

# LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE AND SHIFT AMONG AKAN IMMIGRANT COLLEGE STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

Samuel G. Obeng  
Indiana University

**Abstract:** This study examines First Language (L1) retention and shift among 20 Ghanaian-American college students living in the US. Working within the frameworks of *social identity* (Fishman, 1991, 1997, 2001; Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985) and *ethnography of communication* (Saville-Troike, 2000), the paper demonstrates that the students viewed the Akan language as a symbol of their identity, their uniqueness, and their cultural heritage. An examination of the respondents' performance in oral composition and listening comprehension suggests that participants who spoke Akan in their homes and/or with friends performed better and thus had higher L1 retention than those whose parents and friends communicated with them solely in English. Also, participants who listened to Akan music and such Internet radio stations as *Adom 106.3 FM*, *Ghana Waves*, *Kasapah FM*, and *Peace FM*, *Sikaradio*, performed better in the listening comprehension than those who did not. In addition, gender was identified as an important factor in L1 retention. Specifically, female participants outperformed the male participants in both proficiency tests. It is recommended that, to ensure L1 (heritage language) retention, the immigrant youth must make an effort to use the language regularly and in appropriate social domains.

## 1. Introduction

There is considerable literature on language maintenance and shift among immigrant children in North America (e.g. Guardado, 2002; Ishizawa, 2004; Luo & Wiseman, 2000; Portes & Hao, 1998; Veltman, 1988). However, little exists on African language maintenance by African immigrants. In particular, nothing exists on the language maintenance of African immigrant college students. Most of the literature on immigrant children in North America is on Hispanic immigrants. The work by Fishman (1991, 1997, 2001) in which he examines the relevance of language loyalty and nationalism in L1 maintenance is the most cited and debated.

Most of the studies on L1 maintenance by immigrant children have examined the role L1 usage in the home plays in helping to maintain the L1. Dopke (1992), for example, discusses the *one parent, one language approach* as an important maintenance strategy. In particular, he notes that the strategy in which one parent speaks the heritage language only to the child and the other parent speaks the other language (L2) only works best if the parents are consistent about the approach. Dopke maintains that the above approach works best if the parents do not let the children respond to them in the 'inappropriate' language. The strategy, he notes, works even more effectively if the children have other relatives, peers, neighbors, and members from social groups and/or religious groups besides their parents to talk to them in the heritage language (Dopke, 1992). Duursma, Proctor, Snow, August, and Claderon (2007) also bolster the claim about the important role that families play in L1 maintenance when the L1 is used as the main medium of interaction in the home. The authors discovered that, for their Hispanic research participants, proficiency in Spanish

required considerable social support at home.

Lutz's (2006) study, which investigated the effects of individual, family, and social characteristics on the maintenance of heritage language (Spanish) among English-speaking Latino youth, is very relevant to this study because, this study, like Lutz's, takes into consideration the impact of individual, family, and social characteristics on L1 (in this study, Akan) maintenance. Lutz discovered that generation, gender, race, parent's L2 proficiency, single-parent status, parental income, and neighborhood concentration of co-ethnics, among other factors, all affected the subjects' L1 oral proficiency. The author concludes that there is a close connection between his research participants' Spanish-speaking proficiency and the opportunities they have to speak Spanish in structured family and neighborhood contexts.

Other researchers, such as Ishizawa (2004), Guardado (2002), Luo & Wiseman (2000), and Portes & Hao (1998), have also noted the considerable relevance of multiple contexts in heritage language retention. Specifically, they have noted that L1, or heritage language retention, is enhanced by continued use of the L1 in several discourse domains, which therefore allow for sufficient input for continued language development. The ability of such domains to provide motivation for L1 usage and to help children realize the usefulness of the language also enhances L1 retention.

On L1 maintenance among Ghanaian immigrants living in the United States, Obeng (2008) notes that the goal of Akan immigrant parents is for their children to learn English and to adapt to US culture, but, in as much as possible, to also maintain Akan, their heritage language. Obeng notes further that, despite the parents' desire, for some of the immigrant children, fluency in the Ghanaian language (Akan) continues to decline as the children's English improves (see also Hinton, 1999 for a similar claim on Chinese immigrants). Given the Ghanaian parents' desire for L1 retention by their children, and in view of the perceived decline in the immigrant children's proficiency of the L1, this study aims at investigating language retention and/or loss among 20 Akan-American college students living in the US. In pursuing this concern, a close and systematic look at the Akan oral composition and listening comprehension skills of the Ghanaian-American college students is taken in order to determine the extent to which the students have maintained or shifted proficiency in the Akan language.

## 1. Method of study

Data for this study were collected by the author in Akan-(Ghanaian)-speaking communities in New Jersey and Indiana in 2006. These research sites were chosen due to well-established Akan communities in the two states. Twenty college students—10 male and 10 female—who were born in Ghana and migrated to the US with their parents when they were 10 years old or younger were recruited for the project. The average age of the participants was 23. The population sample was chosen first and foremost because they were willing to participate in the research, and secondly because they immigrated to the United States when they were less than ten years old, and had thus not reached the critical period for language acquisition and development (see Krashen, 1985). Also, the participants had, since their arrival in the USA, not visited Ghana. The group was therefore perfect for testing the extent to which long 'removal' from one's linguistic community (Ghana) could affect one's L1 retention and/or L1 competence.

Of the 20 students, six (four females and two males) came from a high socioeconomic background (i.e. they had a parent who was a physician, professor, or financial manager) with an average annual income of a \$100,000 or more. The remaining 14 came from lower middle class homes with an average income of approximately \$30,000.

In an effort to judge the respondents' competence in Akan, the author interviewed them individually from each other. The interviews were conducted in Akan and in English. In order to ensure that the respondents were at ease and not under any pressure, the interviews were done in their homes or in places determined by them.

Data for the study are made up of transcripts of respondents' responses to interview questions, their narratives (oral composition), and a listening comprehension test. With respect to the 'oral composition', the respondents were asked to speak about particular familiar topics, such as life at school, at home, in the library, cafeteria, or on the playing field. The above communicative domains were selected because they were seen as routinized in the respondents' lives. Each interview took no more than 10 minutes. During the L1 retention testing, promptings and/or probes were used where necessary to help with participants' responses to interview questions. Specifically, to make the data authentic, the author took turns by asking questions, issuing back channels, side sequences, and/or supportives where they would commonly in normal conversations. The listening comprehension involved playing a recorded Akan radio news item and an Akan song and asking the respondents questions pertaining to the content of the text.

Prior to taking part in the research, participants were asked questions pertaining to L1 usage at home, with relatives, with friends, with neighbors (where their neighbors were Akan-speaking), at school, and at church. They were also asked about the kind of music and Internet radio stations they listened to. Given the importance of heritage language television and videos in maintaining and/or improving the heritage language (Tse, 1998), participants were also asked if they watched any Akan video films/drama. These domains of use and exposure were chosen because of their role in helping to enhance language competence. Based upon participants' responses, it was determined that none watched the heritage video films, so that was eliminated from the study. Internet radio and music were the two media that were patronized by most of the respondents.

With respect to the evaluation of participants' oral composition, *positive marking* was used. Using positive marking meant that we avoided impressionistic evaluations or judgments. Participants were evaluated based upon their performance in content, expression, organization, and mechanical accuracy. On listening comprehension, participants' proficiency was judged based on their ability to answer correctly, in Akan, questions relating to their understanding of the content of a news item and a song taken from one of the Akan Internet radio stations. The news clip on which the questions were interviewed was short (not more than two minutes long). To insure that the topic was common enough for all the participants to have equal chance of relating to it and remembering the content, a sports clip was chosen because all the participants noted that they read the sports page of the GhanaWeb.com at least once per week. This was to ensure that the test did not become a test on memory. In both the oral composition and listening comprehension, participants were judged as either *advanced/competent*, *intermediate*, or *novice/L1-Shifted* (See ACTFL proficiency guidelines pp. 110-112).

Participants who scored 70% or more on each test were judged as competent or advanced speakers of the L1. The WAEC objective criteria were used in determining the

bar. Such participants were able to initiate and sustain long and complex communicative tasks in the oral composition. The content of their composition was outstanding and their oral composition was very well organized. They had unlimited vocabulary and used appropriate collocations. Grammatical errors were almost non-existent.

Participants judged as intermediate scored between 50% and 69%. Such participants were able to create, usually through promptings and probes from the researcher, meaningful phrases and sentences by combining and often recombining words and expressions they had retained from the L1. They were able to ask and answer questions and to explain (with a certain amount of difficulty) words and some expressions in the listening comprehension, more especially, if such sentences or expressions are repeated a couple of times.

Participants who scored under 50% were judged as having lost the L1. Participants at the novice level had no functional communicative ability. They were able to communicate only minimally, and their oral production consisted of isolated words and a few high-frequency phrases. Their understanding of the listening comprehension was limited to isolated words, especially borrowed words and high frequency words. They were unable to understand even short sentences.

## 2. Theoretical underpinnings of the study

The study is done within the framework of *social identity* (Fishman, 1991, 1997, 2001; Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985) as well as on Saville-Troike's (2000) theory of *ethnography of communication*. Using Le Page & Tabouret-Keller's theory of acts of identity enabled us to argue that, although the students are naturalized as United States citizens, they still identify themselves as Akan (Ghanaians) and view the Akan language as an important identity symbol. The participants' decision to maintain their Ghanaian language, despite their long absence from Ghana, is influenced by their social and ethnic identities. The Akan language, besides being viewed as an important tool for marking identity, was also viewed as a marker of self-assertiveness and ethnic pride.

Working within Saville-Troike's ethnography of communication, which required close attention to the overall context of an interaction, enabled us to take participants' various interactional domains into consideration. The theory also provided us with an opportunity to observe the relevance of participants' aim for wanting to maintain or lose their L1, the kinds of messages they listened to in the L1, and what they used the L1 to convey, the form, and tone of such messages, as well as the peculiar norms associated with the L1 usage in their lives.

## 3. Data analysis

In the data analysis, claims made are based on the participants' performance in the proficiency tests and on their responses to the interview questions. Specifically, in order to give credence to the analytical claims, participants' responses are cited word for word to back every claim. By backing our claims with participants' own words, we are able to show that such claims genuinely represent the participants' worldview. Where necessary, numeric figures and percentages are calculated and presented to show the number of respondents and the level attained in the proficiency tests.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Participants with advanced level or high competency in the L1

Careful scrutiny of the data shows that 13 of the respondents had native-like competence in listening comprehension and oral composition. In particular, based on the results of our 'positive marking,' 13 participants (5 males and 8 females) scored between 70% and 100% at the proficiency level in oral composition and between 70% and 90% in listening comprehension.

On the average, the female participants scored higher than the male participants in both proficiency tests. The five males scored between 70% and 90%, whereas the females scored between 80% and 95%. Both males and females scored better in the listening comprehension than in the oral composition. The female participants performed better than their male counterparts irrespective of their socioeconomic background. The two male participants whose parents were of a high socioeconomic status did not perform as well as those from lower/middle socioeconomic background. This was probably because their parents did not speak English with them at home, or because they lived in an area where they did not easily mix with other Akan speakers.

When asked about their high performance in the L1, participants gave such reasons as speaking the L1 at home with family members, using the L1 with Akan-speaking friends, and listening to Internet radio and Akan music. A participant noted:

Alice: My parents always speak Twi (Akan) with me at home. We also go to the Ghana Pentecost Church where sometimes they sing Twi songs. I think the main reason I still speak and understand Twi is that I love Highlife music and hence listen to it all the time. I've learned the lyrics of most of the songs and can sing along.

Another participant, Kofi, remarked:

Kofi: My Dad speaks with me in English only, whereas my Mom speaks with me in Akan only. It gets on my Dad's nerves sometimes when my mother insists that I respond to her only in Akan. At times, even if I don't understand what she means, she will explain it in Akan. She is a typical Akan woman; she's tough, and she likes her culture. In a way, she helped me to keep my Akan. I also think that all these Internet radios help a lot. When I'm bored, I just tune in to Ghanawaves.com or to MyJoy online. They have good music and some of their rap is quite good. They sound like Jamaican rappers.

### 4.2 Participants with intermediate knowledge in Akan

Five of the respondents (four male and one female) were judged as having intermediate level knowledge of the L1. Three of the participants under this category could conveniently be labeled passive speakers of the L1, because they understood the L1 in a basic way but were unable to speak as well as they understood (see Hinton, 1999 for a similar case). They could

mostly communicate only after being prompted a couple of times by the researcher. One could, therefore, classify them as intermediate low if a scale of low, mid, and high were created under this category. The remaining two respondents could be described as intermediate-mid because they could speak as well as answer questions better than the other three, although their utterances were characterized with several pausal phenomena. Respondents who fell under this category noted that they did not speak Akan at home, that their parents spoke English with them at home, that either they did not have Akan-speaking friends, or if they had them, they did not speak Akan with them, and that they neither listened to Akan music nor Ghana internet radio. Participants in this category scored between 50% to 69% on the Listening Comprehension and 50% and 60% on the Oral Composition.

Three of the male participants came from a lower middle class background, and one was from a high socioeconomic background. The female respondent in this category came from a lower-middle class background. Interestingly, she (the female respondent) outperformed her male counterparts in both the oral composition and listening comprehension tests by scoring 60% in the oral composition and 69% in the listening comprehension.

Two of the participants said their parents grounded them for speaking Akan when they were young. One noted:

Kojo: My Dad hated this Akan business, Ghana business, you know. He didn't want my sister and me to have anything to do with Twi. If you spoke Twi in the house, he got angry; sometimes he'll ground you. He said it was better to perfect our English and mix with the other kids in the neighborhood. I remember he always told us that knowing Twi would not get us a job. He said, to be successful you need English, not Twi. Maybe he was right then. But now I wish I had continued with my Twi also. Everyone knows I'm from Ghana even though I'm an American; I guess my name is Ghanaian that's why. And I see myself as Ghanaian, but my Twi is pretty bad. It kind of sucks, you know.

Another participant remarked:

Adjoa: The reason my Fante is so bad is that my mother asked me not to speak it at home. Paa Kwesi, my brother, and I were asked to speak English from day one. My mom will insult and sometimes ground us if she over heard us talking in Fante. She spoke to us in English only. As for the Fante songs, I like the beat and the lyrics. I understand some of what they are saying but I can't speak the language. As for my brother, Paa Kwesi, he listens and dances to the music but understands nothing. Maybe when we go to Ghana some day, we'll start learning the language all over.

#### 4.3 Participants who have lost the L1 (Akan)

Two of the participants (a male from a high socioeconomic background and a female from a lower-middle socioeconomic background) indicated that they did not understand Akan. Both of them performed poorly on both proficiency tests with a score of less than

20% on each test. The female participant lived with her mother and a stepfather (an African American), and the male participant lived with his father and a stepmother who was Jamaican. Both participants indicated that English was the language used in the home, on the playground, and in all domains of life they encountered. One was aware of the Ghanaian Internet radios, but had not listened to any of them. The other participant was unaware of such radio stations. Although both participants did poorly in both proficiency tests, the female outperformed the male. She scored 18% in the listening comprehension and 15% in the oral composition, whereas the male participant scored 12% and 10% in the listening comprehension and oral composition respectively.

The male participant, Yaw, had heard Akan Highlife music, but did not understand the lyrics. He noted:

Yaw: Although my Dad is Ghanaian, because his wife is Jamaican, we speak English at home. My Dad and my Mom divorced when I was seven, and he married this physician from Jamaica. She does not understand Akan, so my Dad felt it would be odd to speak Twi, since that will leave her out of any conversation. She might also feel or think we're insulting her if we speak Twi, so I guess that's why we speak only English in the house. My Dad occasionally plays Akan songs, but I don't understand them. You know, I came to the US when I was only six, so I forgot my Twi as soon as my Mom left the house and my stepmother moved in. I do love the Akan people and their language, but I just did not have the opportunity to develop my Akan. It's kind of sad because I know and identify as Akan. My name is Akan, and despite the fact that I have a typical northeastern accent, everyone introduces me as a Ghanaian because of my name, and I'm proud of that. Maybe I'll have to visit Ghana and start learning Twi.

The female participant noted:

Aba: I don't understand Fante at all. My Mom tells me that her husband, my step dad, used to laugh at her any time she spoke Fante with me. Americans don't normally care about other languages, especially African languages. I therefore did not have the privilege of speaking Fante when growing up. I can only understand about two or three words in Fante. I know *gyae*, which means 'stop,' *bra* 'come,' and *ko* 'go.' My mom used them a lot when I was young. No Fante highlife song was ever played in the house; neither were any Ghanaian videos ever shown. Everything was centered on America. I wish I were taught the Fante language because at the end of the day, I'm a Fante even if I live here a hundred years. Hopefully, some day, I'll be able to visit the homeland and learn to speak Fante.

A careful and methodical observation of the above excerpts point to the fact that the respondents' loss of the L1 (Akan) was due to the language not being used in the home domain, parents' negative attitude toward the L1, and/or a situation in which one parent did

not speak the child's L1, and hence, the rest of the family decided not to use the L1 in order to accommodate the communicational needs of the non-Akan parent.

## 5. Discussion

Based upon the above excerpts and others examined in the data, and also on participants' performance in the oral composition and listening comprehension communicational tests, it could be argued that L1 maintenance by the surveyed participants was influenced by their usage of the L1 in important social domains, such as the home, church, and among friends.

With respect to the home domain, given the fact that participants whose families used the L1 on a daily basis and/or whose parents insisted on L1 usage outperformed those whose parents either discouraged or did not care about L1 usage, it could be argued that parents' action or inaction on L1 usage has considerable impact on immigrant students' L1 proficiency and retention. Also, the fact that immigrant parents' encouragement or discouragement of L1 usage by their children depended on their attitude toward the L1 and on whether they perceived of the L1 as contributing to the children's future success and well being, point to the important role of parental perception of L1 on L1's maintenance or shift. This has implications for language pedagogy and language revitalization. Specifically, it points to the important role parents can play in their children's education in general and in language use and maintenance in particular. Most importantly, it points to the fact that any attempt at language maintenance that leaves parents out of consideration is either doomed to either fail completely or to encounter serious problems. Finally, it also points to the fact that perceived economic importance of a language, in part, determines the extent to which its speakers maintain or shift from it.

A final point about the role of the family or home domain on L1 maintenance is the issue of *accommodation*. For example, we learned from the excerpts how, in families in which the parents spoke different languages, the children's L1 had to be 'sacrificed' in order to accommodate the communicative needs of the other parent. A possible suggestion in a situation where the L1 parent wants the child to retain the L1 will be to encourage the non-Akan parent to learn and use the child's L1 (Akan) so as to ensure the child's L1 retention. An easier solution may be to have a private context in which only one parent is present and the L1 is used.

From the data and excerpts scrutinized in the study, we learned that, besides the home environment, L1 usage in other interactional domains, such as at church and among friends, help the users to retain the L1. This also has relevance for language pedagogy. Particularly, it shows the relevance of multiple domains or contexts of usage in language retention and the need for language pedagogues to explore and encompass such domains and others in heritage language teaching and learning environments.

Close inspection of the research findings also demonstrates the important role of music and the media in language maintenance. Specifically, the fact that participants who listened to Ghanaian Highlife music and Akan Internet Radio performed better in the proficiency tests, especially in the listening comprehension than those who did not, shows that if properly harnessed, the electronic media and the worldwide web can contribute considerably toward L1 maintenance in people who have been removed from the L1's home of origin.

With respect to identity, all participants viewed themselves as Ghanaian, although they have American and not Ghanaian citizenship. The reason behind the participants' perception of their identity was that, for them, ethnicity was important in determining how they viewed themselves. Eighteen of the participants emphasized their strong Akan linguistic affinity and saw the Akan language as an important instrument for self-manifestation and a means of relating to other Akans. Thus, for such participants, the L1 (Akan language) was an important determinant, or marker of, although not necessarily coterminous with, Akan ethnicity.

Six of the students were mindful of the fact that the Akan language (and its associated culture) was embattled in their US communities, so they made a conscious effort to use and maintain it to ensure its continuity and survival. They saw language shift as diminishing their Akan identity, and therefore, viewed Akan language revitalization as an instrument of strengthening their Akan identity.

Two important facts scrutinized from our data and the above results had to do with socioeconomic status and gender of the participants. Specifically, we learned that, for our surveyed participants, whereas socioeconomic status was not an important determinant of L1 retention, gender was. Females did better in both the listening comprehension and oral composition tests. There is however insufficient data to suggest that females have a higher L1 retention than males in non-L1 environments. Also, in all, both males and females did better in listening comprehension than in oral composition. Thus, participants could understand the L1 more than they could speak it.

## 6. Significance of study

This study has considerable significance for language and ethnic identity and L1 maintenance and revitalization. Specifically, it shows the extent to which a groups' perception of who they are can influence their desire to learn and maintain a language. The study also shows the relevance of social domains and the extent of language usage in such domains on language maintenance and shift. Finally, the study shows the potential relevance of music, radio, and the worldwide web, in language revitalization and L1 retention.

## References

- American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (1985). *ACTFL proficiency guidelines*. Hastings-on-Hudson, NY: ACTFL Materials.
- Dopke, S. (1992). *One parent, one language: An interactional approach*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Duursma, E. E., Proctor, P. P., Snow, C., August, D. & Claderon, M. (2007). The role of home literacy and language environment on bilinguals' English and Spanish vocabulary development. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 28, 171-190.
- Fishman, J. A. (1991). *Reversing language shift: Theoretical and empirical foundations of assistance to threatened languages*. Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters.

- Fishman, J. A. (1997). Maintaining languages: What works? What doesn't? In Cantoni, G., (Ed.), *Stabilizing indigenous languages* (pp. 186-198). Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona University.
- Fishman, J. A. (2001). *Language loyalty in the United States*: The Hague: Mouton.
- Guardado, M. (2002). Loss and maintenance of first language skills: Case studies of Hispanic families in Vancouver. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 58(3), 341-363.
- Hinton, L. (1999, May 7). *Involuntary language loss among immigrants: Asian-American linguistic autobiographies*. Paper presented at the Georgetown University Roundtable on Languages and Linguistics, Washington, DC.
- Ishizawa, H. (2004). Minority language use among grandchildren in multigenerational homes. *Sociological Perspectives* 47(4), 465-483.
- Krashen, S. D. (1985). *The input hypothesis: Issues and implications*. London & New York: Longman.
- Luo, S. H., & Wiseman, R. L. (2000). Ethnic language maintenance among Chinese immigrant children in the United States. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 24(3), 307.
- Lutz, A. (2006). Spanish maintenance among English-speaking Latino youth: The role of individual and social characteristics. *Social Forces*, 84, 1417-1433.
- Le Page, R. B., & Tabouret-Keller, A. (1985). *Acts of identity: Creole-based approaches to language and ethnicity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Obeng, S. G. (2008). Language maintenance among Akan-Ghanaian immigrants living in the United States. In T. Falola, N. Afolabi, & A. Adesanye (Eds.) *Migrations and creative expressions in Africa and the African diaspora* (pp. 179-218). Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.
- Portes, A., & Hao, L. (1998). E. pluribus unum: Bilingualism and loss of language in the second generation. *Sociology of Education*, 71, 269-294.
- Saville-Troike, M. (2000). *Ethnography of communication*. London: Basil Blackwell.
- Tse, L. (1998). Ethnic identity formation and its implications for heritage L1 development. In S. D. Krashen, L. Tse, & J. McQuillan, *Heritage language development* (pp. 15-30). Culver City, CA: Language Education Associates.
- Veltman, C. (1988). *The future of the Spanish language in the United States*. Hispanic Policy Development Project. New York City and Washington, DC.
- West African Examinations Council (1994). *Ghanaian language grading objective criteria*. <http://www.ghanawaec.org/exams7.htm>.
- Wong F. L. (1991). When learning a second language means losing the first. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 6, 323-346.