of written conversations between inter-comprehensive languages is clearly a factor of language valorization. But should we consider it as a threat for the scripture of languages like Eton, when already codified and taught scriptures of other languages are the predominant resources? And would the unification process of these mutual understanding tongues result into a new kind of *lingua franca* or *standard scripture*?

The hypothesis of this standardization, that would include a much broader population, is perhaps the condition for the development of electronic resources in these languages (software translation, online publication, electronic dictionaries or translators). But it is also a threat to the original mother tongue and to linguistic diversity...

And even, if these electronic sociabilities seem to represent a good hope for the vitality and perpetration of mother tongues from Central Africa, it will hardly become by itself a systematized and durable solution for codifying non-written languages and teach them to non-speakers. There is a need of organizing and systematizing that won't happen into these social media, but into authorized and organized institutions and intermediaries. And this would be a totally different and a more classical process, where social hierarchies and state building dynamics would reappear clearly.

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