

Attitudes Towards Indigenous Languages Among Ghanaian Immigrants In London, Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

Drawing on Gardner's (1985) socio-psychological model emphasizing the role of attitudes and motivation for second language acquisition, this pilot study seeks to answer the following research questions: How do Ghanaian immigrants perceive indigenous languages? What factors influence the language attitudes of Ghanaian immigrants? The paper presents an empirical study through an online survey to capture and characterize language attitudes and practices of the target population. A total of twelve responses were gathered through social media and emails. Using this strategy, the study examines any differences between speakers' reported perceptions and their actual language usage and how these explain the different identities they project. This approach and the questions raised highlight the extent to which Ghanaian immigrants' perception and language choice can influence their language usage and identity. The findings show positive attitudes among respondents towards indigenous languages suggesting cultural attachments and nativity. Also, motivational orientation towards the use of indigenous languages is largely integrative.

Keywords: language attitudes, perceptions, Ghanaian, immigrants, motivation, identities, indigenous languages

Migration largely contributes to language contact and change. According to Dweik and Qawar (2015), the community of immigrants faces great challenges whether to keep their native languages actively in use, to shift to the host language or use both languages simultaneously in the host country. Given this dilemma, Fasold (1984) has noted that multilingualism often serves as an interactional resource for the multilingual speaker in which one particular language may be used at home or with friends whereas another language is used for work, school or formal settings. Thus, people make linguistic choices for various purposes (Coulmas, 1997).

Immigrant languages originate from all continents and belong to a variety of language families. The term “immigrant languages” refers to languages (other than English, French and Aboriginal languages) whose presence in Canada is originally due to migration (Statistics Canada-Census Report, 2011). These languages including African and Ghanaian languages are considered non-official languages in Canada. In 2011, they constituted the mother tongue of more than 6.8 million people or 20.6% of the Canadian population. In addition, for roughly 6.4 million persons, the other language was an immigrant language spoken most often or on a regular basis at home, alone or together with English or French (Statistics Canada, 2011). According to the Canadian Encyclopedia, there are about 60 distinct indigenous languages in Canada falling into 10 separate language families. These indigenous languages are also known as Aboriginal languages. Notwithstanding, both Aboriginal and immigrant languages have their presence due to the waves of international migration that Canada has experienced over the centuries (Statistics Canada, 2011).

Language attitudes, the kind of perceptions people have or form about their own language or other people's language. Most of these attitudes are formed out of our personal experiences or observations or encounters with speakers of different languages. These may be the positive, negative, or indifferent attitude (Batibo, 2005). Again, Batibo (2005) notes that in a monolingual community like France, because the people have only one language, they usually have a positive attitude toward their language. This he believes is because they have no other language to compare their language with. However, in a multilingual community like Canada, people have several languages at their disposal to make a choice from and people have a reason to either develop positive or negative attitudes towards their languages. Ferrer and Sankoff (2004) have observed that language preference and the ability of a speaker are influenced by dominant languages. Hence, more prestigious language is usually favored as the medium of communication in various domains because of its wider social roles. This situation finds immigrants get absorbed into the dominant language in most communicative settings.

The situation is clearly observable in immigrant communities or multilingual settings all over the world and it is usually attributed to a wide range of sociocultural, economic and demographic factors as well as government and institutional policies on language in various countries (Al-Khatib & Al-Ali, 2010). Interestingly, this phenomenon constitutes an influence on the cultural identity of the minority group. Eventually, the minority group has to project different identities in certain contexts in order to be able to socialize and get accepted by members of the host community.

Problem Statement

The post-arrival experiences and aspirations of immigrants in Canada, as in other immigration countries, have been the subject of considerable research effort for several decades. Following this, several studies have examined the residential (housing) and economic aspects of the immigrant experience (Ray, 1994; Zaami, 2012), unlike in the United States (Yeboah, 2007; Obeng, 2008) and Australia (Ndhlovu, 2010), relatively few studies have explored the linguistic dynamism of the immigrant experience in Canada, including the ways in which immigrants portray themselves to integrate into the social, cultural and economic needs in the country through language. Previous studies on the Ghanaian community in Canada have focused primarily on housing (accommodation), socioeconomic issues, the role of Ghanaian associations (Opoku-Dapaah, 2006; Wong, 2000; Mensah, 2010). Specifically, little has been done on the language attitudes of immigrants towards indigenous immigrant languages and the influence these attitudes have on language choice and usage in the host country. It is in the light of this and other assumptions about language attitude and use among immigrants that this work seeks to explore the attitudes of Ghanaian immigrants in London and to understand how such attitudes reflect in their daily language choice and usage in Canada.

Research Questions

This research study is undertaken to seek answers to the following questions:

1. How do Ghanaian immigrants perceive indigenous languages?
2. What factors influence the language attitudes of Ghanaian immigrants in London, Ontario, Canada?

Significance

In the Canadian context, the number of studies on language attitudes among the immigrant population is very limited because research is directed towards spatial variation, socioeconomic factors, etc. Also, it has been reported that linguistic, ethnic, and cultural differences have been neglected and even regarded as a threat to the host society in Canada (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004). Since few studies have looked at language attitudes of immigrants, the present study discusses the attitudes of Ghanaian immigrants towards indigenous languages with the goal of filling in the gap in the literature on immigrants' attitudes and integration. This approach and the questions raised in this paper highlight the extent to which Ghanaian immigrants' perception and language choice can influence their language usage and identity.

Theoretical Framework

In Gardner's (1985a) socio-educational model, attitude is placed alongside intelligence, aptitude, and anxiety as an initial ingredient in bilingual proficiency. Language attitudes also appear in the model as an outcome alongside bilingual proficiency. This model featured motivations in learning a second language and in classroom instruction. However, in Gardner's (1985b) model of social psychology to second language learning, variables were used to test attitudes in language learning. He focuses specifically on the socio-psychological processes involved in selecting, using and learning a second language. These processes identify the individual in a social and linguistic context in which there are motivations for the acquisition of languages of widest communication that have some utilitarian or integrative value (such as English and French).

Clearly, within these contexts, cognitive and affective orientations prevail. In this direction, learning entails not only the acquisition of a new language but also assimilation of social and cultural ideas. This, therefore, deviates slightly from this study's goal of examining the attitudes and motivations towards indigenous immigrant languages. Nevertheless, the present study employs the ideas of Gardner's models to better understand, identify and explain the positive and/or negative attitudes attached to indigenous immigrant languages. These attitudes and motivations are not fixed but strongly affected by the feedback from the environment (Baker, 1992). Moreover, utilitarian and integrative motivations which reflect positive and negative attitudes are relevant in the assessment of immigrants' attitudes and perceptions when it comes to learning and shifting from indigenous immigrant languages to the dominant language.

Literature Review

Cummins and Danesi (1990) define indigenous languages in the Canadian context as all languages brought to Canada by immigrants except for aboriginal languages, English, and French. There are also several synonymous terms that have been used in North America, such as "ethnic language, minority language, ancestral language, third language, non-official language, community language, and mother-tongue" (p.8).

Some scholars distinguish between the cognitive, affective and social parameters of language awareness (James & Garrett, 1991; Wolfram, 1998). The cognitive parameter understands the patterns of language. This relates to the belief in the continuity of indigenous

languages and its value in the transmission of culture. The affective parameter deals with attitudes towards languages. It concerns the feelings towards a language and the importance of speaking it. The social parameter focuses on the role of language in effective communication and interaction.

The present study addresses the issue of Ghanaian immigrants' attitude towards indigenous languages in London, Ontario to contribute to attitudinal studies and since it deals with attitudes, the study adopts the affective mechanism that looks at attitudes towards languages, awakening the development of attitudes, attention, sensitivity, curiosity, and interest shown towards indigenous immigrant languages. The study also applies this mechanism to understand how language can be used as a tool to influence the choices of people.

Ndhlovu's (2010) research on African identities in Melbourne assessed the attitudes of non-refugee African-Australians towards their ethnic languages in the context of the utility and prestige of English. The research was based on 40 immigrants who responded to a questionnaire on language attitudes, language use, and motivation. The study found that African migrants' express positive attitudes towards their ethnic languages. The results also indicated that strong emotional attachments to ethnic languages do not suggest the existence of negative attitudes towards English. Rather, they showed the use of multiple language resources at their disposal for integrative and instrumental purposes.

Canada has become increasingly diverse, multicultural and complex society, composed of a multitude of linguistically and ethnically different groups (Hudyma, 2012). According to Chambers (1991), "Canada is as rich in varieties of English as a second language as in first

language varieties”. More than 23,000 Ghanaians from the ten different regions and various linguistic, educational, and cultural backgrounds live and work in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2006). This number covers most of the major languages (Akan, Ga, Ewe, Dagaare etc.) in Ghana. For most of the Ghanaian immigrants, the tendency of developing a positive attitude and shifting to the dominant languages, English and French might depend on the length of stay in Canada. Such people may usually have a greater preference for maintaining and preserving their ethnic languages at least in very limited context.

Although Ghanaians are among the largest Black African groups in Canada, they have, however, received scant research attention in the literature on immigrant integration in Canada specifically on language attitudes (Mensah, 2010; Zaami, 2012). This motivation of understanding how Ghanaian immigrants perceive the Ghanaian ethnic languages and how they affect language use fills in the gap in the literature, and with my background as a Ghanaian, is necessary to better understand the issue from the data obtained from the survey.

Methodology

Participants

The participants for the study were recruited from the social media and via emails. These included Ghanaians who have migrated to Canada for studies and/or work or permanent residents. The sample was chosen because the research sought to find out whether there is an

influence on their native Ghanaian languages as immigrants in Canada where English and French are predominantly used in most social domains. Also, whether their length of stay in Canada has affected positively or negatively their perceptions and usage of their indigenous languages. The criteria for participation in this study was that; respondent aged 18 years and above, can complete the survey in English, was a Ghanaian and must have been in Canada for at least 5 months. The study obtained responses from participants from different ethnic and social backgrounds as well as length of stay, age, and educational levels.

Design and Data Collection

This pilot study employs a quantitative sociolinguistic method of data collection to provide answers to the research questions. The main quantitative tool used was the online survey with closed-ended questions which were rated on a five-point Likert scale using the following response options in ascending order: 'strongly agree' (1), 'agree' (2), 'neutral' (3), 'disagree' (4) and 'strongly disagree' (5) and well-defined open-ended questions. The open-ended questions gave room for respondents to provide details on their feelings/perceptions on indigenous languages with no particular influence from the researcher. Survey questions were adapted and modified from *My Native Language Scale* (Ndhlovu, 2010). It was assumed that all participants will be able to complete the survey in English thus it was administered in English. The survey elicited a different type of information such as age, sex, occupation, the level of education, the length of residence in Canada and number of languages spoken. Also, questions on perceptions of indigenous languages and language choices were asked. The online survey was developed and administered to the public, targeting the Ghanaian community in London, Ontario, Canada. The

survey was used to capture a wide range of people and responses to questions. It was also employed because it was flexible for the time the study was conducted.

Analysis

The responses were gathered through Qualtrics, a software for online surveys. These responses and their connections to research questions were used to explain the findings and contribution to the study. Statistics generated through the software consisting of tables and percentages were used in the analysis. Each research question was analysed based on how individuals responded to it. As per the survey and objectives of the study, analysis was based on survey items/statements and assumptions on attitudes were potentially avoided. Positively worded items were analysed differently from negatively worded statements using a five-point Likert scale options in ascending order: ‘strongly agree’ (1), ‘agree’ (2), ‘neutral’ (3), ‘disagree’ (4) and ‘strongly disagree’ (5). For statements in the negative, the order was reversed. In addition, open-ended questions had their key phrases used for interpretation.

Findings

Demographic Data

This survey was responded to by people of varying age group with different educational and social background. Overall, twelve (12) responses were gathered. The table below shows the responses on the demographic profile of respondents:

Table 1

Demographic profile of respondents

Age	Sex	Occupation	Educational level	Length of stay in Canada	Languages spoken fluently	Ethnic language (s)
32	M	Student	PHD	3years	English, Twi, Hausa	Buli
29	Male	Student	PhD	3 years	English and Dagaare	Dagaare
25	F	student	graduate	6 months	3	1
28	male	student	tertiary	1.6 years	English, Dagaare/Waale	Dagaare
42	male	mechanic	master's	17 years	English	Twi
42years	M	Professor	PhD	15years	English and Twi	Twi
31	Female	Student	PhD	2.5 years	English	Akan
29	male	student	masters	5 months	Ewe , Twi	Ewe
31	female	student	post graduate	5 months	English, Spanish, Ga, Twi	Ga
32	male	student	BA	1.5 years	English, Twi	Dagaare
38	Male	Student	Masters	5 months	English	Buli
	Female	Student	PhD	3 years	Akan, Ewe	Ewe

The results emerging from the responses of the survey reveal that eight respondents were males and four females. In terms of age, the respondents were between the ages of 25 and 42 and mostly students with one mechanic and a Professor. In relation to the length of stay in Canada, six respondents indicated they had been in Canada between five months and two years and the rest of them between two years and 17 years. For languages spoken fluently, as it was expected, most of the respondents were either bilingual or multilingual speaking between two and four languages, with three being monolingual. Four were fluent in two languages, four could speak three languages, with only one being fluent in four languages. This could be interpreted with the notion that most (educated) Ghanaians are bilingual. Each respondent had at least English and an

indigenous language. With ethnic languages, there were five in all; Akan, Ewe, Buli, Ga, and Dagaare; two had Buli background, two Ewe, three Akan/Twi, three Dagaare, and one Ga ethnic background. The exclusion of English as an ethnic language defines it as an additional language taught and learned particularly in schools.

As conceived, the objective of the survey was to ascertain the language attitudes among Ghanaian immigrants towards indigenous languages and English. It was designed in such a way as to probe ethnic attachment and identity to Ghanaian ethnic languages and assimilation to English. The findings are very interesting and in some cases contradictory to the rationale behind the study that there are negative attitudes shown towards indigenous languages. Table 2 exhibits responses on how Ghanaians perceive indigenous languages and English.

Table 2
Attitudes of respondents towards indigenous languages and English

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
(1) It is important for me to speak my ethnic language(s)	85%	15%	-	-	-
(2) I speak my ethnic language(s) with my family at home	85%	15%	-	-	-
(3) My ethnic language(s) connect me to my cultural heritage	77%	15%	8%	-	-
(4) My ethnic language(s) is/are a symbol of identity	69%	23%	8%	-	-
(5) I speak my ethnic language(s) with people from my native country	62%	23%	15%	-	-
(6) Speaking my ethnic language(s) interferes with my school/work	-	-	23%	8%	69%
(7) Speaking my ethnic language(s) interferes with my friendship	8%	-	15%	8%	69%
(8) It is important for me to be fluent in English	77%	8%	15%	-	-
(9) In Ghana, speaking English makes you appear educated	75%	8%	17%	-	-
(10) Speaking your ethnic language(s) in Canada isolates you	8%	-	8%	31%	54%
(11) It is important to maintain my ethnic language(s)	85%	8%	8%	-	-
(12) My ethnic language(s) has no role/function in Canada	23%	15%	23%	15%	23%

Key: 1=strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=neither agree or disagree, 4=disagree, 5=strongly disagree

Statements 1-5 were about attitudes, ethnic language use and link to ethnic identity.

Respondents agreed positively to the use of ethnic languages and the connection to their heritage and identity. The majority of respondents strongly agree or agree that their ethnic languages serve as a link to their cultural heritage and a symbol of identity. Also, as shown on the table, approximately 85% think that it is significant to speak the ethnic language(s) suggesting an attachment to culture, nativity and local identity. Again, there is unanimous agreement to the use of ethnic languages at home and with native speakers.

With statements 6 and 7, 69% disagree with the negatively worded statement that there is no interference with school, work, social life or even friendship when they speak their ethnic languages. This positive attitude proves the general assumption that respondents' language use and identities portrayed depend on the communicative context. So with family and people from the same ethnic background, respondents may use ethnic languages whereas with non-natives, they will use English.

Statements 8 and 9 focus on attitudes towards English and 77% of the respondents responded in the affirmative that it is important to be fluent in English. 75% were of the view that speaking English makes one appear educated in Ghana. This attitude shows a correlation between English language and the notion of civilization as people in Ghana usually equate the English language with knowledge, civilization, mannerism, sophistication and socioeconomic status (Adegbija, 2000).

Statement 10, negatively worded, directly asks respondents whether they feel isolated when they speak their ethnic languages in Canada and clearly, 54% strongly disagreed with that notion reflecting a positive attitude towards ethnic languages. In response to statement 11, 85% agree that it is important to maintain the ethnic languages as it was noted earlier in relation to ethnic identity. Lastly, on the role of ethnic languages in London, Ontario, Canada, it was interesting that there was no consensus as responses were distributed across scale indicating differences in attitudes and stance.

Open-ended questions

Adding to the five-point Likert Scale statement options, the online survey included two open-ended questions: 1) “what makes it difficult for you to speak your ethnic language(s)?” 2) “what makes it easier for you to speak your ethnic language(s)?” The key aspects that emerged from an analysis of the data gathered in this part of the study are summarized in Table 3:

Table 3
Factors promoting or hindering the use of ethnic languages

Factors that promote the use of ethnic languages	Factors that hinder the use of ethnic languages
a. The presence of people that speak the same ethnic languages	a. The absence of native speakers of ethnic languages
b. Social meetings with native speakers.	b. Time spent with non-natives friends at work/school.
c. Marriage to people with the same ethnic language	c. Socio-psychological sanctions imposed on speakers of ethnic languages either than English and French.
	d. Native speakers’ preference to English because of low proficiency in ethnic language

In accordance with the research questions, respondents were asked to state the factors that hinder or promote the use of ethnic languages. The results shown above in Table 3 are actually simplified under broad themes with similarity to respondents' comments. The motivations that promote the use of ethnic languages are more related than they differ, in terms of integration, among respondents. The differences in terms of barriers, even though are not very strong, offer some useful insights into the priority areas of the influence of the attitudes of Ghanaians. When all responses of respondents are combined, the reasons that were affirmed were instrumental/utilitarian and integrative. Thus, the motivations for respondents to learn and speak the English language are 'access', and social mobility/advancement and mostly integrative (social and interpersonal) towards ethnic languages.

Discussion

Language attitudes among Ghanaian immigrants in London, Ontario are the manifestation of language choices and use which also depend on context and ideology. This involves immigrant communities and individuals making choices about language learning and use that could lead to immigrants losing their indigenous immigrant languages in favour of some other language. In this study, I provided an insight into the language attitudes that respondents have towards the languages they have at their disposal and the choices they make in their usage. It has been shown that language attitudes could influence language choice and reflect in identity (objective 2). Averagely, Ghanaians in London, Ontario, Canada showed positive attitudes towards indigenous languages and English. Respondents revealed a linkage between attitudes and identity with the use of indigenous languages (research question 1). To them, indigenous

languages serve as identity markers and connect them to their cultural heritage. Meanwhile, the importance given to English reflected the utility value (potential gains) of the language.

Further, integrative motivations emerged as the leading factors that influence language attitudes among Ghanaians (research question 2). It is also highly evident that Ghanaian immigrants' quest to integrate into the host community affect the attitudes towards English. Again, to reconnect and strengthen social ties with natives, Ghanaians in London choose to use the ethnic languages for communication. Since respondents objected to the fact that the use of indigenous languages interferes in their social life, shows the choices they make in communicative contexts which may have both integrative and instrumental motivations.

In Ghana, one's ability to communicate effectively in English is an essential requirement for the acquisition of jobs. It also shows one's socioeconomic status and intelligence since it is usually linked to knowledge (Saah, 1986). It is not surprising therefore that Ghanaians in London, Ontario think highly of being fluent in English. Responses from respondents indicate that Ghanaians have positive attitudes towards English as well as ethnic languages. For the majority to accept that it is important for them to be fluent in English and that it makes you appear educated is an indication of their realization of the usefulness of English. This reaction goes further to affirm the instrumentality of the English language. Following this, native speakers' preference of English because they lack fluency in their ethnic languages was cited as a barrier to the use of ethnic languages. This means that natives are losing their proficiency in their mother tongues and cannot communicate effectively and efficiently with speakers of the same ethnic background. Perhaps their length of stay in Canada is influencing this shift and loss.

Often than not, such people code-switch between English and their ethnic languages or solely speak English.

Meanwhile, discriminatory or bias attitudes shown towards Ghanaians also discourage them from speaking their ethnic languages more often. There is the assumption that the more one speaks the ethnic language, the less fluent he/she becomes in any of the official languages. Psychologically, it is taken as a “punishment” to immigrants as they are indirectly forced to learn and practice to be fluent in English/ French to enjoy the utilitarian aspects of these official languages (i.e. social recognition, economic advantages, access to healthcare etc.) or integrate well into the community. For instance, one respondent pointed out that he feels like “there are socio-psychological sanctions imposed on speakers of ethnic languages either than French or English”.

Nevertheless, Ghanaians still see the need to speak their indigenous languages and to maintain them. Respondents in this study revealed that informal settings including social networks and gatherings give them the opportunity to use their ethnic languages with friends and people from the native country and same ethnic background. A respondent cited that “the presence and accessibility of technology makes it possible to interact with other natives across provinces and having the opportunity to meet at cultural gatherings at home and community levels”. This clearly shows the role ethnic languages play among Ghanaian immigrants and the domains in which they are used.

Together with the above concerns raised, it was reported that the absence or fewer number of native speakers hinders the use of ethnic languages. Noted among the responses

include, “lack of people that speak my ethnic language” and “less number of people to talk with in my native language”. Ghanaians will therefore spend time with non-natives which seize the opportunity to speak the ethnic languages. Most often, discourse considerations by immigrants in assimilating into the mainstream community influence language choices and use. Thus, the integrative motivation serves as the core indicator of attitudes towards the use of indigenous languages and English among Ghanaian migrants, not forgetting the utilitarian motives towards English. Based on the information gathered from respondents, it could be said that there are positive feelings and strong attachments to indigenous languages among Ghanaians in London, Ontario, Canada.

Conclusion, Limitation, and Future work

Language attitudes provide insights on how immigrants develop choices, associate, and negotiate identities. As a result, these attitudes affect the language usage in social domains and group identities. Since languages form part of the culture of a people, negative attitudes effect a shift of a group towards languages of acceptance and recognition. On the other hand, positive attitudes influence immigrants such as Ghanaians in London, Ontario, to maintain their beliefs and culture through their languages amidst the opportunities English and French in Canada offer them. There is thus a constant negotiation of languages on one hand and a shift or acceptance of identities on the other in the host communities. The study demonstrates that Ghanaians in London, Ontario, embrace their languages and identities as Ghanaians under intense dilemma of language shifts among migrant communities. Moreover, they exhibit positive attitudes towards

their indigenous languages. Their linguistic backgrounds and identities are established as they adjust to the experiences and influences from the Canadian community.

Overall, language attitudes were discussed in this study, outlining the factors that contribute to Ghanaian immigrants' attitudes towards indigenous languages. However, a major limitation of this study is the few responses gathered from the survey and the fact that the study was limited to only London, Ontario. Though few responses were gathered, the study establishes the foundation for the opinion that language attitudes among Ghanaians in London, Ontario, reflect their language use in Canada. Nevertheless, the findings of the study cannot be generalized to all Ghanaians in Canada.

In future, it will be interesting to conduct a major study in Ghana, covering a larger number of Ghanaians on this topic. It is possible that other intriguing facts about language attitudes among Ghanaians could be revealed. In addition, a test of one or two sociolinguistics variables e.g. age, gender, occupation etc. to language attitudes, coding the frequency of indigenous language use in specific domains will enrich the results of the study.

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