

Songs: Language Choice and Verbal Art

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While describing language documentation methodology in Africa, Lüpke (2010: 67) notes that documenting the performance of verbal art often requires more than just a speaker and necessitates the documentation of the situational context. Childs et al. (2014: 169) advocate for documentation of the comprehensive language repertoire of a community in its sociolinguistic context rather than documenting use of a single speech variety within a multilingual reality. This presentation looks at the performance of poetic form by women in the ʉt-Maʉin language community in a variety of settings.

Paterson (2019: 8-9) lays out seven related speech varieties —ʉt-Fer, ʉt-Kag, ʉt-MaʉKuʉr, ʉt-MaʉJiir, ʉt-MaʉRor, ʉs-Uʉ, and ʉt-Zuksun— under the cover term ʉt-Maʉin. In addition to the ʉt-Maʉin varieties, C’Lela and ʉt-Hun, neighboring languages, and the lingua franca, Hausa, are used in a range of social functions; English is the language of federal government and education; Arabic is used to express a social identity with macro-Islamic culture. However, each ʉt-Maʉin speaker’s grasp of these various speech varieties differs.

Within recordings made while conducting language documentation fieldwork among ʉt-Maʉin speakers, many songs were not sung in ʉt-Maʉin. Rather, C’Lela, Hausa, and Arabic were used depending on the social context. In one case, a song within a folk narrative by an ʉt-Fer storyteller (Mama Iliya et al. 2013) was not intelligible to two ʉt-MaʉRor speakers who were transcribing the story. My consultants clearly expressed that the challenge for translation was because “This is not our language”.

This presentation highlights the relationships between ʉt-Maʉin and C’Lela cultural contexts in which only some ʉt-Maʉin women embrace non-ʉt-Maʉin verbal art. Through analysis of recorded songs, discussion around the songs at the time of collection, discussion with other ʉt-Maʉin speakers elsewhere, and supplemental video conference interviews, I present hypotheses about the sociolinguistic dynamics that drive the use of particular languages in songs that may prove applicable to other multilingual environments.

References

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