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Ethnicity, conflict and language choice: the sociolinguistics of development communication in Ghana's Northern Region

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Latent conflict and language

- The conditions for conflict are always present
- The involvement of language is expected, but in the end language as a direct motivation is very rare
- Associated with ethnic differences and hence a potential marker of identity

Why choose Ghana in a study of language and conflict?

- Large number of multilingual communities, whose stability belies past conflict at the ethnolinguistic level
- Parallel postcolonial and traditional systems of authority, which are often at odds about the solution to a problem, e.g. property title and mining rights
- Hierarchy of ethnolinguistic prestige:
 - Local languages index local identities and group allegiances – ‘native’ languages (may be more than one)
 - Locally relevant lingua francas – acquired in childhood
 - National lingua francas – Akan (and to a limited extent Ghanaian Pidgin English) – acquired in adolescence (?)
 - Official language – acquired through education

Choice of Northern Region

- Relatively stable, compact, but still highly multilingual communities
- Recent history of inter-communal conflict
- Long history of invasions and periods of peace

Development and development communication

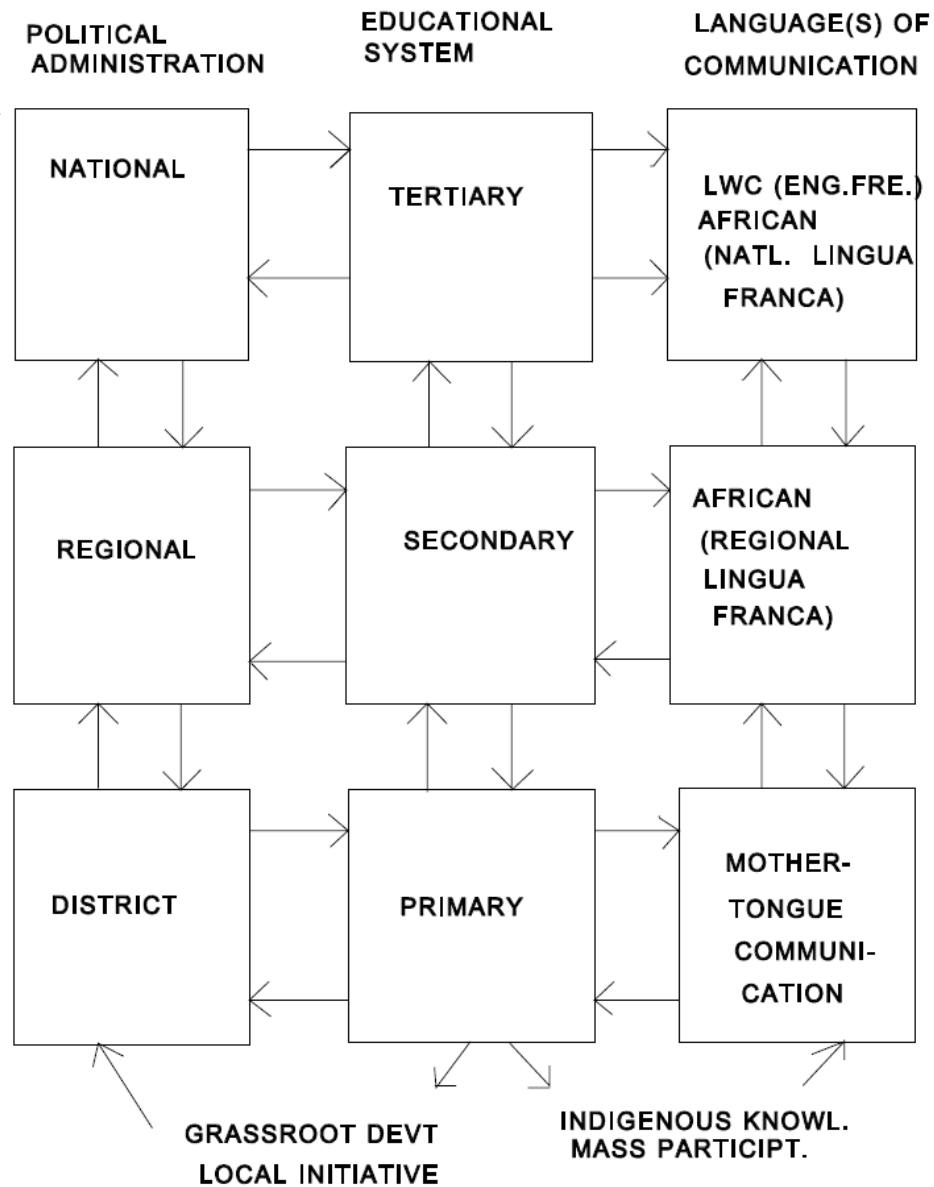
- *Development* is the process by which people can improve their material living conditions, as well as other aspects of their lives.
- *Development intervention* refers to the involvement of a government, an organisation or an individual in decisions, implementations and evaluations of strategies that are intended to improve living standards.

- *Development communication* refers to both the **unidirectional** process of information transfer as well as a process that allows **mutual interaction** between development workers and beneficiaries.

Bodomo (1996): arguing for a valid model of development communication

- Neglect of language in development education – the story of the young development workers
- Nature and role of language in Africa misunderstood
 - Assumption that choice of language is neutral
 - Assumption that African languages can't handle technical concepts, so French or English need to be used

- Bodomo further claims that the problem for newer, participatory, Africa-centred approaches is that the African elites are entrusted with development, and they are:
 - “trapped by the culture of western society, and favor the reproduction of entire western images in African development. The elite in effect sees Africa from outside, in the language, idiom, image, and experience of the outsider, in as far as the African mind is concerned.” (Prah 1994)



Localised trilingualism: a model of development communication (Bodomo 1996: 44)

Bodomo's support for local languages

- Considering the district, or local, level, Bodomo concludes: “Our intimation then is that there should be an uncompromising institution of the **local language of the community** [our emphasis] in all areas of human activities.”

Mahama's (2005) study of development communication in Northern Ghana

- Is there a need for a socially informed understanding of language choice in development communication?

Mahama's research questions

- What are real language practices in education?
- How does language practice function under a range of social conditions in different villages?
- In Northern Ghana, what is the relationship between daily language use in the villages and development communication as currently practised?
- What policies, if any, do development agencies currently have?

- How do language-related issues such as identity/ethnicity and language attitudes affect development communication?
- To what extent does the language use by development workers allow the village people to participate in development?



N20

N28

Zabre

Bawku

Jeffisi

Bolgatanga

Sabuli

N12

Yawgu

Bouk

N11

Wa

N10

Kulmasa

Pong-Tamale N2

Mole National Park

Daboya

Tamale

Yendi

Sawla

N10

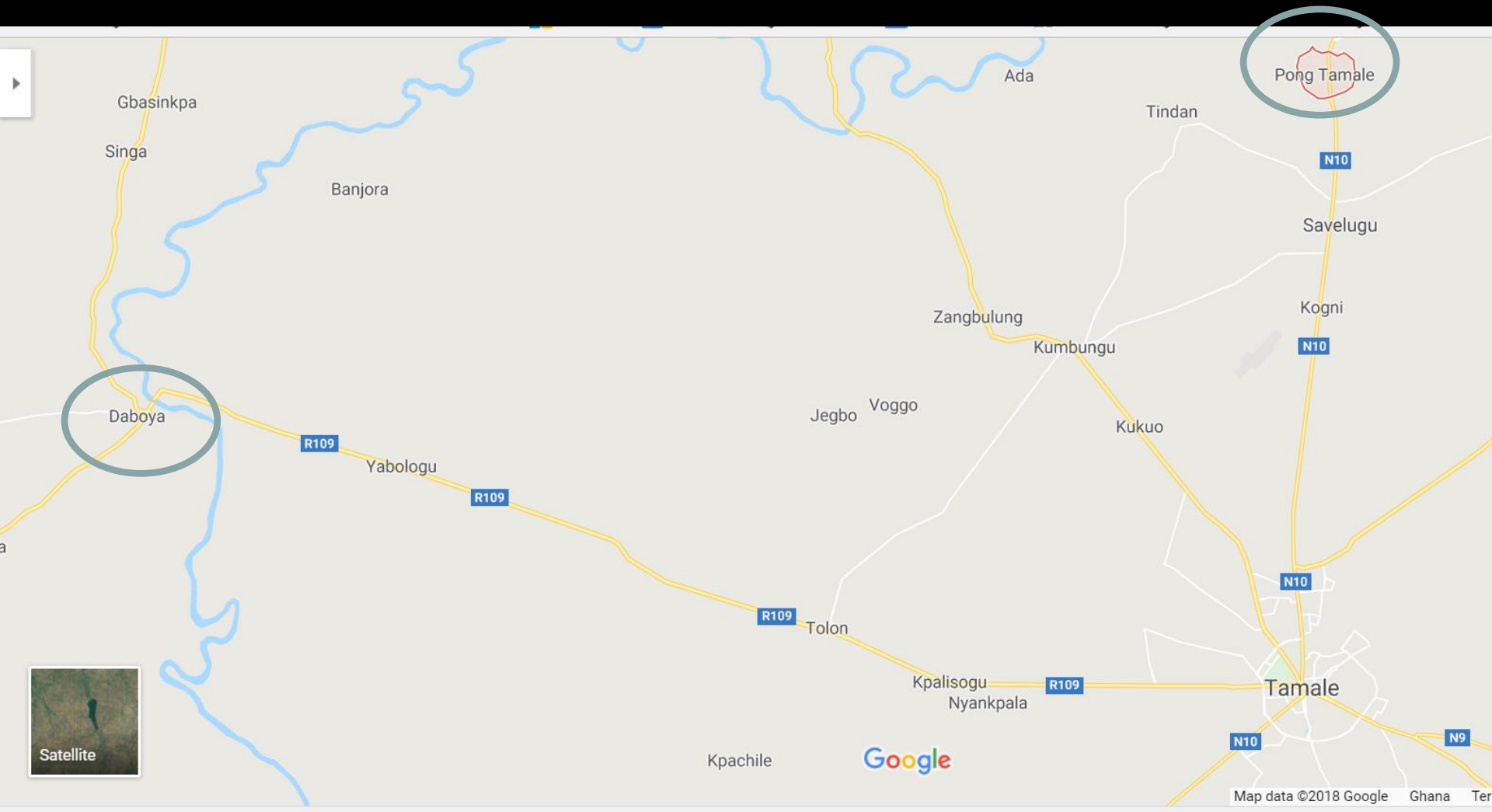
N2

A1

N12

Google

Map data ©2018 Google



Gbasinkpa

Singa

Banjora

Daboya

R109

Yabologu

R109

R109

Tolon

Kpalisogu

Nyankpala

R109

Tamale

N10

N9

Kpachile

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Map data ©2018 Google

Ghana Ter

Ada

Tindan

Pong Tamale

N10

Savelugu

Kogni

N10

Zangbulung

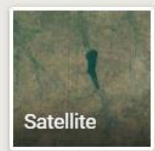
Kumbungu

Jegbo

Voggo

Kukuo

N10



Satellite

Research sites: Daboya and Pong-Tamale

- Daboya: a Gonja village
- The Gonja: conquered their current territory in the 17th century
- Gonja language – not necessarily Gonja identity
 - Hanga and Tampulma are the main non-Gonja languages whose speakers (variably) identify as Gonjas
- Ethnic tensions since the 1980s, and ethnic awareness on the part of the non-Gonja tribes is increasing
- Gonja is the local lingua franca

- Pong-Tamale: a Dagomba village
- Large majority belonging to this ethnic group and speaking Dagbani.
- Strong association between language and ethnicity
 - Dagombas who don't speak Dagbani are called 'lost Dagombas'
- Other groups may live alongside, but do not have the same complex historical relationship as the minority tribes in the Gonja region
- Dagbani used as local lingua franca

- Essential difference between the two villages is one of *assimilation* (Daboya) vs. *plurality* (Pong-Tamale)

Other languages

- Twi, Moshie, Dagaare
- Hausa: trade language, but also used within families.
 - Used in Pong-Tamale by non-Dagombas as a neutral language
- English

Question for Bodomo (1996)

- Where does this leave Bodomo's idea of using the 'local language' at the level of the district for education and, hence, in local development initiatives?

Methodology

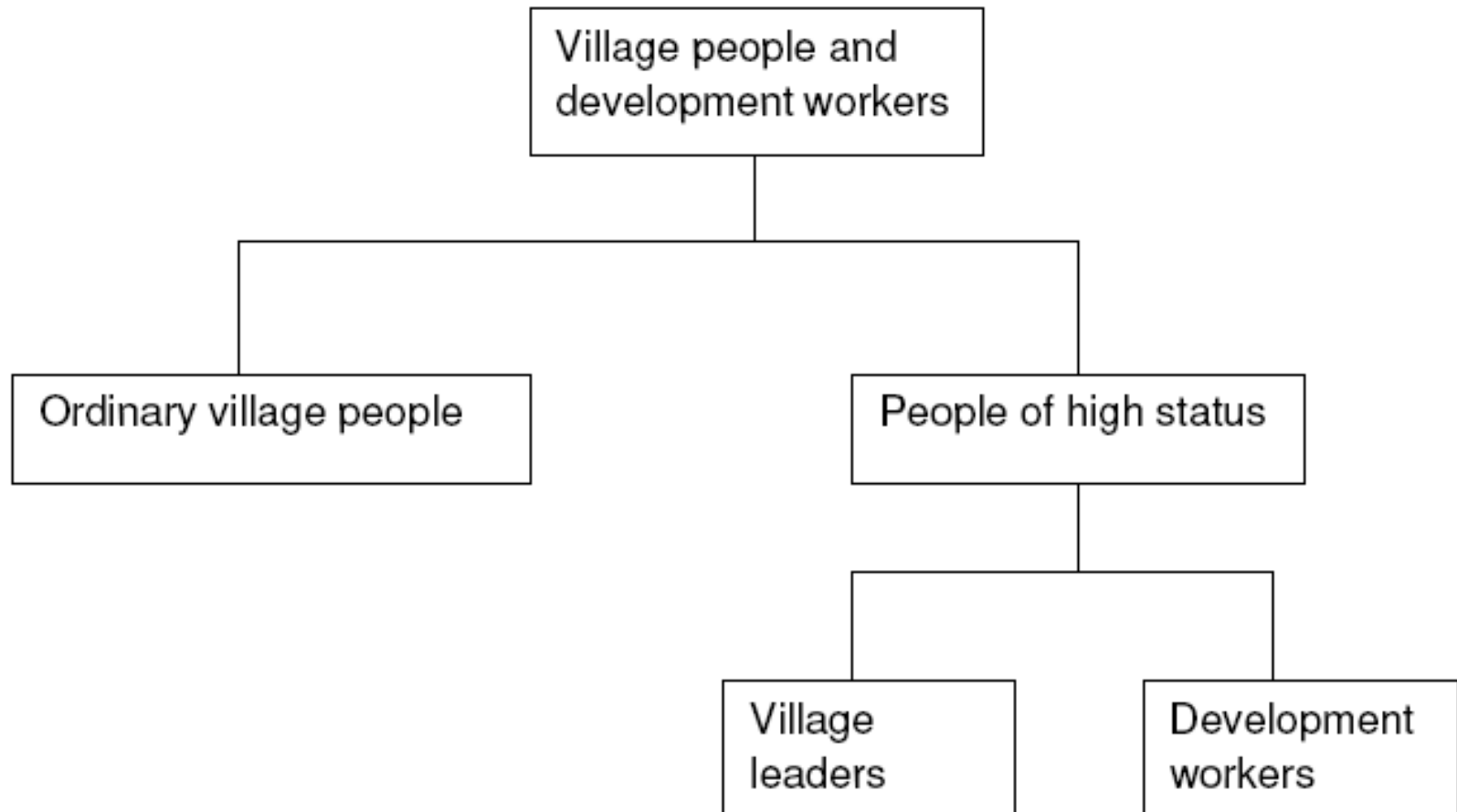


Figure 1. Subject sampling (Village people and development workers) (Mahama 2005).

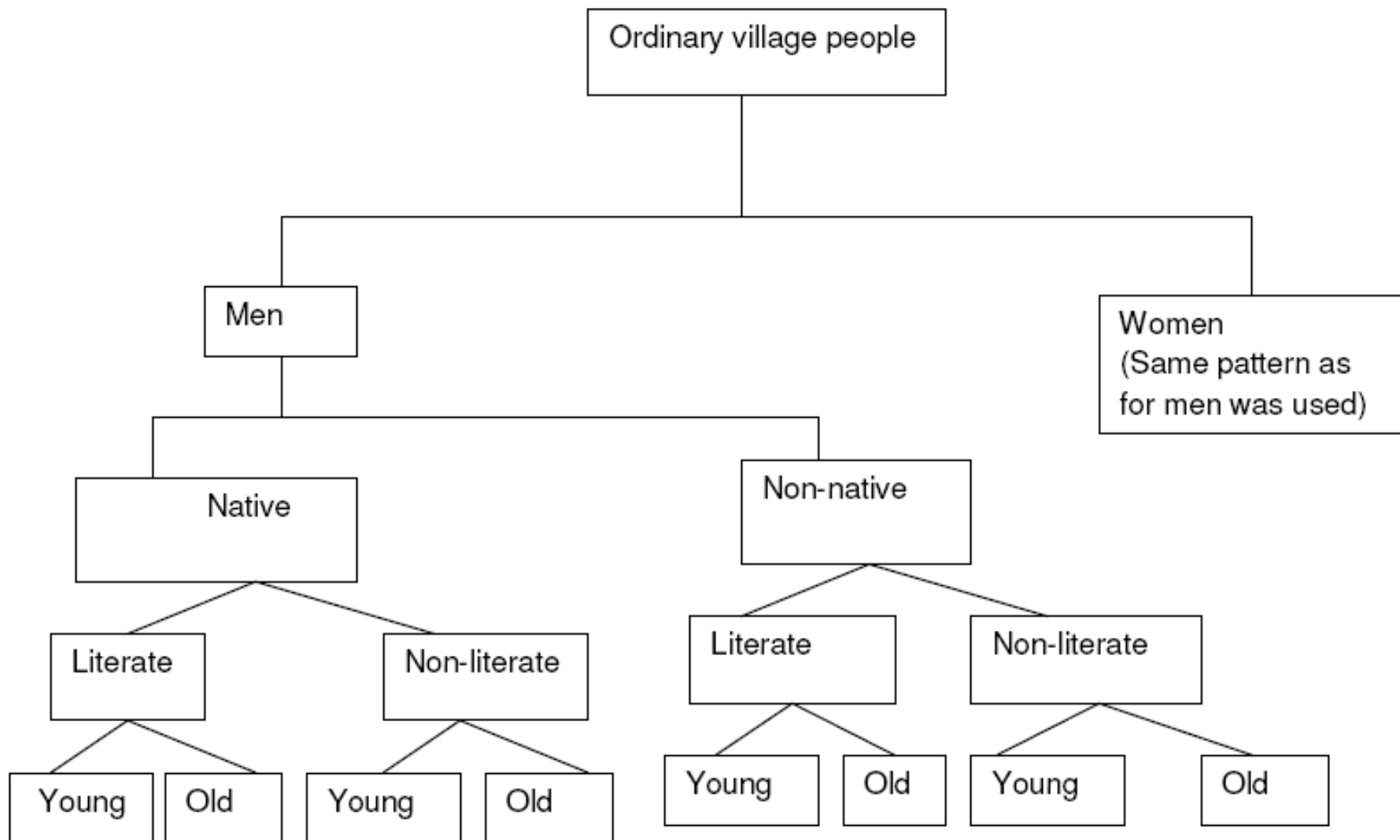


Figure 2. Structure of village sample (“ordinary village people”) (Mahama 2005).

Table 1. language selection for general domains (from Mahama 2005).

Domain	Language	No. of people		Total out of 64
		Pong-T	Daboya	
Home/Family	Tribal language	16	32	48
	English	2	0	2
	Hausa	8	0	8
	Others	6	0	6
Street	Tribal language	12	20	32
	English	4	4	8
	Hausa	10	0	10
	Others	6	8	14
Work	Tribal language	16	16	32
	English	6	5	11
	Hausa	8	0	8
	Others	2	11	13

- Level of multilingualism turns out to be high (4–6 languages spoken), and there are 8–12 ethnic groups living in each village
- Major difference between the villages: in Pong Tamale, the local language, Dagbani, appears to be in competition with **Hausa**. Local people said they preferred to speak this, as it was a Language of Wider Communication and ethnically neutral
- Hausa not mentioned in Daboya as a lingua franca
 - Without the ethnography + questionnaires this information would have been hidden
 - Shows the benefit of combining qualitative and quantitative methods

Languages used in development events in the two villages

- Daboya

Table 2. Languages for interaction in development settings in Daboya (n=32 for each interaction)

Type of development	Language						
	Gonja	Tampulma	Hanga	Gonja/Tampulma	Gonja/Hanga	English	Other
Own development meetings	20	0	0	9	3	0	0
Communal work	14	8	2	3	3	2	0
Meetings with development workers	20	0	0	0	0	12	0

Key: Figures stand for number of people.

- Pong-Tamale

Table 3. Languages for interaction in development settings in Pong-Tamale (n=32 for each interaction)

Type of development	Language					
	Dagbani	Hausa	Dagbani/English	Dagbani/Hausa	English	Other
Own development meetings	14	6	4	3	3	2
Communal work	10	8	5	3	3	3
Meetings with development workers	4	0	22	0	6	0

Mismatch between village practice and practice with development workers

- In Daboya, of the African languages only Gonja is used
- In Pong-Tamale, only Dagbani and interpreted Dagbani/English are used. **The striking lack here is Hausa**, even though it is the major inter-ethnic language in the village and also well understood by many of the development workers
- Hausa is used more in P-T than Daboya because of the kind of settlers each community has. Daboya has more local people (more Ghanaians), whilst in Pong-Tamale, many of the settlers are from neighbouring countries, mainly Nigeria and further north like Burkina and Mali. Hausa could have already been a lingua franca for them.

Conclusions: language & identity

- There is more than one local language
 - High individual multilingualism
- Despite surface similarities, the two villages have different language-and-identity configurations which can only be discovered through ethnographic and quantitative research
- Difficulties for language planners and development workers:
 - The languages are far from socially neutral
 - Power alignments are not predictable and usually covert
 - Speakers' choices are clearly strategic
 - It is difficult to argue for a particular language being a speaker's 'first language'

Conclusions for development communication

- The development agencies should implement communication policies which are informed by local linguistic realities
 - For example, while the Dagomba preferred to be addressed in Dagbani, the non-Dagombas preferred Hausa
 - In Daboya, there was less of a problem addressing everybody in Gonja, but only if existing ethnic divisions were recognised
- Sociolinguistic research should be an integral part of development communication planning

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