
Mother Tongue use in multilingual churches

A review of 'Managing linguistic diversity in the church'

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This is a review of a research paper by Anicka Fast:

Fast, Anicka 2009. *Managing linguistic diversity in the church: language ideological contestation within a shared moral framework in south-western Burkina Faso*. Language Documentation and Description, Vol 6, 161-212.¹

Fast looks at the perceptions held by missionaries, church leaders and villagers on Mother Tongue (MT) use in church. She studied south west Burkina Faso in an area with lots of languages and lots of multilingualism. Many people speak Jula, a Language of Wider Communication (LWC), and some speak French (the official LWC). This situation resembles that in many of the countries where Bible translation is in progress, where there might also be high multilingualism with a LWC and MTs.

Below I have highlighted some key points that stood out to me from the research, raising some important questions in my mind.

Missionaries, church leaders and villagers all held different views over the competence of young people to speak the LWCs.

- Question: When we are thinking about how well people understand the LWC versus MT, who are we asking? Do we rely on the opinions of the pastors we know? They may not be representative of the real situation.

Church leaders and missionaries hold different views over language use in evangelism and church planting (with missionaries strongly emphasising MT). This creates an area of conflict between the two groups.

- Question: Is our overwhelming emphasis on MT use also a possible source of conflict in the work we try to do? Should we be more accepting of LWC use where appropriate? Do those doing partnership work need to have a more balanced approach to promoting the MT translation work?

Church leaders choose the language used in church based on inclusion, solidarity and practicality (therefore tending towards the use of a LWC), while missionaries focused a lot on use of the MT as the heart language and how this is tied up in the identity of the people. The problem with this missionary view is that it seems to make churches ethnically exclusive.

¹ See here: <http://www.hrelp.org/publications/papers/volume6/>. A shorter version of the research is available for download here: <http://www.ling-phil.ox.ac.uk/events/lingo/papers/anicka.fast.pdf>

- Question: Do we want churches to be ethnically exclusive? Of course not! Let's be careful not to encourage MT use in church when it goes against the important ethic of inclusion of all in the church family, whatever their ethnic group.

While the main reason for using the LWC in churches seemed to be (from my understanding) an issue of unity, other reasons cited by church leaders included the fact that the pastor may not be fluent in the MT.

- Question: Where the latter problem is the reason for lack of MT use in church, how can pastors be helped to become fluent in the MT? How do we sensitively find out if this is the reason for lack of MT use in church or not?

Areas of MT use that church leaders supported, even if it was deemed inappropriate to use MT for the whole service, were: MT songs, testimonies, children's Sunday school. Only preach in MT when everyone present speaks the MT.

- Thought: This is a good reminder of areas that we can focus on to encourage MT use in churches.

The article suggested a power imbalance between the ideologies about MT between church leaders/villagers and missionaries. Missionaries tend to see language and identity as one, while locals don't – they believe their ethnic identity remains intact even if their language dies out. One church leader saw the power imbalance as a form of colonialism (quoted below):

“On the one hand, they say that they want to liberate people by helping them to speak their language, but at the same time they confine them in their environment, they shut them in.... So I say to myself that when this kind of project comes from elsewhere to be imposed, this is a kind of colonialism. You're keeping them shut up in their language, while you, you're developing your knowledge by learning other languagesAnd when you come and confine people in their languages, you don't have the possibility of teaching them about everything that's happening in the world. You just limit yourselves to teaching them literacy, and all they need to do is read the Bible. No, I think that's colonialism, and it's wrong... It's wrong in respect to the way our world is evolving, so that in a decade some languages won't hold out. So it's necessary to look at the trends and work with them, in order to be able to help people better.”

- Question: What do people think about what we do?

One final point was that missionaries shouldn't define themselves as 'outsiders' in church (e.g. telling the church to use MT when they are present in a service even though they don't understand it because they're just a 'visitor'). This doesn't encourage a shared definition of church and the church being a place of unity.

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