

Endangered ? Yambetta in its Speech Community

Carolyn Benbow
Pacific Lutheran University
Research Advisor: David Tiomajou
Academic Director: Christienne Magnido
S.I.T. Cameroon: Culture and Development
Spring 2007
ISP Topic Codes: 304, 502, 504

Dedication: to my dad, whose example inspires me to go to new places and listen to the people there.

Acknowledgements:

- First of all, to TonTon Léonard and his family for opening up their home to me, teaching me village life and helping me with my research, both by being willing participants and by acting as translators when I needed it
- Second, to my participants for taking the time to listen to my questions and let me observe what is so normal to them
- Third, to my advisor David Tiomajou who gave me enough direction to keep me from being discouraged without taking over the project itself
- Fourth, to the neighborhood kids, and most particularly Madeline and Blanche, for being my guides and protectors in the village
- And lastly, to my mom, who woke up at 4am to listen to me vent my frustrations and homesickness.

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Abstract

This project is a study on the village of Yambetta and its efforts to keep its local language of Yambette. It looks into the organisation YALICO and the role of the local language within Yambetta's speech community. Through observation and interviews, this study found that Yambetta is a living language not in immediate danger of dying out, and that the efforts of the Summer Institute of Linguistics through the local linguistic committee in Yambetta village is improving the chances that Yambetta will continue to be a living language. This was important because around half of the world's languages are estimated to be in danger of dying out in the next two hundred years.

Useful Sources for future studies/

- Greg Trias: Language and Development at the Summer Institute for Linguistics. Is able to connect you with local community leaders and projects within S.I.L. Speaks English and some French. 230-64-56
- Léonard-Albert Bilioki: Head of the Yambetta Linguistic Committee. Very helpful in explaining his work and finding a place to stay within the village. Speaks French and limited English. 740-12-72
- Dacid Tiomajou: Professor of Linguistics, works for Peace Corps. Very helpful as an advisor. Speaks French and English. 777-12-86

Introduction

Everyone utilizes at least one language – be it verbal or otherwise – which, according to the Sapir-Worf theory, influences the way an individual sees the world around them. It is through the use of language that a group of people can communicate their ideas, beliefs, worldviews, values – in brief, their culture. They “are vehicles of value systems and of cultural expressions and they constitute a determining factor in the identity of groups and individuals”¹. Languages not only provide the means to express current cultures, but may also help show how different the peoples of the world are related to one another through the use of linguistic maps. These languages are not only useful to their speakers but also to researchers trying to uncover humankind’s history as a whole. Currently, there are over 6,000 languages spoken throughout the world. Unfortunately, it has been predicted that the number of spoken languages will decrease sharply over the next 200 years or so to only 3,000 languages with one language, on average, disappearing every two weeks² due to the spread of globalization and neo-colonialism. It is this prediction that has motivated linguists and organizations around the world to try to save as many of these languages as possible, or at the very least, record them for future reference.

One organization striving to record and promote local languages is the Summer Institute for Linguistics (hereafter S.I.L.). Their mission is “to foster the development of Cameroon's language communities through linguistic research, literacy and translation work through building capacity within cooperative working relationships so that local citizens can acquire the skills for doing all facets of language development.”³ Put another way, S.I.L. strives to encourage locals to record their own languages in the hopes of preserving the language, aiding in development and opening a doorway to translate the Bible into the local

¹ UNESCO

² UNESCO

³ SIL

language. In order to accomplish both these goals, S.I.L. has divided its focus into five main areas. The first entails creating a linguistic description of local languages, by which they mean, among other things, writing down the alphabet, grammar, and dictionary of each language. Training individuals to provide a linguistic description of their language and on translating the Bible into that same language is S.I.L.'s second focus, while classes encouraging locals to become literate in their local languages makes up the third. The fourth and fifth objectives are promoting literature in the local languages and translating the Bible, respectively. They have also created an Ethnologue, a data base that lists all the languages they have worked with so far, including the number of speakers, the region it is spoken and basic description of the language itself. One of the many countries where S.I.L. is working on realizing these goals is Cameroon, a nation with over 270 languages⁴, not including Cameroonian Pigin English and the two official languages of French and English. Currently, S.I.L. is working with 80 different communities within Cameroon in order to promote and preserve their respective languages, and translate the Bible. Employees at S.I.L. have stated that their organisation will help any community that asks for aid in preserving their language even if they do not want to translate the Bible or other religious material, although all but 2 of the current communities have asked for the Bible in their local language.⁵

One of their programs is situated in Yambetta, a village of about 6,000 inhabitants and located approximately 30 kilometers from the city of Bafia in Cameroon's Central Province. The languages to be found in this village include Yambetta (yes, it has the same name as the village), French, Cameroonian Pigin English, and Yambessa, although the first two are the most prominently spoken by the inhabitants themselves. Most inhabitants live off of subsistence farming and sell what extra they have in Bafia to earn money for school fees and other necessities that cannot be made in the home (such as petrole, clothes, and batteries).

⁴ the number of languages varies depending on the definition of a language from 124 to 285, however S.I.L. has used the figure of 270 on their webpage.

⁵ SIL Staff ; S.I.L.

Approximately 20% of the population has recently moved to the village in order to take advantage of the abundant land available for the cultivation of manioc, maize, tomatoes, mangoes and papayas, among other things⁶. Electricity, running water and paved roads are missing from the village, as is a local health center, although the main road is wide enough for one car and there are pumps for potable water. That may change in the relatively near future as the village received government funding for the village's development. As for religion, both Christianity and animist religions are commonly held by the inhabitants. S.I.L.'s program is being run by Léonard-Albert Bilioki, a local who has taken many of S.I.L.'s training program and has been translating portions of the Bible and other, non-religious material since 1978. This program, called the Yambetta Linguistic Committee (hereafter YALICO), focuses on translating the Bible and teaching Yambetta's inhabitants to read and write in their local language, Yambetta, and was started in 1998.

The initial reason for this study was to verify S.I.L.'s claim of helping communities translate things other than religious material. This was important to discover because should their claim be true they can help communities guard their languages, and therefore their cultures, against the onslaught of globalisation in general, and Westernisation in particular. With half of the world's languages estimated to be extinct in the next two hundred years, it is necessary to identify those organizations that are helping stem the tide of lost languages. It is equally important to find out whether the Yambetta language is in immediate danger of dying out, which is the second justification for this study. This study, though limited in scope and time, has the capability of making a preliminary analysis on S.I.L.'s work and on the Yambetta language's viability.

This paper's organization is based roughly on how the study itself was conducted. After the definition of terms and methodology, the paper examines the Yambetta Linguistic

⁶ this statistic is according to a survey I conducted during the project itself in which 4 of the 20 people responded that they had moved into the village within the last 5 years.

Committee in regards to who runs it and what they do. The second portion of this paper looks into the Yambetta language's role in the community – who speaks it and when. The third section attempts to predict whether or not Yambetta will be spoken in the next two hundred years with reasons given as to why or why not. It also looks at the role YALICO plays in that prediction. The paper concludes with an overall summary and suggestions for future research.

Definition of Terms

Local languages: those languages spoken by the inhabitants of Cameroon that do not originate from outside of the country. For the purpose of this study, Cameroonian Pigin English will be considered a local language because “nowadays there are PE speakers with no home language base”⁷.

S.I.L.: Summer Institute for Linguistics. See introduction

YALICO: Yambetta Linguistics Committee, a local organization working with S.I.L.

Participants: those inhabitants of Yambetta village who participated in interviews, both formal and informal, and surveys related to this study.

Commodity: “something of use, advantage or value”⁸; not necessarily material in nature.

Methodology

This study was conducted in the neighborhood of Babetta in Yambetta village from April 8 – 28, 2007 and was implemented using both observation and formal and informal interviews. This site was chosen because the head of the local linguistics committee was willing to have me stay with his family and introduce me to the village, and this provided an opportunity to observe daily life in the village itself and not rely solely on what people told me in the interviews. Additionally, the director is well-known in the village and was able to connect me with people to interview. The make-up of those interviewed includes eight adults

⁷ Tiomajou 261

⁸ Dictionary.com

whose ages range from early 30's to almost 100 years old, and whose occupations include farmers, teachers, vendors and housewives. Observation sites included the Bilioki household and surrounding neighbors, the market, and the church. With this range of sites, I was able to view people in different social settings and get a better grasp as to when and by whom Yambetta is spoken that interviewing alone could not provide.

The two main facilitators for this study were living in the community itself and the community's acquaintances with strangers coming into the village to study the Yambetta language. Living in the community itself, as previously stated, helped me gain the trust of the community, as well as giving me the chance to observe more social situations on a more frequent basis than had I lived outside of the community. Since the inhabitants are use to Léonard Bilioki having strange white people living at his house to study Yambetta, my living there was not unusual. Most of the time when I stated that I was staying with the Bilioki's, the inhabitants immediately assumed I was from S.I.L. itself. Of course, that meant everyone thought I was coming to learn their language and/or translate the Bible and were therefore mystified that I was only staying for three weeks and had no previous knowledge of Yambetta. But people were happy that a student from the United States had come to study their community and language, and that was useful in finding people to interview.

The initial objective of this study was to discover what, if any, impact YALICO was having on the local community. Specifically, I wanted to investigate the work they were doing, and whether that work was useful to the local population. To help uncover the answer to these questions, I spent the first week learning what YALICO did – its projects and goals and other general information, and observing the population to see if the Yambetta language was even in use, and if so, who was using it. I soon discovered that a majority of the population knew the local language, and therefore could presumably use YALICO's services. The following week was spent verifying my initial assumption that most people spoke

Yambetta through interviews, both formal and informal, and trying to discover who used the YALICO services. This proved to be difficult in that the head of YALICO was gone, and there was not a written record of who has used the services. Also, as people were busy trying to harvest their crops and were tired in the afternoon when interviews were conducted, the interviews were generally less in-depth than I had hoped. This difficulty led to me to switch from looking at the impact YALICO has on the development of the village to whether or not YALICO affects the probability of the Yambetta language being spoken after the next couple generations.

There were several constraints present in this study, which constitutes its main weakness. The first constraint was, predictably, the time allotted for the study itself. Three weeks is simply not enough time to get to know the area, gain the trust of the participants and follow-up on all the questions that cropped up after I had time to reflect on my interviews and observations. The second constraint was my inability to interview the children of the village about their opinions on the Yambetta language, and therefore, there is a gap in those represented in this study. I did try to overcome this particular gap through my observations, but observation alone cannot provide enough insight as to whether or not the children will continue to use Yambetta in the future or teach it to their children. The third constraint also deals with interviews, but this time in administration. Most of the interviewees were chosen by my translator, and he was also the head of YALICO. This meant that 1) he was more likely to choose his friends and those people more supportive of his work, and 2) I could not ask people if they thought his organization was useful or important since presumably they would say yes with my translator there. Therefore, since a bias of those individuals more likely to speak Yambetta is present in my sources, it will also be present in this study. Due to these constraints, it is more than possible that a future study, one with more time and more

access to the population as a whole, will come to conclusions that may conflict with those made in this study.

YALICO

The main question I had upon arriving in the village of Yambetta was “what does S.I.L. have in place in the village?”. Specifically, I wanted to know what services were being offered and who ran them. I was particularly interested in the non-religious services being provided because there was some skepticism among my classmates as to the validity of S.I.L.’s claim to provide non-religious services without a heavy religious influence on those same services. To answer this question, I talked to some of the local volunteers from S.I.L. who were working with YALICO.

The Yambetta Linguistic Committee is a grass-roots organization started in 1998 by Léonard-Albert Bilioki in order to promote and record the Yambetta language. It is affiliated with YANOGUNUA: Fédération des comités de langues du Mbam, whose objectives include, but are not limited to : “la promotion: de la littérature en langues maternelles, de la Traduction des Saintes Ecritures, [et] des cadres en langues, [et] le développement social, économique et culturel de [leurs] populations respectives”⁹. So far, YALICO has translated from French into Yambetta parts of the Bible and two developmental pamphlets, as well as creating a course on how to read and write Yambetta. For their work, the staff at YALICO receives “encouragements” from S.I.L. and a missionary couple in the United States of America in the form of 2,000 cfa a month as well as the occasional help with school fees because “la culture ne donne pas beaucoup d’argent. Juste pour manger à la maison”¹⁰. Despite the help, Bilioki insists that this is a volunteer organization and that he and his colleagues work with S.I.L. because they believe in the importance of the Yambetta language.

⁹ Meeting Notes, 27-04-2001

¹⁰ Bilioki, 12-04-2007

Through their words and actions, it is easy to see the strong religious drive in YALICO's staff members. When asked what YALICO does, the first thing Bilioki and his colleagues mention is Bible translation. At this point in time, YALICO (and Bilioki working alone before them) has translated Mark, Romans, Titus, Philemon, John, the history of Anne, and the following parables from Luke: the Good Samaritan, the lost sheep, the lost son, and the lost coin. The previous parables are recorded with Yambetta praise songs on a CD currently at S.I.L. offices in Yaoundé; however, due to a lack of funds, it is not yet available to the inhabitants of the village. Additionally, "Lectionnaires, Annes A, B, et C" have been developed and are used in the local church. This collection of material represents about half of the work done by YALICO, and takes up more than half of the shelf space in the office. Jean, a local teacher of the Yambetta language and staff member at YALICO, stated that "si les gens écoutent et lisent les paroles de Dieu dans leur langue, ils pourront les comprendre mieux et plus facilement qu'en français"¹¹. Considering the frequency with which the staff members cite religious reasons for their motivation, the logical conclusion is that giving the inhabitants of Yambetta the ability to read and hear the Bible in Yambetta is the YALICO staff's primary motivation for continuing their work.

However, even with promoting Christianity as their primary objective, the YALICO staff is also dedicated to the promotion of cultural pride and the overall development¹² of the village itself. One main service provided by YALICO is its adult classes on reading and writing the Yambetta language. These classes are taught by volunteers, often previous students, in all of Yambetta's ten neighborhoods, with class sizes ranging from only 2 students to more than 20 and generally lasting around 6 months per session. The text for this class is YALICO's Manuel pour Lire et Ecrire la Langue Yambetta and it costs 1,000 cfa, which makes up the entire 'school fee' for the student. Covered in this manual is the

¹¹ Jean, 18-04-2007

¹² Development according to the YALICO staff is improving the standard of living of the inhabitants of Yambetta

Yambetta alphabet (created following the alphabet designed for all of Cameroon's local languages) and how to note the four tones and gutteral stop that are found within the Yambetta language. It is important to note that this manual is not a how-to-speak Yambetta book; it does not cover any grammar rules (such as word order, verbs, etc...) and the only vocabulary listed is there to show the student how the letter sounds and not to build-up the student's vocabulary as would a conventional language book. When asked why this was, Bilioki stated that 1) there was no money available to create the second book which would cover grammar rules, and 2) that the inhabitants already knew how to speak Yambetta – “c'est naturelle”, and therefore, it was more necessary to focus on those linguistic aspects that were not naturally learned in life – the reading and writing of one's language¹³. There was a text created aimed towards children which the schools have agreed to use on a weekly basis but due to a technical error it was lost and has not yet been recreated. Nonetheless, the work done on these two texts shows a desire for the inhabitants of Yambetta to be able to express themselves in their local language.

The ability to read Yambetta would not be very useful if not for the literature provided by YALICO, as there is currently no other source of Yambettan reading material. In addition to the Bible translations, there exists two different pamphlets on HIV/AIDS and how to prevent its spread. The first pamphlet, free to anyone who asks for it, is a two-sided handout that covers the basics of who is at risk for HIV/AIDS and how it is and is not spread. The second pamphlet is 20 pages long and goes into greater depth on the points touched in the first packet, although this one costs 2,300 cfa. It also adds scriptural references to back-up certain practices, but it is not limited to the 'traditional' Christian teachings as it covers the use of condoms and other aspects of protection often missing in Christian HIV/AIDS literature. This is important as it demonstrates a willingness to use all current methods to stop the spread of

¹³ Bilioki, 13-04-2007

HIV/AIDS and not just those preached by the Vatican. Lastly, there is a short book containing many of the local “histoires”, or fables, of the area in Yambetta, and although it is not currently available to the inhabitants in general, there are a few copies used in the language courses. The fact that this book exists proves one inhabitant’s statement that YALICO is important “pour améliorer et préserver la mémoire du peuple”¹⁴ as it insures that so long as there are readers of Yambetta, the stories most important to the population, and therefore the culture that accompanies those stories, will be available to future generations. Overall, the current literature provided by YALICO – the Bible translations, the histoires and text, and the developmental packets – aim to address the cultural and developmental needs of the population.

Should funding become available in the future, Bilioki hopes to add to the current literature provided by YALICO. Because “les gens ici cultivent, et surtout le cacao”, pamphlets that address better farming techniques, such as how to use fertilizer and how to protect plants from insects, is first on the list of things to do. Another issue that Bilioki wishes to address is the illnesses found in the region, and especially how to treat a child’s diarrhea. This could be accomplished through pamphlets similar to that of the HIV/AIDS pamphlets. Lastly, there has been talk of a local newspaper in Yambetta. These ideas all touch on perceived cultural and developmental needs, as does the literature already created.

Having talked to the staff and reviewed the current services available, I discovered a religious organization run by locals who truly desire to serve their community - spiritually, culturally, and developmentally. YALICO strives to identify those needs by talking with their neighbors and holding community-wide meetings and asking them what is important to them in conjunction with S.I.L.’s goals of translating the Bible. All-in-all, I found YALICO to be a group to be mostly-balanced between the religious and the secular aspects of life. And if

¹⁴ Jean, 17-04-2007

there exists a heavy religious influence within the organization itself, that is only to be expected when a group short on funds is supported by those who wish their religious beliefs to be promoted.

Role of Yambetta in the Babetta neighborhood

Having discovered a living organization in the form of YALICO, the next question to be answered was “is their work relevant?”. That is to say, are they providing a service that people want and can use, or is their work mainly safeguarding their language for future linguistic research? YALICO’s work could only be truly useful if the inhabitants of Yambetta as a whole actually spoke that language, and not just a select few. It was then necessary to discover the linguistic situation of the area. Do those living in Yambetta speak mainly French or mainly their local language, or are they more bilingual in their habitual speech?

How do you define a person as bilingual, and are there different types of it? In his dissertation, David Tiomajou talks about different categories of bilingualism found in Cameroon. The first category is bilingualism with national languages, which is “fostered by the family” and takes place either at home and/or “in ordinary daily activities which are not formal”¹⁵. Formal activities in this paper will refer to those activities not involved with the government or institutional education. The second main category is bilingualism with a national and an official language, and the third is bilingualism with official languages. This third category is defined as involving “English and French and to some extent Spanish, German and Latin” and “is the result of professional efforts or constraints. It can be either formal or informal ...[and] affects only the official languages”¹⁶. In this way, people can identify the type of bilingualism found in themselves and in their neighborhoods.

¹⁵ Tiomajou, 257

¹⁶ Tiomajou, 257

The question then is to which category do most inhabitants of Babetta belong? The third category, bilingualism with official languages, can be disregarded as I only found one person who spoke English, and she was a relative newcomer to the village from the anglophone region of Cameroon. As the third category requires bilingualism with both the official languages, this excludes the inhabitants of Yambetta as a whole, which leaves the other two categories. In my survey as well as in casual conversations I discovered that everyone spoke at least two and as many as four local languages. So the first category, that of bilingualism in national languages, is a fit. And considering that all the signs, schools and a majority of the population utilize French, the second category is not only a fit, but the best fit for the inhabitants of Babetta. But how good a fit is this second category? It is true that both languages can be heard in the village, but to what extent? To answer this question, it is helpful to look at a typical day in the neighborhood¹⁷.

As the day breaks, kids are awoken by “Reveilles-toi!” if the sounds of the goats, pigs and birdlife has not already done so. Parents give further commands to their children in French, but can be heard talking amongst themselves in both Yambetta and French, and sometimes Yambetta commands slip into those being directed at the children, to which the kids generally respond in French. After morning chores are finished, those kids who are old enough go to school, while the adults go to the fields and those not old enough for school stay in the care of a family member or neighbor. As each group heads out to their destinations, calls of “Wonconyé” and “Ayé” and more rarely “Bonjour” or “Good Morning” can be heard passing from one group to another. On the farm, silence is the rule but is often broken by various commands and songs. In general, French, Yambetta and Cameroonian Pidgin English are spoken in equal measure in the conversations, but Yambetta reigns in the songs. At school, French presides as is directed by law, but children can be heard having conversations in

¹⁷ This fictional day is built on two-weeks of living in the village itself with a local family.

Yambetta, though rarely. Those taking care of the youngest at home speak mostly in French, but occasionally give mini-lessons during work breaks on the Yambetta language in the form of giving commands in that language and praising the child when he/she responds correctly or repeating themselves if they are misinterpreted.

Those working in the fields and those at school arrive home about the same time, and afternoon chores and dinner are started. Classmates joke around with one another mostly in French while parents discuss the day and converse in the same language that is broken-up by outbursts of Yambetta. Adults address children are as likely to do so in Yambetta as in French, and the kids generally respond in whatever language is directed at them. Chores are generally accompanied by song, sometimes in French but more often than not in Yambetta. Elderly neighbors come over and the conversations, both adult and child, switch to almost entirely into Yambetta. The youngest children are given additional language lessons by the grandparents and are enthusiastically praised for every word they learn. Dinner is eaten and the neighbors all leave, and the house is once again filled with both French and Yambetta, with the parents generally switching to Yambetta and the school-age kids discussing the day in French. If there is no school the following day, grandparents can be convinced to recite a *histoire* for the kids, almost exclusively conducted in Yambetta. The night ends with “Bonsoir”, and everyone disperses for bed.

Some aspects of life not covered in this hypothetical day are those activities that happen on a regular but not daily basis, and need to be explored as they are still important to the life of the inhabitants. One of those aspects is the weekly church service; here, Yambetta and French share the duty (or pleasure) of teaching God’s Word. The preacher gives his sermon in French and someone from YALICO repeats it in Yambetta. Bible verses are translated when possible from French to Yambetta. Worship songs are split almost fifty-fifty between the two languages, although one song in English is often sung. The congregation can

be heard talking amongst themselves in both French and Yambetta, although with all the people talking at once it is difficult to say which of the two is the dominant language. Another component of village life not covered by the previous day is the market, which takes place every ten days and provides the inhabitants of Yambetta a closer source of necessities such as oil lamps, medicine, soap, dried fish and clothes than travelling to Bafia. Here, vendors are generally older men and women, and tend to chat amongst themselves in Yambetta but generally switch to French to talk to most of the customers. Occasionally, Yambetta still carries through the conversation, but prices are almost exclusively given in French. A last part of the inhabitants' lives that is missing is the "reunions", or meetings, that are held on an irregular basis. These reunions may cover local politics, how to attract aid to the village, discuss local needs or any number of other topics that are deemed important. The reunion I was able to observe involved the local political leaders (all over the age of 40) and discussed different organizations that could possibly help meet the needs of the village. This meeting was started in Yambetta, switched to French, and then back to Yambetta, sometimes in the same sentence. As I do not speak Yambetta, I was unable to hear what was discussed in that language, but the French parts generally discussed who had been recently elected to what position in the village, and the various organizations which could possibly be of help. However, the Yambetta parts of the conversation were generally accompanied by a great deal of laughter and exclamations and pats on the knees, and I could not help but think that more than business was being discussed at these points. Overall, these activities demonstrated a consistency in the use of Yambetta that the previously described day showed about the bilingualism found in Yambetta.

What does the hypothetical day and the regular activities tell us about the extent of bilingualism in the Babetta neighborhood? The main thing they show is that while almost everyone speaks Yambetta, the people who use it the most often are, predictably, the elders of

the population. Indeed, I needed a translator for the majority of elderly people I interviewed as they spoke Yambetta and other local languages almost exclusively. This is mostly likely because they can get almost everything they need – both material and otherwise – through the use of their local language; friends and families all speak to them in Yambetta, providing for their social needs and since the majority are farmers or stay at home to watch the youngest, there is no economic reason to learn French. “Given their lifetime investments in local languages, modes of dress and skills, [the elderly] can produce the commodities they desire – e.g. camaraderie, status, consumption – more cheaply using their existing capital than by investing in new languages and accoutrements”¹⁸. Capital in this sense does not refer exclusively to money or the accumulation of material wealth, but also to the ‘commodities’ mentioned in the previous quote, and is useful in explaining why the older generation has not learned as much French as the younger generations – it is simply easier not to do so.

This concept of commodities also explains why younger generations *have* learned both French and Yambetta. By learning Yambetta, the younger generations are showing a desire to build a relationship with their parents and grandparents. Another commodity acquired by the use of Yambetta is cultural pride seen in those local histories and church songs that can be understood and repeated to others. Smiles and exclamations of “Tu comprends!” always accompanied my attempts to learn Yambetta words and expressions. Additionally, the inhabitants of Yambetta warmed up noticeably when I started employing Yambetta greetings, as gifts of fruit and invitations to dinner started showing up the day after I started using those greetings. However, in order to do well in school, children have to learn French, and so the younger generations speak French as well as Yambetta. French is also useful for connecting with those outside of the village or with those moving into the village to find work. This is perhaps easier than trying to teach those newcomers the local language, assuming they wish

¹⁸ Jha 5

to, which I did not find to be the case. Three out of the four individuals I talked to who were not from the area did not speak any Yambetta, and the fourth stated she could not speak it but could understand a little since it was similar to her local language of Yambessa. Although their lack of Yambetta skills could be attributed to the difficulty of learning the local language, I suspect that is not the case, since all the individuals I talked to had been in the village for at least a year and as long as five years. While this may or may not be enough time to become fluent Yambetta, that is enough time to learn more than the greetings, and I did not ever hear these individuals use Yambetta for more than that. This reluctance to use Yambetta may be evidence that it is easier for everyone involved to speak French with those not from the area, as well as indicating that commodities such as camaraderie can be achieved among the younger generations even when Yambetta is not spoken. Nonetheless, because many of the inhabitants can only achieve some relationships through the use of Yambetta, mainly those with elderly family members and neighbors, it is still a vital tool to the younger generations in the village.

Another way of analysing the linguistic situation in Yambetta can be found in Ronald Wardhaugh chapter on speech communities. Although Wardhaugh provides a number of definitions of what a speech community actually is, the one most useful for this study comes from J.J. Gumperz's definition of a linguistic community: "A social group which may be either monolingual or multilingual, held together by frequency of social interaction patterns and set off from the surrounding areas by weaknesses in the lines of communication"¹⁹. Here, the "frequency of social interactions" refers to more than simply seeing someone or knowing their name. Rather, it is those things that bring a variety of individuals to the point of saying "yes, I can identify with you", or the level of community cohesiveness found within the group itself. The strength of this community cohesiveness can be very influential on the choices

¹⁹ Waudhaugh 120

individuals in the group make. In general, people wish to be a member of their community and will choose to acquire those aspects that mark them as a part of the community, whether that be the shoes someone wears or the music they listen to. In the case of a speech community, although there may be other markers that distinguish those who are “inside” the group from those who are not, the unifying factor is the language you use and the way you use it.

How then can we describe the Yambetta speech community? Is Yambetta a necessary commodity within the community that defines who is and who is not a part of the group? To answer these questions, we must first make sure that there is a strong sense of community cohesiveness to be found in Yambetta; otherwise, there is no speech community to analyze. Although this study did not allow for an in-depth analysis of the level of community cohesiveness in Yambetta, the observations made allow for the preliminary conclusion to be made that there is a strong sense of community in the Yambetta village. Just about everyone knows their neighbors, and neighbors here can refer to those individuals living a mile or two away. These same neighbors can be seen working in one another’s fields, helping each other get water from the well and doing laundry by the river. Neighborhood boys and men can be found hunting down the pig for dinner. At least three times a week, people from the village came to the house in which I was living in search of food, and when we had enough, we shared; if there was not enough, they asked the next house. When our family ran out of petrol for the oil lamp, our neighbors provided us with some until we could buy more. In addition, if someone, especially a child, asks a farmer for one of their mangoes or manioc, if they have enough, the farmer will gladly share a part of their harvest, and can often be seen gifting friends and neighbors with fruit and other food without being asked. This is not to say that life is without arguments or disagreements within the village; they are definitely present in the village. However, it is easy to see that this is a close-knit community, especially in

comparison to those neighborhoods in the United States where neighbors do not even know one another's name, let alone feel comfortable enough sharing food and portions of their work with one another.

Is the Yambetta language one of those things that ties this community together? We have already seen how it is a constant companion to those living in the village itself, and the way in which it is used by specific members to gain friendship and other needs met. It is interesting to note that when I asked who spoke Yambetta in the village, every participant responded with "tout le monde". When I mentioned that I had met individuals in the village itself who, in fact, did not speak Yambetta, it was brushed off with a variation of "bien sûr, il y a des étrangers ici" with the tone and the word "étrangers", or 'strangers', implying that they were not, in fact, a part of the Yambetta community, despite working in one another's fields or sharing some of the harvest with one another. This demonstrates that Yambetta does indeed bring individuals together, and that while French is used in a similar manner, it is much easier if an individual speaks Yambetta. Where does this leave us as we try to define the Yambetta village speech community? It results in the following definition "the Yambetta speech community contains mainly those who are bilingual in both French and Yambetta, as well as those only bilingual in local languages, of which Yambetta is one." In this way, we distinguish it from surrounding communities who do not speak any Yambetta and yet, by using the word 'mainly', allow for the minority in the village itself who does not speak Yambetta.

With reference to these commodities and speech communities, what can we say about the role of the Yambetta language in a village that has the same name? We can say that the members of this particular speech community feel that the Yambetta language is a useful tool to acquire those commodities they desire – be it money, love, friendship, or cultural pride. It may not be the only tool available, but it is still one of the major tools that belongs to the

inhabitants of Yambetta village. So long as that belief holds true, the Yambetta language will continue to be spoken alongside French.

The Future of Yambetta?

Is Yambetta likely to be spoken after the next few generations? Languages tend to die out for two main reasons: children do not learn the language and/or the population of that language itself dies out as a group²⁰. Since there is little fear of the population of Yambetta dying out any time soon, and we know that the children have learned Yambetta, it looks like it will be spoken for at least one more generation. But will today's children teach their children Yambetta, or will they view it as a tool that no longer serves as the easiest method to get what they desire? How does YALICO affect those things that will influence whether the next generation teaches their children the local language? These are important questions whose answers will allow us to predict the likelihood of Yambetta remaining a living language in the next two hundred years.

One major influence on Yambetta culture, and therefore the Yambetta people, is the local church; in a church building that holds around 200 people, there is never an empty seat and an additional 50-100 people bring their own seats or stand outside through the two-hour long service each week. This number represents roughly half of the population of Babetta, the neighborhood the church serves. Its influence is seen not only in the attendance of the congregation, but also in that congregation's joy at singing the worship songs as often, or more often, than the secular songs. The grandpa of the village, a man of almost 100 years, stated the reason he had reached his age was because he had kept God in his thoughts his whole life²¹. Jean, another participant, stated that he preferred to speak the language God had

²⁰ Cahill 1999

²¹ Grandpère du village 14-04-2007

given him, Yambetta²². These remarks, when coupled with the attendance at church and the frequency with which Yambetta songs are sung, indicate that the church is able to influence its congregation. Because the church is bilingual in nature, it will promote both French and Yambetta, and as the Bible is translated more and more by YALICO, the ability to utilise Yambetta in church will grow. So long as people continue to attend church, and YALICO continues to push for the use of Yambetta within the church, the church will continue to be a positive influence on people's decision to use Yambetta.

Of course, the church is not the only influence on people's decision to use Yambetta or not, and there is less choice involved as to whether to attend or not, or what language should be used than there is in the church. The education system of Cameroon is perhaps just as strong an influence, and is generally seen as a negative influence on a population's decision to speak Yambetta. In Cameroon, where schools are conducted in either French or English, local languages have been left out for the most part, and one hears stories of students being punish for speaking their local language in the school itself. People often site schools as a main reason for a language's decline, and as languages mirrors culture and ways of thinking, possible resources are lost as well. Certainly, the *Projet de Recherche Operationnelle pour l'Enseignement des Langues au Cameroun* (hereafter PROPELCA) believes this to be true. Defying those who believe that Cameroon can only develop when everyone speaks the same language, PROPELCA states that Cameroon should not follow Western methods to development, but rather utilise "ses propres langues, ses propres ressources humaines pour assurer un avenir viable à la jeunesse montante"²³. Furthermore, they state that "la réussite dans la vie commence par la réussite scolaire [m]ais la réussite scolaire est avant tout une réussite linguistique »²⁴. In other words, a child can only succeed in life if they succeed in school, but that children cannot succeed in school without being able to use their local

²² Jean 17-04-2007

²³ Tadadjeu 16

²⁴ Tadadjeu 11

languages for at least part of their time in school. These two quotes demonstrate that PROPELCA believes the schools to have a large influence on people's languages, and that these languages in turn can help or hinder the development of the nation as a whole. In their opinion, the viability of a language depends on whether it is taught and/or utilized in the schools themselves, and not just in the homes.

Arguing against the education system's ability to save a local language from dying out is Joshua A. Fishman, who believes the education system's affect on local languages, especially in saving them, to be minimal at best. He argues that "mother tongue transmission is essentially informal and continuous phenomenon and schools are essentially both formal and 'passing' experiences...Out-of-school hours are much more numerous and much more influential than are in-school hours and interactions"²⁵. From his point of view, even if a language is taught in the schools, it will not be utilized by the population unless it is also spoken within the community. On the other hand, this quote also suggests that even if Yambetta is not taught in the schools, children will still speak it so long as they are encouraged to do so outside of school. Taking this viewpoint, we can argue that the family and the church are more influential than the education system. Perhaps YALICO should not focus their attention on getting Yambetta taught in the schools themselves since it would not matter if the students do not use it in the home and in other social interactions. This leaves the schools as a neutral influence on people's decisions to speak Yambetta or not to speak it.

However, if the schools can be argued to be an essentially neutral force playing on people's decisions to speak Yambetta or not, the way in which that school system integrates its students into the world of globalization is not neutral. This is done not so much by what is being taught in the schools themselves, although some would argue that point, but rather in the way that the local school system removes students from the village itself and into

²⁵ Fisherman 118

neighboring cities. By moving out of the village, students are exposed more and more to the effects of globalization, which a lack of electricity and the price of radio batteries had been kept to a minimum in the village itself. The mass media brings with it pictures of other cultures, most notably those of the United States and Europe, which affects the way students view their own culture. They see the luxuries available in the world, and desire to earn enough money to at least have some of those luxuries in their own homes, and many want to travel and live abroad. To do that, students understand that they need to speak a Western language, and their own local language becomes less useful in gaining those desirable commodities. In the village, Yambetta is used to gain friendships and communicate with the family, and French is not needed to have food on the table if you have a farm that supplies you with all the food you need. In the city of Bafia (where most students go for secondary school), however, French is used to communicate with classmates, in the market, to listen to the music playing on the radio and the television, and to find jobs. According to Prusherie Tsade, an employee of the Ministry of the Domaine, speaking Yambetta is not useful to finding a job and can even hinder your chances at getting a job if your French is not quite up to par²⁶. And jobs are what you need if you can no longer count on your farm to feed you, and you want more than ‘the basics’ in life, such as a CD player, television or a ticket to France. In this case, while a student may still use Yambetta to communicate with his/her parents or grandparents in the village, that is less frequently than he/she speak French to those in the city. The “informal and continuous phenomenon” Fisherman talks about is broken up, especially if students are home only for holidays and summer break. This can also take place once the village of Yambetta gains access to electricity, which given the governmental grant that was recieved in April of 2007, may happen sooner rather than later. In this case, the mass media will be able to affect not only the high school students, but families as a whole. This

²⁶ Tsade 22-04-2007

then would be a negative influence on the population's decision on which language to teach their children.

Of course, the previous paragraph makes it sound as though people in general, and students in particular, will gladly give up their own culture for another. While cultures are absorbed by other cultures all the time, it is not necessarily true that people will choose French or English over Yambetta simply because they started watching television or listening to the radio. Competing with the mass media is the church and the efforts being made by YALICO to increase local pride in their language and culture. And with Cameroon being advertised as Africa in Miniature, there is also the possibility that the mass media itself will influence people to take pride in their culture and not assimilate into another culture. Evidence for this path can be seen in the number of Cameroonian musicians played on the radio and on the television, and in the way that most students I talked with preferred those Cameroonian musicians more often than not to the musicians from other countries. While these musicians may not be singing in Yambetta, they can be heard singing in their own local language, and this has the ability to encourage people to take pride in the local languages of Cameroon. In addition, there was a study done on how companies are using the stereotypes of specific Cameroonian ethnicities to sell their products²⁷. If companies are playing on the local ethnicities, that can only signify a general pride in the ethnicity by the people themselves, since companies almost always play those cards that will earn them the biggest take in terms of profit. With the encouragement of the church, YALICO and even aspects of the media itself, the effects of going away for school may not be as all-powerful as is first believed, and undermines the overall negative influences of mass media on an individual's decision to speak and teach Yambetta to their children.

²⁷ Unknown

In fact, there is no reason as to why the local languages and the official languages cannot be utilized in the same manner that they are being used today within Yambetta village. Even though French, with its ability to give access to jobs and education and being reinforced in the mass media, will continue to have a dominant linguistic role in the Yambetta community itself, it will not necessarily wipe out the Yambetta language. As more than one participant stated in answer to the question “Pensez-vous que vos enfants et leurs enfants parleraient Yambetta?”, it all depends on whether children decide to accept or reject the culture and language of their parents.

Conclusion

Looking at all the evidence, it seems likely that Yambetta will be among the 3,000 languages spoken two hundred years from now, although the likelihood of it last much longer than that is shaky at best. YALICO, with S.I.L. behind them, is working hard to give the population a fighting chance at keeping their culture and language by encouraging them to become literate in Yambetta itself. By recording Yambettan stories and songs, and providing reading material that is helpful both materially and spiritually, YALICO gives future generations incentive to continue to teach their children Yambetta, and thereby preserving their language and culture. Using this community as an example, we can see that the Summer Institute for Linguistics is an organization that does, in fact, work to preserve the languages of the world. Unfortunately, this community study does not provide clear indication that S.I.L.’s programs 1) help those who do not want any religious material, and 2) is the main cause for the pride in which this community takes in speaking their language. To clarify the first issue, a study needs to be done on a community that does not want Christian material translated but does desire to have their language recorded. As to the second question, a comparison between one or more communities in which there are no S.I.L. programs in place and one or more

communities in which S.I.L. is working would be helpful. This future study should look at how the communities feel about their local language(s) and the likelihood that they will be spoken after a couple of years. In this manner, S.I.L.'s affect on local communities and their languages can be seen in greater depth, and whether they are an effective organization to attempt to save some of the world's endangered languages.

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Appendix I: Questionnaire

- 1) Quel âge avez-vous ?
- 2) Quel est votre village d'origine ?
- 3) Quelle est votre langue maternelle ?
- 4) Combien de langues parlez-vous ?
- 5) En général, quelle langue parlez-vous le plus souvent ?
- 6) Avec qui parlez-vous votre langue maternelle ?
- 7) Si vous devriez choisir une seule langue, laquelle préféreriez-vous ?
- 8) Est-ce qu'il y a des choses ou idées dans votre langue maternelle qui ne s'expriment pas en français ?
- 9) Pensez-vous que vos enfants et leurs enfants parleraient votre langue maternelle ?
- 10) Pensez-vous que votre langue maternelle est importante pour a) la vie sociale et b) gagner de l'argent ?
- 11) Quelles sont les besoins du village ?
- 12) Est-ce qu'il y a d'autres choses que vous voudriez me dire sur votre langue ou culture ?