

Understanding language diversity among the Mbororo of Northwest Cameroon

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The Northwest region of Cameroon has been recognized as one of the country's most linguistically heterogeneous regions (Simons & Fennig 2018) with about a hundred languages spoken by 1.8 million people (2010 census) in a total surface area of 17,910 km². Many people in the region, like in many parts of Cameroon, are multilingual in their mother-tongue, Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE) and at least one other language. The semi-nomadic Mbororo cattle-rearers dispersed throughout the region are highly multilingual yet no study has sought to understand the conditions of their multilingualism. Our study explores the constraints on language choice among the Mbororo living in Badem, Babanki Tungo to shed light on the factors responsible for their multilingual nature and on rural multilingualism in Cameroon. Based on observations, interviews, and questionnaires administered, the study reveals that most of the Mbororo above six years are multilingual in Fulfulde, CPE, and Babanki. Furthermore, many of the participants in the study make use of four or more languages depending on their age, sex, education and mobility or level interaction with speakers of other neighboring languages. It was also found that four of the 47 respondents use more than 10 languages with one of them being able to communicate in 13 languages.

The study shows that these semi-nomadic cattle-rearers of the entire Northwest Region of Cameroon are multilingual in Fulfulde, CPE, the indigenous language of their host community, as well as any other languages they have contact with. It is also seen that Fulfulde (language of the minority Mbororo) continues to survive in the face of the larger host community languages mainly because the relationship among local languages in rural settings is not based on prestige (Connell 2009) but simply on the need to enhance communication.

References

- Connell, Bruce. 2009. Language diversity and language choice: A view from a Cameroon market. *Anthropological Linguistics* 51(2):130–150.
- Simons, Gary F. and Charles D. Fennig (eds.). 2018. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World, Twenty-first edition*. Dallas, Texas: SIL International. Online version: <http://www.ethnologue.com>.