Abstract

Ethnolinguistic vitality theory (ELVT) grew out of a political and intellectual milieu in western Europe and North America, Canada in particular, which set highly politicized ethnolinguistic groups against each other. The analytical concepts of ELVT emphasizing well-profiled group-based boundaries (in-group/out-group, subordinate/dominant etc.) privilege the conflictual dimension of multilingualism. In this context the existence of linguistic societies displaying relatively stable multilingualism, often with multiple lingua francas, appears as an anomaly in ELVT theorizing. I argue on the basis of the language situation in northeast Nigeria that there exist what I term complex linguistic societies which, for a variety of reasons, favor a stable multilingualism. Smaller ethnolinguistic groups are not necessarily threatened in the face of politically or demographically dominant ones. ELVT, it is argued, is best suited as an analytic tool to describing what are termed simple linguistic societies where implemented languages are politically instrumentalized in the service of ethnolinguistic groups.

Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory and Complex Linguistic Societies

An enduring theme in the study of language pertains to questions of contact and the attendant problem of maintenance and change. In its linguistic and sociolinguistic ramifications it is a vast topic with, in a sense, no beginning and no end. I will use this observation to justify beginning at an arbitrary position in the vast fabric, and I have chosen the following premise as the starting point: there are linguistically simple and linguistically complex societies.1

To introduce this issue it is first of all necessary to have a framework for measuring the linguistic complexity of societies. Global measures of societal linguistic complexity go back at least to the 1960’s in the work of Stewart and later Ferguson (see Fasold 1984: 61-84 for summary). Ferguson took nation states as the basic domain of measure and classified them according to such factors as the number of languages spoken in a country and the status of these languages in terms of number of speakers, literacy, use in education and religion, legal status and use as first and second language.

Though using essentially the same social, demographic and status parameters as classificatory instruments, a quite different use for these was developed in the 1970’s in what was termed ethnolinguistic vitality theory (ELVT for short, Giles et alia 1977). The basic innovation of ELVT was to link languages to social groups and to inquire into how these ethnolinguistic groups in contact would react linguistically. The outcomes of contact were looked at in particular in terms of the notions of language accommodation, maintenance and/or shift. Ethnolinguistic groups could maintain their language, accommodate partly towards that of other group(s), or shift towards the other language(s).

Languages were again classified according to status and demography parameters, which were hypothesized to play a role in the question of which languages in a contact situation would spread, which recede. Beyond these parameters, however, a further array of conceptual categories have been used by various authors working in the ELVT tradition to give predictive power to the model, including the following:

1 Such broad typologization is not new. Lambert (1999) divides states into three broad classes based on their degree of multilinguality, homogeneous (e.g USA), dyadic (e.g Belgium), and mosaic (e.g Nigeria). What I would stress, however, are the different linkages behind the generalizing typologies. Lambert is interested in correlations between typological status and aspects of language policy (1999: 4-6). The thrust of my own suggestions is to look at connections in terms of language form and individual linguistic behavior.
subordinate/dominant group, ingroup/outgroup, availability of cognitive alternatives, hardness or softness of group boundaries, perceived group or perceived ethnolinguistic vitality and convergence/divergence.

Various instantiations of these concepts have been invoked to make statements about language learning predilections (Giles and Byrne 1982), language maintenance (Giles and Johnson 1987), and to structure research on many speech communities. In one study, for instance, Mexican Americans speaking Spanish are considered to be a dominated group speaking a minority language. Whether or not this group will shift towards American English is hypothesized to depend on whether or not they perceive cognitive alternatives to their dominated status. If they do not, for example, they are predicted to converge linguistically towards standard American norms, whereas if they do they are predicted to diverge linguistically away from these norms (i.e. to maintain Spanish, Giles et alia 1977: 332).

It is important to observe that ethnolinguistic vitality theory grew out of multilingual milieus in Canada, Wales, and Catalonia, among other areas, and has more recently (1994) been applied to other regions, (e.g. Vietnamese immigrant communities in Australia (Currie and Hogg 1994), Arabic and Hebrew in Israel (Kraemer, Olshtain and Badier 1994) and Frisian in the Netherlands (Ytsma, Viladot and Giles 1994).) In these societies, a fundamental problem with political repercussions is seen in the dominance of the standard (English, Castilian, Dutch) against minority languages like French, Welsh, Catalan or Frisian.

While the vitality approach has been criticized of late (Blackledge and Pavlenko 2001: 244) for its positing of either/or group membership and language loyalty, it offers an analytically appropriate framework for group-language dynamics in the western societies which it describes. The overwhelming dominance of the national standard or standards does pose a threat to any smaller language, institutionalized support is an important means of maintenance against the standard, and this implies a politicization of linguistic minorities.2

With this classificatory background in mind I turn to the main theme of the paper, linguistically simple and linguistically complex societies. In section 1 I will summarize what I understand by linguistically simple societies. In section 2 I treat linguistically simple ones, arguing that ethnolinguistic vitality theory (ELVT) is structurally unsuited towards describing language dynamics in complex linguistic societies. In section 3 I identify key sociolinguistic and socio-political factors underpinning complex linguistic societies, and suggest that they engender certain types of linguistic behavior, as manifested for instance in patterns of codeswitching. This section is based descriptively on the language situation in northeast Nigeria, with particular focus on one minority linguistic group, Nigerian Arabs (known locally as Shuwa Arabs). In the concluding section 4 I briefly return to the relevance of the ELVT to complex linguistic societies.

1. Simple linguistic societies

Substantial attributes of linguistically simple societies include the following (a fifth is added at the end of this section).

1. They possess an implemented standard language

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2 Blackledge’s own study on Bengali women in England itself fits into the classic ELVT framework very well, despite his own criticisms of its theoretical premises. Bengali women in England, native speakers of Sylheti with Bengali as a second and literary language, are disempowered through their own lack of English and through the non-recognition of their own languages as desirable cultural capital. One could easily recast this situation in an ELVT script in which minority languages are excluded from domains dominated by English, the mothers striving to maintain knowledge of Sylheti and Bengali at home.
2. The standard has a well-profiled political identity
3. Linguistic minorities will have a political identity
4. Linguistic minorities will typically perceive their language as threatened by the standard

Looking briefly at these attributes one by one, by ‘implemented’ standard I mean a standard whose norms are effectively transmitted via various formal institutions, above all by educational ones and the media. These norms are internalized throughout large parts of the population. The fact that a country has a well-defined standard which is the basis of a teaching curriculum does not guarantee that the standard is implemented, as is demonstrated in the Arab world. Standard Arabic, though the sole language of instruction, has, for many reasons, never become a mother tongue. It thus contrasts with Standard German or Standard English, which is, with only slight deviation, the native language of most Germans, Americans, Australians, etc (respectively of course).

The political identity of the standard is associated with a ruling ideology. This need not imply repression of other languages or varieties, and its identification with ruling structures is often not official. The use of English is not prescribed in the American constitution, nor is German in the German. Nonetheless, the political importance of these two languages comes to the fore when they encounter other large languages. This is witnessed in the various initiatives to give ‘official’ English in California and other states (in the face of Spanish, Fishman 1986) or to upgrade the status of German in the EU (in the face of entrenched English and French). Recently there have been calls to require individuals seeking German citizenship to demonstrate a proficiency in German. Association with a ruling ideology can, of course, lead to repression of smaller languages. France since its revolution in the late eighteenth century has basically had a monolingualistic linguistic policy to the detriment of its smaller languages (Gordon 1978: chapter 3). As noted above association with a ruling class need not lead to effective implementation of the language, as already seen in the case of Arabic.

Points (3) and (4) go hand in hand. The use of the term ‘linguistic minority’ in local discourse implies an instrumentalization of language for group political ends. It is certainly no accident that the discourse on linguistic minorities has been most intense in western countries (e.g. French in Canada, Welsh in Britain, Catalan in Spain) where language provides one of the most important identity badges for groups whose political interests extend beyond language maintenance. Language policy is neatly coterminous with a larger political agenda, and it provides a tangible rallying point for political action: protecting the minority language against the standard is a ready-made policy plank.

That the issue of linguistic minorities has not been prominent in countries far more multilingual than those cited above, Nigeria for instance, shows that mere lingual demographics is not criterial. It would be interesting to look more closely at the conditions under which language politicizes. The case of Algeria may be mentioned in this context. There an ostensibly anti-French movement that promulgated (Standard) Arabic as the national language in the late eighties quickly led to a reaction among Berber speakers demanding recognition of their language (Chaker 1997, Brahimi and Owens 2000 for background). Even allowing for the fact that the politicization of language issues goes back to the pre-independence era, it is remarkable how quickly Berber has been enlisted as a counterweight to Arabic dominance.

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3 As opposed to linguistic demographers, who may use the term linguistic minority as a descriptive term for languages spoken by a certain percent of a national population (see de Vries 1990).
Not all linguistically simple societies will have all four attributes listed above. What I would suggest, however, is a causal link between (1) on the one hand and (2-4) on the other. As already remarked upon, an implemented standard implies (2). Now, (1) and (2) do not necessarily imply (3) and (4). The minority status of Catalan or Welsh is relatively recent as a widespread political issue, dating from the 1960’s and 1970’s. As soon as minority languages do become part of the political landscape, however, there follows a series of administrative steps (use of the language for various official purposes, instruction in the schools, greater media exposure) which begin to put the minority languages on a par with the dominant standard. This leads to a fifth characteristic of simple linguistic societies:

(5) Once they are recognized as such, minority languages are codified and assigned administrative and legal niches in theory at least putting them on a par with the dominant standard in terms of implementation.

The languages, like much else in the societies, are codified, categorized, assigned a niche. This might be dubbed the ‘nichification’ stage of language development.

2. Complex linguistic societies

Western and (post-)industrialized societies are typically linguistically simple ones. On the basis of this axiomatic premise, there follows, I believe, a fundamental limitation to the discourse and theory of much of sociolinguistics and the sociology of language.

For linguistically complex societies, on the other hand, the story is different. Linguistically complex societies are multilingual in a different way from linguistically simple ones. I would like to isolate two necessary attributes of linguistically complex societies, and one contingent one. Beginning with the necessary attributes, first, in many cases, such as the case of Nigeria or more specifically NE Nigeria which I use as my main example throughout this paper, there will be a far higher degree of multilingualism, i.e. many more languages spoken than in linguistically simple ones. Secondly, and crucially, there will be a high degree of so-called endogenous multilingualism. Political boundaries will have been imposed around diverse language boundaries. This very multilingualism requires, for reasons taken up below, a lingua franca or, often, lingua francas, which frequently are of exogenous origin.

These two factors are characteristic of all linguistically complex societies today, from Singapore to Switzerland to Nigeria. A third attribute characterizing many, but not all such societies, is that languages will be only partly implemented in the sense defined above. The basis of this partial implementation will stem from different sources. What Myers-Scotton (1993) has termed ‘elite closure’ has a role to play. A standardized (even if according to local norms) European language will be, as it were, fully implemented among the elite of the society, but will not be implemented in all social strata. Regional languages will not be fully implemented for at least three reasons. First, the resources for their full implementation, e.g. in a 1-12 grade teaching curriculum may simply be lacking. Secondly, where there is more than one regional language they may cancel each other out. In Nigeria, for instance, for political reasons Hausa cannot be more implemented than Ibo, so neither are particularly implemented. Thirdly, the elite, in any case, will ultimately be exercising their above mentioned closing option, to the detriment of the regional languages. Of course, if it is

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4 Admittedly this rough typology runs the risk of making classificatory cuts at the wrong places or not making enough fundamental distinctions. Closer comparison may advise against mentioning the multilingual Switzerland in the same breath (sentence) with multilingual Nigeria. Typologies, however, benefit from clearly delineated polarities, and the simple – complex contrast is, I believe, clear enough to motivate its further use.
difficult to implement regional languages, the possibility of implementing smaller minority languages is even less likely.

The following schema outlines the main attributes of complex linguistic societies.

Complex linguistic societies:

High degree of endogenous multilingualism
Lingua franca(s)
Partly implemented standard
   Languages of elite
   Partially or unimplemented regional languages
   Small languages entirely unimplemented

A number of effects, both socio-political and linguistic, can be read off of the characteristics of complex linguistic societies, which contrast with those of simple ones. I will mention one socio-political and one linguistic effect.

Beginning with socio-political, language will tend to be only loosely associated with expressions of political identity. This follows from at least two points. First, the language of the elite itself has an ambiguous political status and identity. As an European language it lacks local authenticity. If its status should be politicized at all, it could be construed in a negative light. Better, therefore, to keep language and politics separate.5 Secondly, particularly in countries like Nigeria where there is a very high degree of multilingualism, there is a very high degree of mutual tolerance for other person’s language. So many people are conscious of speaking a language different from their neighbors, that they well appreciate the dangers of promoting one’s own language to the detriment of others’: should they do so, their neighbors will be equally tempted to do so, thus potentially calling into question the legitimacy of one’s own tongue.

The contrast with linguistically simple societies in this respect is significant. It is not that language is not a significant marker of identity. Its overt political association, as in much of the West, however, is structurally inhibited.

Looking at a linguistic consequence of complex linguality, it is remarkable how many languages can come into contact within one and the same individual. The relationship can be represented in hierarchicalized fashion and is illustrated with Nigerian Arabs living in Maiduguri, Nigeria. For brevity of reference I term this ‘hierarchy 1’.

Hierarchy 1: a linguistic hierarchy in a complex linguistic society

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Standard Arabic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hausa (or Hausa/Kanuri)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Kanuri)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigerian Arabic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is important not only what languages are found in an individual’s language repertoire. Equally significant is the way they are deployed in everyday usage. It has been often observed that what may be termed dense codeswitching between 3 or even 4 languages is

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5 I do not want to underplay the typological differentiation within my two broad categories, simple and complex linguistic societies. For instance, in a recent article on language in Singapore, Wee (2002) argues that government linguistic policy in which ethnolinguistic groups (Malay, Chinese, Tamil) are mandated politically is increasingly at odds with families of these groups who are shifting incrementally to English. The mandated socio-political linguistic status of speakers corresponds less and less with their actual linguistic behavior. An issue such as this is of relatively negligible importance for most Nigerians.
commonplace in various African societies. This contrasts with a much more, ‘politically controlled’ as it were switching that has been observed in certain linguistically simple societies, French-English switching in Quebec/Hull for instance, or French-Dutch switching in Brussels (Treffers-Daller 1994: 247). This correlates, I would suggest, with the fact observed above that language is only rarely a vehicle for political mobilization in Africa, so switching between languages is rarely ‘proscribed’, as it is, for instance, among higher class French speakers in Hull/Quebec (Poplack 1988).

Though there are often many languages in complex linguistic societies, their acquisition by individuals does follow wider patterns. It is significant in hierarchy 1 that multilingualism in minority groups looks almost exclusively upwards, while multilingualism of larger ethnolinguistic groups does not look downwards. I know of no cases, for instance, of Nigerian Arabs who speak Margi or Bura, two sister Borno languages of comparable demographic size to Nigerian Arabic, while Kanuri who speak Arabic are the exception. This point leads to a re-introduction of ethnolinguistic vitality theory to the present section. The existence of multilingual hierarchies such as (1) are only partly explained by classic ELVT, where group-language complexes push against each other, interpenetrate, and shift domain boundaries. What one observes among the Maiduguri Arabs, however, is the incorporation of other languages within, broadly speaking, a system centered on an Arabic node (see

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6 E.g. Mandinka, Wolof, English, French in Gambia (Haust 1995), Swahili, Lingala, French, smaller languages in Bukavu (Goyvaerts 1997).
7 Treffers-Daller for instance explains the tendency for those better-educated in Dutch (Flemish) to use less French-Dutch codeswitching in political terms, "... the standard language and the puristic norms associated with it appear to create a negative climate for switching and borrowing" (247).
8 Hierarchy 1 could also be described in terms of x-glossia (tri-, quadri- etc.). Schiffman (1993) attempts to extract rules for when related H and L varieties in a di- or multi-glossic society will undergo shift in one direction or another, though in the end one is left with the impression that there may be as many outcomes as there are multilingual societies. What Hierarchy 1 does bear out is Fishman’s (1970: 36) observation that when H (languages of wider communication) varieties are in direct functional competition, one will loose out. Such appears to be the fate of Kanuri as against Hausa in Maiduguri.
9 Sankoff (1980: 9, 17-19) observes a certain shift of multilingual patterns in parts of New Guinea from a symmetrical, horizontal relationship (e.g. Salisbury 1962) between neighboring languages in pre-colonial times to an asymmetrical, hierarchicalized one in the colonial and post-colonial era. Today multilingualism is increasingly focused upwards, as it were, towards Tok Pisin and English. The shift in multilingual patterns correlates with changing political relations: the 'bigpela man' was replaced by the colonial authority as the dominant authority, education and literacy became valuable resources for social advancement, the geographical scope of decision-making widened, encompassing diverse and numerous linguistic groups and urbanization brought together different languages in a compact environment. Prestige of certain languages and communicative necessity reduces the number of languages in the New Guinea multilingual repertoire. Africa is too large to make all-encompassing generalizations. It would, however, be interesting (if methodologically difficult) to examine the extent to which colonial and post-colonial patterns of multilingualism have changed from pre-colonial ones. Certainly within a globalization discourse it is quite plausible to explore the idea that the globus is moving away from mutual multilinguality to a hierarchical multilinguality (see below).
10 It is virtually an unstated premise of ELVT that languages in contact will be associated with minority and dominant ethnic groups, and that there will be ensuing tensions between these groups. As I have already stated, this assumption is indeed valid for the multilingual societies typically described in ELVT. One ELVT study dealing with a situation broadly similar to the Maiduguri one is Pierson (1994), in which the local Catonese variety of Chinese is juxtaposed with two languages of wider communication, English and standard Chinese (Putonghua). The results reported in the article are preliminary, but point to the limits of applying ELVT to data of this sort. A basic problem is that languages of wider communication are often languages without well-profiled social groups, what might be termed para-social languages because they are accompanied by other languages, the L1’s. In Pierson’s study a number of observations are made relating to language attitudes towards the three varieties (1994: 55). These are interesting in and of themselves, but it appears that English is not ‘ethnic’ in the same way Cantonese is. English is the official language, language of education, of the legal system, but not of a social group in the way Cantonese is the language of native Hong Kongese.
Owens, 2001). The fact that the languages integrated into the Nigerian Arab language repertoire in Maiduguri are only weakly identified with ethnic groups indicates that factors other than simple ethnic or group affiliation are at play in determining language choice. The social profile of English is that of an educated elite, extending beyond the borders of Nigeria around the globe. That of Hausa in Maiduguri is not so much the language of an ethnic group, as the language of a particular domain, trade and communication, the language of the public sphere par excellence. To the extent that Hausa does have a group-based profile it is primarily that of a language of northern Nigerians, and secondarily the language of Muslims. Both of these affiliations, however, shade into fuzziness for various reasons. Hausa, for instance, is not only a boundary marker against the South. It is also a language associated with the north-central and northwestern regions of the North, and hence may be a boundary marker internal to the North, particularly against the northeastern region. Furthermore within northern Nigeria, Hausa is as important to many Christian groups as the language of the Bible as it is to Muslims.

Crucially for the comparison with simple linguistic societies, the languages higher in the hierarchy are not necessarily assimilatory ones. I will qualify this below, but on the whole one does not find in Borno a significant L1 shift from smaller native Bornoan languages such as Shuwa Arabic or Bura to Hausa, Standard Arabic or English. These languages of prestige and wider communication remain just that, at least for now.

3. Factors underlying complex linguistic societies

What then is behind the common idiom heard in Maiduguri that ‘Hausa has eaten Maiduguri’, or the sustained interest in English? While no single cause is sufficient, necessary causes may be identified.

First I think de Swaan’s (1998) idea of languages having communicative value likened to a type of ‘hypercollective good’ is a useful starting off point. Once it is learned, a language is free, multi-directional traffic. The more people who sign onto one code, the greater will be the mutual access to this traffic. The cost of learning a language, however, time and intellectual energy, dictates that the number of languages which become widespread in a multilingual environment will be limited.

A second factor favoring Hausa and English in Maiduguri is what Myers-Scotton (1976) terms neutrality strategies in multilingual contexts. Languages of dominant groups, in the Maiduguri case, Kanuri, will be avoided, if possible, in order that members of politically dominated groups be able to meet them on neutral ground, as it were.

A third factor is the accident of history. Hausa was the language of the British colonial army in Nigeria and it gained some advantage during British civilian rule. Since independence it has consolidated its head start, at least in that part of Nigeria associated with the old North.

Note that among these factors, ethnic identification is, if anything, a negative criterion for the sustenance of a language of wider communication, and this gives one clue to the maintenance of the native language, in this case Arabic. Arabic in Maiduguri does not have

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11 In recent years the so-called Middle Belt of Nigerian states has become increasingly assertive of its political independence from the North. Should this political trend continue, it will be interesting to see to what extent Hausa, the main language of wider communication in this region, is able to maintain this roll.

12 And before her, Greenberg 1965, who speaks of the psychological advantage of speakers not being forced to use the native language of the other.

13 An area stretching from the Niger border in the North well into the South, a boundary corresponding to today’s southern boundaries of Kwara, Kogi, Benue and Taraba states.
to push and elbow itself against Kanuri or Bura or Margi. In inter-ethnic communication a neutral language of wider communication will, instead, be chosen.

This is not to say that complex linguistic societies do not witness language shift. Such results are, however, linked to specific situations and do not necessarily affect the transmission of the language as a whole.

Mixed marriage, for example, is one of the best known factors favoring shift, where partners and children grow up on the language of wider communication. Another pertains to the dynamic of urban areas, in particular its affect on relatively small languages. While systematic work remains to be done, impressionistically migrants to Maiduguri who speak languages whose total population of speakers does not exceed 25,000 people, will have trouble passing on their language to their children, even if both partners are native speakers. Nonetheless, it is one of the hallmarks of complex linguistic societies that there is no overwhelming assimilatory pressure emanating from a single language or languages.

Arguably in the sociolinguistic literature more attention is devoted to the emergence of languages of wider communication than to the maintenance of the local languages, so that often it is the continued use of the communal language which is seen as the marked case. This, I believe, often reflects on the professional interests of those studying language situations, rather than on local linguistic realities. Language planners, after all, hardly have the time or means to plan for small languages; political scientists, sociologists and many other varieties of social scientists often have no time at all for an African language, let alone a small, insignificant one.

Why then, should Shuwa Arabic continue to survive in an urban area like Maiduguri where virtually all of its speakers are fluent in Hausa? Certainly no single factor is determinative, though the following are relevant: a relatively large population of speakers both in the Maiduguri metropolitan area (ca. 50,000) and in the rural areas (ca. 500,000), economic niches where Shuwa have a strong presence (cattle trade, Islamic-orientated education) and, a special factor supporting Shuwa, the perception that their language is close to that of the Koran. All in all, factors supportive of Shuwa are probably stronger than for most minority languages in Nigeria of comparable size.

4. Conclusion

Using as an example the range of factors that obtain among one language group in Nigeria, the above-mentioned hierarchy 1 is for certain urban groups of minority speakers a stable configuration where multilingualism does not presage loss and language shift. It may further be proposed that situations of complex linguality in general are conducive to maintenance of minority languages.

Like ELVT the current paper emphasizes structural aspects underpinning multilingualism. Though sympathetic to ELVT, it draws attention to a large gap in ELVT theorizing as seen in its neglect of languages of wider communication. This is caused, it is suggested, by the genesis of ELVT in linguistically simple societies. Complex linguistic societies, such as many in Africa are, present conceptual challenges whose broad contours can be identified, but whose more precise characterization requires time, resources, and a comparative spirit based on the assumption that the lowly elements of a hierarchy are no less important than the one at the pinnacle.

14 A conclusion which echoes Greenberg’s (1965) observation of language stability in West Africa, made over 35 years ago.
References

Abbreviation: *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* = *IJSL*


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