“Silimminga, hello!”
Negotiating Race, Place, and Language Ideologies in Post-Colonial Dalun, Ghana

Sabea Evans
Tri-Co Linguistics Department, Haverford College

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Linguistics

Fall 2017

Acknowledgments: Firstly, thank you to the community members of Dalun for your immediate and most warm welcomes. Thank you to the Lagim Tefi Tana program, Program Coordinators Dr. Alice Lesnick and Al-Hassan Sumaila, and my cohort of Fellows from University for Development Studies– Tamale, Haverford College, and Bryn Mawr College. I’d also like to thank my Simil Radio internship mentor, Technical Director Mohammed Gausu Yusif, our most frequent collaborating MC Producer Alidu Abdul Rahaman, and the whole Simil Radio team for being gentle and invested teachers. Without the generous funding of Haverford College’s Center for Peace and Global Citizenship and Bryn Mawr College’s Leadership, Innovation, and Liberal Arts Center, I would not have had the opportunity to conduct this research. Likewise, I’d like to thank the Tri-Co Linguistic department for providing me with model linguists Dr. Brook D. Lillehaugen, whose mentorship has been unyielding and multifaceted, and Dr. Jamie A. Thomas, whose mentorship firmly led me to ethnography and to a plethora of other avenues in which my potential as a linguist could flourish. I’d like to thank my Writing Partner, Maurice Rippel, for getting on the plane to Accra with me and always knowing exactly what I was trying to express when my words failed. Finally, I would like to express an enormous amount of gratitude to the John P. Chesick Scholars Program for providing me with a carefully crafted community of brilliant peers, including Maurice, and the leadership of my inexplicably kind, thoughtful, and invaluable mentor, Ken Koltun-Franm. From my first step onto campus through the completion of this thesis, they have devoted everything they could to supporting my success.
Abstract

This paper is an ethnographic account of the motivating factors of language choice in Ghana through the lens of a community of Dagomba people in the rural town of Dalun in the Northern Region of Ghana. English-only education policies force many to choose English or a local language—in this case, Dagbani—and designate each to disparate spaces. The focuses of this paper are (a) to investigate how local people of Dalun narrativize their own language learning, choices, and ideologies, (b) to examine how agency in language learning, choice, and ideology in the context of rationale is impacted by discourse on development, education, and mobility reveal language ideology, and (c) to emphasize the indispensable nature of the voice of the ethno-graphee in answering these questions of language, power, and agency.

Key words: Language choice, language ideologies, mother tongue, Dagomba, Dagbani, education, L2, local language, motivation, investment, post-colonialism, globalization
List of Figures

1 Google Maps image of Ghana. ............................ 3
2 Google Maps image of Dalun, in the Northern Region 4
3 LTT Fellows with Simli Radio Technician and Producer. 7
4 Dagbani [dag] teaching materials for SfL .................. 8
5 One of School for Life’s graduating classes of 2017. .... 10
6 Signage outside of the Simli Center. ...................... 14
7 The road to the Baobab tree near the Simli Center. .... 20
8 The road from Dalun to the Simli Center. ................. 22

Contents

1 Ghana’s Language Landscape: Dalun & Dagbani ........ 3

2 Lagim Tehi Tuma ........................................... 4
   2.1 Encountering Ideologies .............................. 5
   2.2 Simli Radio ............................................ 6

3 Mother-Tongue Literacy and Education Policies ....... 9
   3.1 “English is what everyone wants.” ................... 9
   3.2 “This is a simple language.” ......................... 11

4 Language Choice: Post-Colonial Notions of Agency .... 14
   4.1 Post-Coloniality and Development .................. 15
   4.2 “Silmenga, hello!” ..................................... 17
   4.3 Economies of Language: English as Mobility .... 21
   4.3.1 North vs. South: “Laughing in vernacular” .... 23

5 Conclusion ................................................. 25

Appendix ................................................... 29
   Transcription Conventions .............................. 29
1 Ghana's Language Landscape: Dalun & Dagbani

As is the case for many former (and current) British colonies,\(^1\) the official language and lingua franca in Ghana is English (iso code [eng]; Simenst & Fenig 2017). Akan [aka] is the “national or vehicular language” of Ghana, indigenous and spoken by the majority of the population, while English is the “international language” carrying the “legacy of colonialism” (Zsiga et al: 2014, 1-2).

The Northern Region is broken into about twenty six districts with Tamale as is its capital. Dalun, situated in the Kumbungu district and about forty miles outside of Tamale (see Figure 2), is a rural community populated by people belonging to the Dagomba ethnic group. Dagbani [dag] is the heritage language of Dagombas.\(^2\) Dagbani is classified as part of the Gur subgroup of Niger-Congo languages. There are over a million speakers of Dagbani but this paper is concerned specifically with narratives of Dagomba people in Dalun on their relationships with Dagbani and English language use.

---

\(^1\) Ghana achieved independence in the 1950s.

\(^2\) I will be using the ethnonym, Dagbani, instead of the autonym, Dagbanli, for the duration of this paper as I do not consider myself a Dagbani speaker.
2 Lagim Temi Tuma

In the summer of 2017, I spent seven weeks in Ghana: four days in Accra, the southern capital, that bracketed six and a half weeks in Dalum, in the Northern Region. I participated in a collaborative action research fellowship called Lagim Temi Tuma, meaning “Thinking Together” in Dagbani [dag]. The fellowship is an ongoing collaboration between Haverford College, Bryn Mawr College, University of Ghana-Legon, and University of Development Studies (UDS) Tamale. The fellowship involves completing internships at one of four local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that were created out of community member collaboration with both the U.S. and Denmark to work toward “Development.” Rather than approaching these internships from the perspective of problem solving, Lagim Temi Tuma (LTT) fellows focus on problem posing and critical engagement with questions of how it has come to be that certain resources are available or un-available and for whom these realities are designated to. This summer the team consisted of four Haverford College students, four Bryn Mawr College students, four University for Development Studies Tamale students, four internship site mentors, Program Director and Bryn Mawr Professor Alice Lesnick, Local Coordinator Alhassan Sumaila, and local Junior Fellow Yakuba Mariam. The internship sites were

(1) Titagya schools, an early childhood education center
(2) Simli Radio, a local, but far reaching, community radio
(3) ICT center, an Information Computer Technology center geared toward teaching school aged kids basic computer skills
(4) Music & Arts Culture Group, a space to learn and learn about local songs, dances, and cultural practices

Through our work at these internships, along with various formal/informal discussions and language learning, we conducted collaborative action research to examine questions of education, power, and history in a post-colonial context, while remaining critical of Western-centric ideas of development.

2.1 Encountering Ideologies

During the LTT US Fellows’ orientation week in Accra, professors from the University of Ghana-Legon gave talks on the trajectory and implications of their work. Transitioning from a comment she had made about the way that the radio disseminates pervasive language and perpetuates uses of terms like “tribe” instead of “ethnic group,” she began citing other examples of language that were pervasive in Ghanaian dialects of English. Her examples rang with a confused disdain for the use of “several” to mean “several times” and “let’s be upstanding” to mean “stand up.” She was firmly decided on the point that multilingualism and code-switching was valuable and creative (“If I want to throw French in there [while I am lecturing], I will”) but pidgin English\(^3\) was only “cute on kids.” She hypothesized that people who spoke “bad” English were doing so because they were “trying too hard” and were translating too literally between their native languages and English. She cited this linguistic practice as “Twinglish,” a combination of Twi\(^4\) and English.

She continued by explaining that some people are unaware that they are not speaking Standard English, so she allows verbal code-switching but prohibits its use in written assignments unless it is accompanied by translations.

\(^3\) A pidgin language is a combination of languages produced by the contact and interaction of two or more language communities. Its function is to bridge communication between the communities and its main purpose often arises out of business transactions.

\(^4\) Twi, a variety of Akan, is the most popular language used in Ghana outside of English, with 9.1 million users according to Simenst & Fenig (2007).
Her statements were generalized in a way that centered Twi, mostly spoken in Southern Ghana, without acknowledging other varieties of Ghanaian pidgin English that could exist in the North, signaling a multilayered sense of internalized linguistic hierarchy reinforced by regional tensions between the Ghanaian North and South (Ahearn 2012: 127). I expand on these regional tensions in Section 4.3.1.. This hierarchy was farther complicated when she prescribed that Akan should be written down in official contexts so it could “beat English,” her point that all school entrance exams are written in English drove home for me the questions of what agentive language choice looks like in this context, what are the structural disadvantages put in place for those who use little to no English, as well as what are the implications of only being educated through English, English literature, and thus schools of Western thought.

2.2 Simli Radio

I explored these facets of language choice through opportunities provided and encounters facilitated by my internship at Simli Radio (see Figure 3), a community radio dedicated to raising awareness of various structural and practical issues that are intertwined with developmental mobility and empowering communities to work at these issues to improve quality of life through “participatory approaches... that stimulate social economic and political change that meets the aspiration of its constituent communities” (Ghana Community Radio Network). Simli Radio broadcasts almost entirely in Dagboni, with a few segments in English, and on topics such as sanitation and hygiene, education, local cultural entertainment, international news, gender inclusion and family life (Seidu 2011) I, along with three other LTT fellows, produced eight programs that were aired during Simli Radio’s Community Development segment. Each of us led a week of programming consisting of writing for two segments: the first day was an introductory and informational segment on what we had found through talking to people in the community and the second was an interview with someone local who could provide a stronger background or example of whatever our topic was for the week.
I led segments on mother-tongue language use and literacy and interviewed a member of the Ghana Education Service that I met at a School For Life graduation. In this context, mother-tongue is another term for indigenous language, or language that is native to an area, community, or family. Mother-tongue is also known more formally as an L1 or heritage language. School For Life (SfL) is a program for out-of-school children (usually between the age 8-14) that works toward improving access to education by teaching basic educational skills in local languages instead of English (see Figure 4). Our radio team was invited to a graduation ceremony during the interview my mentor had arranged for me at the Tamale chapter, with the Deputy Manager of Operations, the Deputy Manager of Curriculum Development and Replication, and the Communications, Advocacy and Gender Officer. According to an impact assessment of SfL’s model of complementary education, “the nine-month SfL literacy cycle provides a solid foundation for students to move from mother-tongue literacy to second-language acquisition in English... The values embedded in the SfL curriculum contribute to former SfL students being disciplined, confident, and motivated” (Casely-Hayford & Hartwell 2010: 533).

What I found most interesting about SfL, both as reported in an overview of the program by the Tamale office members and the impact assessment, was that “interviews with head teachers and teachers revealed that ex-SfL learners were outperforming non-SfL students in the same class in the Ghanaian language, English, and mathematics” (Casely-Hayford & Hartwell 2010: 533).
533). An on-going issue that was mentioned during a community outreach forum held by Simli Radio⁵ in a nearby community, was that students were having difficulty sustaining at-home study practices. The causes of this difficulty included lack of electricity for a light source by which students could read by at home, low adult English literacy rates, and the inability to discuss topics learned at school with parents who did not speak English.

Additionally, according to Haneda (2006: 343), “when the home-school boundaries are deliberately blurred or crossed, students’ investment in school learning appears to increase.” It is not only important for students’ memory retention to be able to use the literacy practices they learn across context, but also for the value that students place in their education. In English-only contexts, students “are expected not only to understand what their teacher is trying to teach them in a language that they do not understand, but also to learn to read and write in this language—a medium that is not the social language of their community, their family or even the playground” (Roskerans et al. 2012: 597). Students who were taught in their native language would have a better and quicker grasp of early literacy and math skills than those learning them through a language they were still learning the basics of. Haneda (2006) also posits, in line with the vision of SfL’s curricular materials, “it is important for teachers to develop an understand-

⁵Simli Radio participates in a community outreach partnership with UNICEF in which they make repeated entries into various communities deemed under-resourced by UNICEF in order to survey, discuss, and collaborate on solutions to community reported issues that prevent higher quality of life.
ing of students’ personal and community literacy resources and to try to incorporate them into classroom practices in locally relevant ways.” What complicates this notion of promoting Mother-tongue literacy is both teacher investment in and command of the local language.

3 Mother-Tongue Literacy and Education Policies

3.1 “English is what everyone wants.”

The SfL committee’s emphasis on the multifaceted nature of English-only education was bolstered by a tumultuous history of language policy in Ghanaian education. According to Owu-Ewie (2006: 76), there has been fluctuation in Ghanaian education policy that governs the language of instruction since the pre-colonial period of 1529-1925: “With the inception of formal education and the subsequent use of English as the medium of instruction, the indigenous languages [that had previously been the chosen languages of conduct in traditional education] were seen as ‘inadequate’ as teaching media.” However, the arrival of missionaries elicited “the development of the local languages in both their educational and proselytizing efforts” and prevented British colonial government from avoiding the incorporation of Ghanaian language in education legislation in 1925 (Owu-Ewie 2006: 76). Since then and until 1951, the first three years of school were conducted in Ghanaian languages, decreasing to just the first year from 1951 to 1956 and to no use at all from 1957-1966; the downward trend reversed itself after this point with first year Ghanaian Language instruction in 1967 from 1969 and first three to six years, depending on the area, 1970-1974 (Owu-Ewie 2006: 77). Ghanaian languages were used for the first three years from 1974 until 2002, when the Ghanaian government passed a policy stating “that English should be used as the medium of instruction from Primary one, with a Ghanaian language studied as a compulsory subject to the Senior Secondary School (High School)” (Owu-Ewie 2006: 77). Some reasonings, offered by the Minister of Education in 2002, for the policy changes stemmed from the exceptional multilingualism of student bodies leading to lack of teaching materials, teachers
trained in teaching in Ghanaian languages, a standardized writing system, and, in rural areas especially, teachers neglecting English use altogether in class (Owu-Ewie 2006: 78).

Now, children in rural areas are less likely to have access to any kind of education, let alone an English based one, because “the government isn’t even able to reach out to them, probably because of geographical location” (Evans et al. 2017b). Once there is access to education, the child is either too old to attend a grade that they would have the appropriate skill level for, and/or is taught in a language that the child has no true grasp of and has difficulty practicing at home because their family and friends use little to no English.

SL’s philosophy, as posited in my interview with the current Tamale office members, is that “the child starts from home, starts with the language, gets to school, that kind of... process should continue. You shouldn’t cut the child away from what he or she have brought from home” (Evans et al. 2017b). However, even though the mother-tongue method gets more results, English has been made the structurally preferred language of the job market by a long and recent history of British colonial rule. After hearing these perspectives on the ways that Ghanaians are forced to learn English out of fear of being excluded from avenues of earning a livelihood, I conducted semi-formal interviews to explore how these languages policies get implemented on an individual level.
3.2 “This is a simple language.”

Grades in English are what most heavily impact whether or not students matriculate. Mfum-Mensah (2005:85) emphasizes this claim by revealing the insights of school children on how not speaking English has been made detrimental to several levels of education: “When we take subjects that we are studying in school, you can see that all these subjects revolve around English. English determines success in all other subjects. Therefore, if you cannot read English you cannot do well in any subjects.” All job applications are written in English. English is “what everyone wants” (School for Life: 2017) However, this issue with English-only policies for education from early childhood is that they do not, according to Sziga et al (2014: 9), “foster better English speakers” and “they result in students who are losing respect for their local language, are not learning the international language, and are also falling behind on the content areas.” Hovens (2002: 250) also addresses this issue in second language learning:

In the beginning [L2 learners] may make slower progress in this second language, because without comprehensible input in the L2, students are excluded from effective understanding of and learning in the second language. This is easy to understand if we consider that reading is not merely decoding written communication, that understanding a language comes before reading, and that reading the first language should come before reading other languages.

Not only are children being forced to discredit their own language and familial learning as a method of instruction, but they are being prevented from gaining a quality and holistic education because of it.

After interviewing the SfL– Tamale committee on their work in Mother-Tongue language advocacy, they invited the Simli Radio team to observe graduation ceremonies as the nine month cycle had just ended in nearby communities (see Figure 5). I had the opportunity to meet a Ghana Education Service (GES) officer who had chosen, uncharacteristically, to participate in the final examination process before the ceremony. The officer, Salifu
Sulemana⁶, agreed to join Simli Radio for an interview for my segment on Mother-Tongue literacy and advocacy and his perspective on the ways education is impacted by language policies was impassioned, critically honest, and disproving of the assumption among some of my colleagues that government officers were not invested in improving education for the under-resourced. In the interview, we asked him “why don’t basic education get taught in the local language and what are some policies or current advocacy work being done to advocate for accessibility of education through mother tongue or local language use?” (Community Development, 2017) First, he made sure to clarify what the policy actually was:

**Salifu:** The local language should be 80% in the basic and then... 80 or 90% and that of the English language should be 10% and that is in the primary. That is eh maybe KG, Primary 1, P-P1, P1 and 2.⁷ So from that point it start going up... the percentage of local language usage will- reducing when the child is growing up. (Community Development, 2017)

He proceeded to postulate that the issue with implementing the policy was that “most teachers, even Dagombas, are finding it difficult to use the language to teach.” The team was surprised with this answer and while we were stuck in thought, the MC posed a much needed “why?” to break the silence. Salifu responded:

**Salifu:** Why? Because they themself are not taking it serious. [**Host:** Mmm.] That is, in fact, I happened to be a language teacher in the primary school- I mean in the junior secondary school. and I realize... that children did not have any respect for the local language tutor. [**Host:** Mmm.] Simply because they feel that ‘Oh, this language is something we understand. This is a simple language.’ Meanwhile, they cannot- when you give it to them to read, they cannot read it.

---

⁶Ghanaian names will be written in their tradition with surname followed by given name.

⁷The Ghanaian school system starts with two years of Kindergarten (KG 1 and KG 2) succeeded by Primary School (F 1-6), Junior High School, and Senior High School.
And even go down and realize that when eh eh eh the parents are not in full eh eh eh recognizing someone who teaches Dagbani. So when they’re not recognizing the person, it means that they will not have interest in it. They will not be able to- they will not really put their minds in it to learn very well. So most teachers from even there XXX they did not also like it. Because it is their language they feel they can speak, they can use the language anyway but they don’t know they need to learn it before they can use it to teach. So because of that - I mean it is really that most of the teachers did not have the interest in the language from onset and so therefore when it comes for them to use it to teach it welcomes a challenge. (Community Development, 2017)

When asked in Opoku-Amankwa & Brew-Hammond (2011: 95) on perceptions of literacy, one focus group’s description of a literate person largely focused on one’s ability to read and communicate in English. Being able to read and communicate in one’s local language was not considered literate, in some cases because “you cannot use it outside”– local languages are truly bound to the locality and are not received out of the bounds of heritage speakers, and therefore Ghana. According to these study participants and those documented in Mfum-Mensah (2005:82), local language “ends” within Ghanaian land and the willingness of Others to communicate with and to listen to a conversation partner begins with English. Globalization, the global expansion and integration of ideas, cultures, economies, “has led to increases in migration and developments in communication technologies that allow for [these] transnational flows of ideas, languages, and asymmetries” (Ahearn 2012: 121). It is the perpetuation of these ”asymmetries” that hold certain languages, like Dagbani and other African languages, to the realm of the local and other languages, like English and other Euro-colonial languages, flourish globally.
4 Language Choice: Post-Colonial Notions of Agency

After discussing the focus of my research with a few members of the community and LTT, I had heard more than one recommendation to speak to Mahama Safianu. Safianu is the director of Dalun’s Information and Computer Technology (ICT) Center and the mentor for the fellows who chose ICT as their internship site. Safianu has been involved with and spearheaded a considerable amount of development work and NGOs in Dalun.

He is known to have the most revered command of English in the town and was often complimented for his eloquent translations. This summer, he was the designated translator in the LTT Fellows’ interactions with the Chief of Dalun, as well as for the community’s first Education Stakeholders’ Forum. Safianu is also an administrator for Titagya Schools, a bilingual and child-centered early education center, and has spent a considerable amount of time traveling internationally to negotiate stake-holding with Danish colleagues. His sparse yet comfortable office was a one room building structure that sat across a small courtyard across from the ICT Center and next to the Dalun Youth House. The Dalun Youth House is a space used for various forums, activities, and most recently to house Dalun’s only Junior High

---

Safianu introduced himself with this shortened version of his given name.
School while it awaits governmental approval for its own building.

I found myself leaning in to hear over the rumbling of ICT students and children peeking through the door of the ICT Center because they were either too young for the lessons or arrived after the computers had all been occupied. Two of Safianu’s own small children wavered in and out of interest over playing outside and being present for our discussion. Safianu spoke only Dagbani [dag] to his children during their interruptions. I strained to stay focused when the few curious children had realized my presence and called “silimenga, hello!” for my attention through the windows while Safianu relayed to me how early and forcefully he was made to learn English, and echoed Salifu’s point about teacher engagement:

**Safianu:** Throughout my primary school from age 6 to 11... most of the time they try to tell us to speak only English and not our mother-tongue. And that was too serious... It’s only in the 5, 6 hours you spend in school that they try to teach you English language. And unfortunately, too, most of the teachers who taught us were not also good in the English language. So, this was kind of, ya know, serious thing and um, sometimes they had to flog us to learn English language. (Evans & Mahama 2017: 1)

The use of corporal punishment is not an uncommon or unspoken about method in school systems in the area, though its use has drastically decreased since Safianu’s time in school. However, the forced association of physical punishment with native language is a practice born out of colonial rule. This translates into both an ideology of speaking English as a technique of self-preservation and a stripping of worth and incentive from speaking native language.

### 4.1 Post-Coloniality and Development

The English language’s enmeshment in education impacts symbols of development, is used as leverage to exchange for money and status, and gets translated into internalized colonial ideologies toward local language. Dahun’s
Simli Center (see Figure 6) has long been a crossroads Ghanaian–Danish collaboration with the continuous maintenance and formation of local NGOs, much like the organizations at which LTT Fellows intern. Simli Radio was born out of the same Ghanaian–Danish collaboration as School for Life, "started by two Danish Ghanaian organisations [sic] and funded by the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA)" (Casely-Hayford & Hartwell 2010: 29).

Safianu has used his command of English as a great asset and has crafted many opportunities for international collaboration as he is a large proponent of pushing forward Dalun’s development and, interestingly enough, the medium in which Ghanaians and Danes interact happens to be English. However, discourse on development and around issues of development in Dalun as related to education hints to the ways in which Euro-colonial ideas of development can be internalized and interpreted, especially through the ways in which education and intelligence is quantified via how well one can grasp English. When I asked Safianu about what the experience of learning English was like for him, he presented memories of difficulty and perseverance:

*Safianu:* It was tough... some of us I think it’s just... by nature... because the way we started, most of my colleagues until now cannot speak good English. A few of us... we have this natural thing that you know when they teach us something you try to grasp it we’re kind of— we’re called... ‘fast-learners’ in school... so because of that we are able to pick up little by little what we are being taught and... through that we build upon our language and that’s how until today we are able to kind of y’know speak the English language somehow...*laughter* <somehow better than when most of our colleagues can> but I must say that it was tough learning english language um in the early days because it was everywhere you had to speak Dagbani. Everywhere you go it was Dagbani, so it was very difficult in the beginning. (Evans & Mahama 2017: 1-2)

---

*Simli* is Dagbani for ‘friendship.’
This idea of “good English” presents a conundrum, since the quality in which one receives education in English is stunted by the way English is isolated into schools. The way that Dagomba people view themselves in relation to their linguistic abilities is complex in that having a “good” grasp of English is a sign of intelligence but there are not many spaces of dense English speaking. There seems to be an inward glance on the community as illiterate or uneducated because of a lack of English language skills but English-only approaches also prevent students from being able, or even wanting— as Salifu posited, to engage with Dagbani as a language of literacy and education, a medium in which they would already have an advantage. Norton (2000: 5) highlights the lack of exploration in how power is mechanized and stripped from L2 learners in situations where their L2 learning is isolated: “The lesson to be learned is simply that with little exposure to the language of instruction outside school, and if teaching the language of instruction is ineffective in school, the resulting low-quality learning, which is not consistent with local agenda-setting, amounts to a denial of rights in education” (Babaci-Wilhite et al. 2012: 628). Dagbani knowledge (and intellect) is both hidden beneath the discourse of promoting development through English education and withheld from its ability to thrive by the denial of quality education.

4.2 “Silimminga, hello!”

In Dalun, when foreigners come into town, the children are the first to announce their arrival. From the time they are old enough to know how to wave their little palms, they find their way over to you to bestow welcome. When they learn to speak, they don a chorus of “Silimminga, hello” far extending past the point in which you have acknowledged them and sounding closer to “Saminga, hello” depending on how far their ability to syllabicate as developed. Primary school aged kids ask “Silimminga, what is your name?” while High school kids look on in bashful or steely silence. Silimminga means both ‘foreigner’ and ‘white.’ One of the first phrases children in today’s Dalun acquire is this traditional invocation of difference and understanding. It is bilingual— a code-switch (Ahearn 2012: 129). The LTT Fellows enter the
community bracing our ears for it but we never wear it comfortably. Five of the eight Haverford and Bryn Mawr students, including myself, identify as Black. The UDS–Tamale students that find humor in occasionally joining in the chorus are from Accra– they are outsiders, but we are outside of the outside.

During our first broadcast, our resident MC and Producer Alidu Abdul Rahaman introduced the intern team as “siliminsi” who had come to be guests of Simli radio. After this point, I inadvertently began tracking the words he said that I understood and that I wanted clarification on. I took note, with the limited Dagbani I had, of when I or one of my student colleagues would say something in English and Rahaman would subsequently either say a word I recognized but didn’t say or not say a word that I expected him to. I became frustrated not knowing if the points we had scripted in English had been diplomatically translated, even though Rahaman did mostly sight translations. When I finally understood a good amount of his rhythm and word choice, I started to pick up on his knack for paraphrase and decided to confront my discomfort with not knowing what the Dagbani speaking audience was being relayed. The original purpose of interviewing Rahaman was to inquire on how Rahaman envisioned himself as an MC and as a translator in order to get to the root of how he made translational choices and to convince him of the issues in his style. He told me how his grandmother taught him the “style” of finding the “main point” of a statement in order to perform concise, accurate, and artful translation through summary. Not satisfied with his answer, I inquired on his choice to translate ‘English’ as siliminsi in an earlier broadcast, a choice I understood to be changing the meaning of the surrounding statement:

RM: Nashara, siliminsi - it covers all.
S: So siliminsi covers all?
RM: Yes, it covers all.
S: But covers all of what?
RM: All that involves in English, where you are a siliminga, everybody. Siliminsi- the persons, siliminsi- the language.
S: So how would you say Danish?
RM: Danish? Danish, we cover all. All of them takes it up even the British. We all call it *siliminsili*, *siliminsi*.
S: So what does it mean?
RM: *Siminsili*? Well that is way we learn it.
S: No, what does it- what does it mean?
RM: The meaning of?
S: *Siliminsi* or *siliminsili*.
RM: It do- that’s a different tribe. [S: Ok?] Like Gonjas, we call them gonjas. *Dagbanle-* that is their tribe. *Dagbanle*, the people are Dagombas. Yes that’s why we have that.
S: So who are the *silminisi*?
RM: The *siliminsi* is the British.
S: The British?
RM: Yes, and the Danish too. (Evans & Alidu 2017)

Though I had originally thought Rahaman had misunderstood my question, indicated by my repeated prompting, what Rahaman was offering me was an insight on how Dagbani lexical choice signifies insider and outsider distance from self-identification and its relationship to racial identity. *Siliminsili* is language in the abstract, covering all languages spoken by foreigners who are also seen as white people. I realized after encountering Juffermans & Van Camp (2013) that I came close to enacting “epistemic violence,” sabotaging the interview by continuing to prod him on why children were calling me *silimina* about what he considered foreign or white because I refused to accept the answer he was giving me about how he was Black and I was not. Juffermans & Van Camp (2013: 156) posits that “knowing how language is conceptualized locally, along with how language is dealt with in the community as well as in school, may be helpful in designing locally sensitive and relevant language-in-education policies and in avoiding institutional epistemic violence” and that “voices are always ideological... Some ideologies are inherent in the structure of language(s) itself; others are merely voiced in language.”
After coming to this realization, I thought about our previous *Community Development* segment on the socialization and healthy risks of skin bleaching and how frustrated I was after how a caller berated us, the *silim-insi*, for warning the audience against bleaching products when they are a creation of our people. I remembered responding first by establishing that we were not “all white” and then going on to theorize about the global nature of colorism and emphasizing the issue that people were being sold products with labels in languages they could not read and consequently bleaching unintentionally. I also remembered being told that “people bleach to get to your color” and how my stomach stiffened with loss rather than understanding. My mind now turns to Pierre (2012: 104): “Where attaining corporeal Whiteness is impossible for those racially Black (and dark), the desire for lightness is less about becoming White and more about becoming *less* Black in order to gain ‘certain aesthetic and political-economic resources that pertain to being white.’” The idea of diplomatic translation was flawed in my conception because there were many things that I failed to translate across context. In Dalun, I was not the same kind of Black. This fact did not change nor did it invalidate the fact of my Blackness in the United States, it was just called something else that encompassed a more nuanced and global variety of experience. The richness of Dagbani knowledge and linguistic practices often fell to the background in favor of our Western expertise, demeanor, habitus, and sensibility (Bourdieu 1972).
4.3 Economies of Language: English as Mobility

Gboyega & Idiat (2014) focuses on the “language situation” in Nigeria but provides a bigger picture of how widely colonial implementation of English as the language of education, government, and the job force has impacted various African language communities:

Any education system relies on a network of interactions between and among parents, teacher, students and community members. These interactions are influenced by many factors amongst which is the socio, and cultural drivers like the languages values and culture of the people. Unfortunately, acceptance of English language as medium of instruction in early childhood classes is denying us as a nation the opportunity of introducing our culture and ways of life to the young ones using the mother tongue (Gboyega & Idiat 2014: 270).

This choice of teaching early education in English, a governmental policy that SfL is now advocating to change, presses far past the bounds of basic education. Laitin (1993: 235-6) provides a model for analyzing “the micro rationality of language choice,” discussing economies of language and the motivations for implementing colonial languages instead of maintaining local languages and the ways these motivations are enmeshed with socioeconomic interest, status, and mobility: “In Ghana, it would be imprudent for a Dagbani parent to insist that his or her first son or daughter get educated through the Dagbani medium, since the opportunities for English are so attractive, and the marginal benefits of greater subtlety in Dagbani expression are quite minimal.”

To thrive, to exist in these other spaces of opportunity, English is perceived as a necessity. According to Laitin (1993: 232), “economic pay-offs, local honor, and external acceptance are the three components of a language choice utility function.” The way that English language acquisition has become the crux of Ghanaian educational experience is indicative of the persistence of “education that has been used as an instrument for the unconscious destruction of indigenous knowledge, preventing Africans from learning locally and
participating globally in ways other than as subordinates” (Babaci-Wilhite et al. 2012: 628). Babaci-Wilhite et al. (2012: 627) adamantly supports the position that “education is not only expected to enhance employability or livelihoods at the individual level and economic development at the national level but also to give credibility to people, incorporate knowledge of the ecosystem, and inform a distinctive understanding of community interests and the world.” Safianu spoke to witnessing some of his friends benefit from the mother-tongue approach of School for Life and thinks the program made it “easy for some of them to climb the educational ladder because they... started with the School for Life and they were taught... in Dagbani” (Evans & Mahama 2017: 6). English-only education policies stymie the potentials and possibilities of indigenous knowledge centers and situate Ghanaian citizens firmly within the grasp of education systems that prioritize and reproduce colonized intellect.

However, Laitin (1993: 233) suggests that, despite the rationale of choosing to enroll children into English learning spaces, there are a variety of ways that Ghanaians attempt counter-hegemonic practices. For example, ”voting for mandatory education in Akan, for example, but sending your own child to an English-medium private school, is a standard move in the strategy of privately subverting a public good.” In addition, though Dagbani language use has been reserved for spaces outside of education and employment, there is still a large effort to sustain its use in those spaces: “Dagbani is spoken at home, and among neighbors. Children are no longer expected to speak the language
with deep knowledge of etymologies and roots; but they are expected to use it in a wide variety of private conversations.

By the time a Dagbani child is ten years old, he will often have facility in four languages without having made a clear ‘choice’” Laitin (1993: 236). Two of Safianu’s children currently attend the bilingual early childhood education center, Titagya Schools– Dalun, at which he is an administrator. He prefers to speak to his children in Dagbani and used it exclusively when addressing them during our interview. For Safianu, stakeholders of Titagya Schools, and many listeners of Simli Radio, multilingualism is the most “viable strategy” (Laitin 1993: 235).

4.3.1 North vs. South: “Laughing in vernacular”

Though multilingualism has always been a common feature among Ghanaians, there is an undeniable internal hierarchy among Ghanaian languages. Though Dagbani is one of the most widely spoken languages in Ghana, the association of Dagbani with the north exposes the language to prejudices felt by inhabitants of the urban south toward rural northerners. The perceived disparity between rurality and development is exacerbated with imaginings of poverty and highlighted instances in the field when linguistic performance or discourse on linguistic prowess seemed to be tied to class performance. In the chapter “The Famished Road,” Hartman (2007) details the tension between southern Ghanaian acculturation toward Western ideals, “a derivative of African contact with European colonisers [that] is manifested in assimilation or marginalisation (alienation from both the local and the dominant cultures)... [giving] rise to social challenges based on a presumption of the superiority of Western culture and ‘civilisation’” (Babaci-Wilhite et al. 2012: 626), and imaginings of the north as rural, poor, antiquated, and undeveloped. Despite the fact that “most of them had never been north of Kumasi... this didn’t prevent [southern interlocutors] from sharing fanciful tales... you would expect from an American provincial opening the pages of National Geographic” for the first time, or mapping the north-south divide along lines of brawn versus intelligence, or bemoaning a world without indoor toilets
or electricity, or complaining of lazy untrustworthy servants... The crudeness and poverty of northerners would send me running back to Accra, they warned” (Hartman 2007:178). These ideologies about the north were not revealed nor confirmed in the field, but the classification of my open-mouthed, teeth-showing laugh as “laughing in vernacular” or “laughing in Dagbani” by a colleague did startle me as questionably negative and reminded me of Professor Darkwah’s call for the rise of Akan-Twi, largely spoken in the south, to use at the national level.

The use of linguistic prowess symbolic of cultural capital, “the knowledge and modes of thought that characterize different classes and groups in relation to specific sets of social forms” (Norton 2000: 10), is ever-present in multilingual speech communities. According to Norton (2000: 10), “if learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital. Learners expect or hope to have a good return on that investment— a return that will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources.” The ideas that Akan-Twi should “beat” English, that Dagbani is synonymous to vernacular, and that those who can’t speak English are “useless in the Ghanaian society” (Mfum-Mensah 2005: 82), are all indicative of the highly stratified nature of language ideologies encountered and the multitude of language choices made by Ghanaian language speakers in every space that they enter: ”When language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with target language speakers, but they are constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. Thus an investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner’s own identity, an identity which is constantly changing across time and space (Norton 2000: 10-1). The issue of English-only education is not solely about the temporal persistence of internalized colonial ideological rule via linguistic violence. It is about the multiplicity of identity as it is understood and impacted by various power structures and how language is used as a skill, tool, and resource toward gaining access to a better quality of life.
5 Conclusion

In Dalun, the skill of speaking Dagbani is not necessarily the primary focus of those interested in the language’s sustained use as a mother-tongue. The skill set of speaking, reading, and writing in Dagbani well is considered increasingly rare and often coveted. Despite the fact that Dagbani is still spoken to children at home and used widely between community members, this multifaceted command over this mother-tongue is put just out of reach, for many indigenous speakers, by one of many education systems that prioritize English language learning. This drive toward elocution augments the ideological tension between multilingualism and code-mixing that frequents a multitude of indigenous African speech communities. While some see value and artfulness in translation performed by those considered to have a ‘good’ command over Dagbani and English independently, many community members believe that mixing two languages in the same speech act to be a gross misuse of language that takes away from the value of both languages and prevents their higher skilled uses. This understanding of how language should be used is no doubt a reflection of how language-in-education policies impacts quality of education, which in turn impacts later elocution skills. Children are incentivized to leave behind their mother-tongue in the early stages of their relationship with it in favor of acquiring and improving their English skill, which are fundamentally impacted by an unfamiliar language of instruction that is not sustained in many contexts outside of school. English and Dagbani are preferred in separation to promote elocution in both languages, but this separation early on in education seems to negatively impact later use.

In the effort to provide direction in shifting education policy, pedagogy, and methodology of approaching questions of how to prioritize indigenous language, knowledge, and cultural context, Babaci-Wilhite et al. (2012: 636) posits that

In support of a distinctly African voice, the curriculum must promote a localised pedagogy for inclusive participation, local content to ex-
pand the desire to learn, and the eagerness of students to acquire manual skills and to appreciate local language. It must also move from just transferring practical skills to cultivating creative populations with the potential for the social solidarity that African societies enjoyed in the past and continue to need today. The question for developmental educationists in Africa should be how we can rethink education to equip citizens with indigenous knowledge as their main asset to gain control of their own lives.

The implications of this ethnographic encounter with Dalun are intertwined with this need for a shift in direction in that the reworking of education policy toward a people-centered approach needs to be focused on the narrative voices of the indigenous. It is a duty for scholars of indigenous language and ethnography, as well as future participant observers in fellowships like Lagim Tehi Tuma to situate themselves within the existing power structures of indigenous communities and decentralize attention toward Western thought in favor of locally established authorities and knowledge-holders in order to critically reproach the suppression and destruction of indigenous language and thought. Ethnographic methods that prioritize the ethnographee can bolster the effectiveness of policy for locally relevant changes that provide spaces for the indigenous to fruitfully participate in their communities make meaningful contributions to their communities, rather than as global labor resources. Indigenous education conducted in mother-tongues and utilizing locally relevant and useful knowledge starting from primary school and extending onward can fashion, without inhibition, generations of self-sustaining, self-motivated, and invested members of society that can continue to pose and reconfigure questions of power, poverty, and quality of life that lead to thriving, dignified communities.

Internalizing indigenous authority, during this ethnographic inquiry, began with legitimately internalizing value of indigenous narrative. The original intention of this thesis was to represent how Dagbani speakers understand and imagine their own language use but throughout its cultivation has both broadened outward toward local education policies and narrowed onto spe-
cific moments of learning other perspectives of self-perception and meaning-making. My personal ethnographic practices have been greatly impact by collaborating with the community members of Dalun and have shifted from just asking questions to understand theoretical frameworks to listening for answers that pushed at the bounds of my questioning. My work does not stop at theorizing about what the language landscape and context means for Dagbani speakers; it goes on to understanding how to make-meaning and apply indigenous knowledge to the context in which it is held as an Other to be studied. These language choices, uses, and ideologies and the indigenous knowledge attached to them do not exist in a vacuum: they pose an invaluable contribution to not just linguistic ethnography, but to all aspects of academia that do not include these members of society as credible knowledge production sources. The way I understand my positionality as a scholar of linguistics now is as a perpetual student learning how to listen well enough to my interlocutor so that I stop asking questions that they have already answered.
Appendix

Transcription Conventions

**bold**   Bolding indicates who is speaking.

*italics*  Italics indicate Dagbani language use.

...   Ellipses indicate pauses in speech.

???.   This indicates indistinguishable speech.

th-    A hyphen indicates an abrupt cut-off or self-interruption of the sound in progress indicated by the preceding letter(s).

*laughter* Words in asterisks indicate paralinguistic information.

<   Left-side angle bracket indicates where commented action indicated by asterisk begins.

>   Right-side angle bracket indicates where commented action indicated by asterisk begins.

[   Left-side square bracket indicates overlapping speech beginning.

]   Right-side square bracket indicates overlapping talk ending.
Transcript of Interview with Mahama Safianu

Location: Dalun, Ghana
Interviewed: Mahama Safianu
By: Sabea Evans
Collaborator: Maurice Rippel
Transcription: Sabea Evans
Date: July 27, 2017
Duration: 0:46:32

Mahama Safianu: MS
Sabea Evans: SE
Maurice Rippel: MR

1 All:  <???> *laughter* <???>
2 SE:  Ok just leave it there... Um don't mind Maurice, he's just here. *laughter* Um, so, I
guess we can start with um if you feel comfortable sharing anything about like your
experience learning English um cuz I'd like to try to look at um like how people are
learning English in this community and like how that impacts education and uh so if...
Was Dagbani your mother-tongue?

7 MS: Yeah, Dagbani is my mother-tongue, yeah.
8 SE: So, tell me a little bit about your experience learning English.

9 MS: About English... [SE: Mhm.] Um, yeah, that's interesting. Um, let me begin from when I
was growing up. I mean, when I was a kid and was sent to school, I started school at age
of six. I was six years when I was taken to the primary school [SE: Mhm.] to start
education and, I mean, throughout my primary school from age six to eleven there
about... most of the time they try to tell us to speak only English and not our mother-
tongue. And that was too serious because um we're not given that coaching as to, you
know, speak only English language. It was almost every time Dagbani our mother-tongue
we are to speak. We come back to the house to speak Dagbani throughout so it's only in
the 5-6 hours you spend in school that they try to teach you English language. And
unfortunately, too, most of the teachers who taught us were not also good in the English
language. So, this was kind of, you know, serious thing and um, sometimes they had to
flog us to learn English language. because it was so serious <???> lying you down and
then they start whipping you hitting you telling you 'No vernacular, don't speak Dagbani
again in the school.' It was tough and um some of us I think it's just um by nature that I'll
say, because the way we started most of my colleagues until now cannot speak good
English. A few of us, you know, were kind of- we have this natural thing that, you know,
when they teach us something you try to grasp it we're kind of- we're called um 'fast-
learners' in school, I and a few colleagues. So, because of that we are able to pick up little
by little what we are being taught and uh through that we build upon our language and
that's how until today we are able to kind of you know speak the English language
somehow... *laughter*<somehow better than when most of our colleagues can> but I
must say that it was tough learning English language um in the early days because it was everywhere you had to speak Dagbani everywhere you go it was Dagbani so it was very difficult in the beginning... Yeah.

SE: So what did you- what do you qualify as good English? Like, what do people who don't speak good English sound like?

MS: I don't get it.

SE: Like, when you say 'good English' [MS: Yeah.] what do you mean like is it-

MS: I mean yeah when I say good English I mean to be able to construct a sentence and construct it well, knowing when there's a full stop knowing when there's a comma in both written and spoken in English. Things like that because there are some of my colleagues who when they write, they still have problem with you know writing you know constructing a sentence and constructing it well. So that's what I mean by 'good English' and sometimes somehow they'll speak and it's difficult for them to kind of differentiate past tense from present tense sometime instead of come they say came or instead of came they say come and things like that so they are not able to kind of you know construct it perfectly. So, um, from school- I mean from my class a few of us were able to kind of grasp that were... always given a plus for the manner in which we are able to learn the English language and uh to me English was my favorite language in school. It was my favorite subject so I tried to do um well in the subject. I still love reading I mean I mean a lot though this time- time is not by my side, I have to do so many things in the night and then sometimes I'm tired and I have to retire to bed so... yeah... so... that's what I mean by 'good English.'

SE: Are there like certain... words here that people use that aren't considered good English [MS: Hm?] when they're speaking?

MS: When...?

SE: Like, for example... I think there... is... like this... I think Benjamin and Samuel pointed out that some people say like 'too much' when they mean to say like 'a lot'?

MS: Mhm.

SE: Um... are there other things like that [MS: Yep.] that you've noticed?

MS: So you're asking...

SE: For, like, an example of something that someone would say that wouldn't be considered good English.

MS: Yes, um- I mean... yes, but that- from what I said, some of these things... I mean you will have to learn the language to be able to kind of differentiate between some of these like... saying this in place of that and sometimes this in place of that. For example, 'it's' and 'its' like, it is when the contracted form of 'it is' and then it's sometime it's difficult for people to kind of you know make them out and say 'well this is this and this is that'. So, some of these things will have to come in or maybe somebody will have to see it in you
to be able to know that yes you are... maybe an average English speaker, someone who is
good in the language. Um... most of the time people will say you have command over
the English language but I also feel that because of the training I had... I still have some
shortcomings in the- uh had shortfalls in the- in the language somehow because
sometimes I might try to say something and I have to struggle with it a little bit. And
though some people see me as somebody who is up there but *laughter*<they think
so>... I still struggle with the language sometimes to be able to you know say it like
someone who’s really good at the language or somebody who speaks English as their
mother-tongue, as their first language say it as - I- I know sometimes I still struggle with
some of the things but um...other people around here will see me as somebody who is
good in the language um or somebody who’s able to kind of distinguish between certain
things that they are not able to- to do and so they feel that I am somehow good at the
language... yeah.

SE: That’s very interesting because I know that in the states there are like different types of
English that people speak so like they might consider themselves to be speaking or like
their native tongue to be English but people... who are like very like picky about certain
grammar things would consider them- their English to be like ‘bad English’ [MS: Yeah-
yeah.] but they’re like- they- that was their first *laughter*<language>... So... do you
know how to read and write in Dagbani?

MS: Yes, I do.

SE: So, how did you learn?

MS: I learned it in school. and um <????> I had a very good Dagbani teacher when I was in
school. I think it’s also because I- I could learn very fast um I’m really good at Dagbani
both written and spoken in Dagbani. I’m really good at that and then uh *laughter*<other
people> also see *laughter*<me as somebody who is so good> in it and not to blow my
own trumpet, but I think around here in this community it would be difficult to find
somebody who can read and write Dagbani the way I do it... Maybe a few- a few people
I think about like Mr. Al-Hassan of um... Titagya schools and maybe my brother Aziz
can also do something but... Yeah a few of them but I- I know I can write and read
Dagbani very well.

SE: So you were taught in school to read and write in Dagbani [MS: Yes] but you weren’t
allowed to speak in Dagbani?

MS: I learned to speak Dagbani- I learned it from home. Not to speak. To speak, you always- I
think most of the time you learn it from home, but in Dagbani they don’t teach you how
to speak. They teach you how to read and how to write. Yeah... in school.

*8 second pause while note taking*

SE: Also, I didn’t mean to like- be like “Maurice you can’t say anything”, [MR: Oh!] you can
definitely like jump in with any like... thing... you’d like to say. Um... I guess like going
along with that um who else like usually speaks English in the community? Like is there
a specific... like a set of people... [MS: Mhm.] Like I think we <????> about not too
many women speak English um… but is that also like a certain age range or like area in
the town?

110  MS: Somebody who can… speak English? [SE: Mhm.] In terms of women?

111  SE: Like who- like if you were to point out specific like um categories of people who speak
English [MS: Mhm] in the area-

113  MS: Oh, ok… ok. I think mostly it’s uh… people from… those who have been to the senior
high school who have, you know… educated <???> after the senior high school. You
know, and beyond. Some who can… you know speak the language um… Somewhere
because um from the primary school to the junior high school most of the time it’s very
difficult for them to- to speak the language and speak it well. And I think that’s basically
due to how we are taught in school you know you are exposed to more and more Dagbani
than English language so you end up you know being so comfortable speaking Dagbani
anywhere you go, not speaking the English language and you know when you don’t
practice it more it is so difficult for you to kind of you know pick it up the way you
would have wanted to. So I would say from the senior high school and then college to the
university that’s who the people uh who really pick up you know speaking the language
like fluently like they would have wished to. So that category I believe those are the
people who can speak the language.

126  SE: Do you think it’s important for people to be learning English in the community?

127  MS: Yeah, it’s important for people to learn English *laughter* especially um these days to be
able to interact with uh you know uh when you have these devices sometime you need to
read to be able to understand what- and be able to understand what you are reading before
you are able to do what you want to do. And um also more and more people are getting to
school than previously. When I- when I was young um in the la- early 80s, between 1985
there about… um… where very few in-in my house were given the opportunity to go into
formal education a lot of kids were left to go to farm to look after animals and stuff so
you had so many kids at home but um when the free um universal basic education <???>
came into being in Ghana, it was like everybody’s now <???> push to school at the
school-going age. So because of that there’s uh tougher competition for people to kind of
learn how to speak the language than it was previously because now almost everywhere
you go you meet students- you meet your fellow students and um a few of them might
want to kind of uh speak to you in the English language to see how you respond and also
um sometimes people at the home who have not been to school might give their phone to you

*laughter*<unable to identify the name> in it so-if you cannot read and understand
then even saying that this- this is what you’re looking for it is kind of a disgrace when
they see you as a student and then they give you something to read and you aren’t you’re
able to read it It’s like oh well what kind of school are you going? a few time I had to
face um similar situations when I was growing up because in the midst of so many
people you are the only one who have been to school so anything that has to do with
letters… um a letter that you- that they have, they come- they give it to you To read and
tell them what it means so if you are not able to read it or if you read it and cannot
explain to them what it means in Dagbani, it also is a problem but um those days it was
somehow minimal but now it’s getting you know more serious because of that stuff,
phones and uh you know its uh electronic devices where you have to read and tell
somebody and uh because so many people now being pushed into school, it has gotten
um… you know… a bit serious than it was when I was growing up. So it’s important for
people to learn English and to be able to write, read, and also understand what they are
reading or writing.

SE: Do you know when English became the standard in schools?

MS: Um… Mhm… if I got your question right, when English...

SE: Like were schools always like taught in English or like when you went to school was it
always English or was there a point where you- [MS: Yeah, I mean] <???>

MS: There’s only when you have to learn Dagbani as a lesson that you are allowed to speak in
Dagbani. [SE: Mhm.] So any other thing you have to be taught in English. From, you
know, Social Studies, <???> English, and whatever- any other subject you have to be
taught in English. And as- always they will tell you ‘No, vernacular when you come to
school’ so it means you have to forgo your mother-tongue and, you know, *laughter*<get
onto the English language> in both your studies and your-your leisure time. When you
are on break, you have to speak English; when you are in the classroom, you are taught in
English. Except that when they are going to teach you Dagbani, they will use the- uh, you
know the Dagbani language. And then uh… yeah I think y-you have to be taught in
English every time. Yes. But- but sometime the masters would kind of combine the two
languages to make you understand better what they were telling you. They teach in
English and then try to explain it in Dagbani somehow for those that they think do not get
it when they’re saying it in the English language.

SE: So like, even people older than you who were going to school, they also were taught in
English?

MS: Yeah.

SE: So, is there not- were there no schools that were ever taught in Dagbani here?

MS: No, no, no. Every- every school were taught in English. No school taught only in
Dagbani… The only thing I know is the School for Life Program, but that was just meant
for um people who were above the school-going age and who were interested in going to
school. For one reason or the other, they were not able to, you know, to get into the
classroom, so the School for Life came and they tried to organize classes and it was
100% Dagbani. They taught that only in Dagbani [SE: Mmm.] for nine months and
they… they send them to um the classrooms to start learning English. [SE: Mmm.] Yeah.
The that’s in every school; all the teachings were done in the- in English. Except that when
you’re going to learn Dagbani, then they teach you in Dagbani.

SE: Mmm. So I hear that School for Life- like people who did School for Life programs
usually do really well when they go into like- into like formal education [MS: Mhm.] and
like into things like other schools [MS: Mhm.] um… Do you think that’s because they’re
learning um their like subjects in their mother-tongue? Or… what do you-
MS: Yeah, I think that the sense of the School for Life was to kind of get them to be able to read and write. And they thought this would be um... so much easier when they are using their mother-tongue because that’s what they’re already used to. So they use that to teach them how to read and to write and um... interestingly, when they get into the classroom- I have um a few friends who passed through this program and some of them have been to the universities- and um when they get into a classroom, they say that when they start learning English, it’s pretty easier for them to be able to do that. Um... and... I think some will argue that it’s- it was even easier for them to learn English than those of us who were sent into the classroom where uh they started teaching us in English language and force us to understand what it is. So, I don’t know how true it is but I think it was easy for some of them to just climb the educational ladder because um they started with the School for Life and they were taught <???> in Dagbani.

SE: So do you think it would make more sense to have like primary education taught in Dagbani?

MS: I think- I think- I think it would make sense. S-some might argue that it-it would not but I think it would make sense. When you start learning your mother-tongue, how to read and write, and then you master it, I think it would be- I also share the view that it would be easy for you to learn other languages <???> English language when you go to school. I think so.

SE: I know that like part of ICT’s is like preparing some students to take exams [MS: Mhm.] that are in English and like are- or are like identifying certain computer parts <???> um...

What do you think about like teaching that in Dagbani?

MS: The ICT?

SE: Yeah.

MS: Yeah *clearing throat*, most of the time, if you watch me teach the ICT, I’m teaching- I use almost 70% Dagbani, 30% English. Because I know most of the students who come to learn... um have a problem understanding everything you say in the- the English language. So it is really kind of a disservice to them if you’re trying to 100% English because some of them will not really get what you are trying to teach them. So as much as possible I try to do 70% Dagbani and 30% English because I know they are also students and um there are places they go they will have to speak only the English language so it will not be proper for me to just use also 100% Dagbani, I have to combine these two languages for them to kind of understand it better, what I’m trying to teach them. So it- it’s always helpful if you can you know combine both languages. And I know in the headmaster here in this junior high school is an expert in that. He, whenever he goes in the classroom he tries to do fifty and fifty: 50% Dagbani and 50 % English. And the students love that guy so much *laughter*<???> Oh, he knows how to teach well than most of the masters ‘> because um when you say something English and you try to explain it in Dagbani, it gets better than just leave it in English and leave it like for some of them do not really understand it.
SE: I remember like coming in, watching Samuel try to explain like what the mouse was or
like telling them to touch the mouse and having someone help him with the Dagbani to
tell people to touch the mouse because he’d just repeat like ‘Touch the mouse!’ [MS:
Yeah.] [All: *laughter*] and I noticed he was really trying to do that. Um... and I know
Addy mentioned um that she... wasn’t sure how to feel about like forcing people to type
in English [MS: Mhm.] and like how... like <????> that. Like is it ok for her to like tell
them that they can type in Dagbani?

MS: Yeah, I think so. The problem is... when you use the computer and type Dagbani, you
have to use special characters. Those special characters don’t come out from the
keyboard directly sometimes, you have to go through the system to go to plot them out.
So that is the challenge somehow but it’s ok if she ask them to type in Dagbani. But some
of the words you cannot use English- I mean the alphabet to- For example, if you’re
going to- If I want to type Dagbani, you got D-A-G-B-A-N-G, but in writing Dagbani
proper you are supposed to write it D-A-G-B-O-N <????> but if you spell it with English
alphabet, it’s still gonna sound if somebody’s going to say it. But if it’s in Dagbani, they
will not allow you to do that, you have to get it right and to be able to get it right you will
need to get the special characters too and you know for beginners like them to kind of
you know ask them to look for those special characters *laughter*<????> it would be
a burden and uh it would kind of slow the process down so much, yes. And um... I think
also that when you- if you are able to learn English very well, it can also help you the
other way around: to be able to do well in Dagbani. I’m also trying to say that because
sometimes, from my own experience, it’s- I realize that even there are things you might
struggle to say in Dagbani but when you think about them in English, then quickly you
can refer to it and say well ‘this is what I meant to say’ and people will understand you
better. And so, it’s even apparent that when people- when someone who have been to
school and they somehow <????> speaking in Dagbani, you see that the flow is- is kind of
you know, better than somebody who can only speak Dagbani and have not been to
school.

SE: Can you give me an example of that?

MS: Example is like when I- when I speak, like when there’s a forum when-when there’s a
gathering, meetings like that. When I get up and I speak Dagbani, after that people,
especially the older ones, would stop and say ‘when did you’- I mean, ‘how did you learn
Dagbani? You seem to speak Dagbani better than we even though all of us, we’ve given
birth to you. How’d you if you manage to do that?! [All: *laughter*] And I know it’s not just
because I was Dagbani in school but it’s because I’m trying to use the English language
with the Dagbani combined and then I get certain things better than some of them would
really, you know, get it. And uh yeah, I always look up to Mr. Al-Hassan. Mr. Al-Hassan,
when he speaks um... Dagbani, you know that he’s somebody who have really learned it
and that he’s also using the English experience to be able to get it better. And there are
you know, some proverbs in Dagbani... if they ask you to translate it into English, some
people would struggle so much with it. And if you start practieing how to do it in English
um...sooner than later you will see that you’ll be doing better than some people who can
only speak Dagbani because there are proverbs you can really translate well and even
when they say it- the way you say it, when they say it literally in Dagbani, people might
not understand but you can say it, somehow, you try to put some words into it so that
people understand it. But it's like you are now teaching people Dagbani instead of just
communicating to them. <????> there are so many proverbs that when people say- even
when you are a Dagomba, it would be difficult for you to kind of, you know, decode it
and say 'this is what it means' unless, of course, the person will teach you somehow...
for want of a better word, to kind of rephrase it [SE: Mmm.] for you to understand it
better. [SE: Mmm.] I don't know if I'm making sense here because what I'm trying to
say is that most of the time we are faced with the challenge of translation. You know,
saying something in Dagbani and then saying the same thing in English. And there are
certain things you can't get- when you say it literally in English, it wouldn't make any
sense. You have to say it um and add some words to it to be able to, you know,
communicate it better with someone to understand you. So, when- you notice that for
somebody who have been to school, and is good in Dagbani or in English and be able to
kind of use these two mediums to kind of decode some certain thing, you understand that
when the say it, it's much easier for people to understand them than somebody who is
just one-sided, who have been to- who speaks only Dagbani. Because they will say like
they have learned it and they also struggle to, you know, kind of explain it to you for you
to understand. [SE: Mmm.] But if you can crossover these two languages, you are able
to- to do better sometimes.

294  SE:  In terms of the Dagbani that you speak [MS: Mhm.] is it that you're speaking a specific
type of Dagbani that has like English sentence structure [MS: Mhm.] or is it like the
meaning of the sentence [MS: Mhm.] that like means the same- I don't know how to
describe-

298  MS:  Yeah, I got your point. Yes, you can say that because when you are in school, whatever
they teach you in Dagbani, you also try to explain it in English. So, at a point, you see
that the Dagbani you speak could have some English sentences in it. *laughter* Yes, um,
you know, compared to somebody who have not been to school, it would look somehow
different. But in most cases, in order not to kind of um, you know, um- in order not to...
uh I want a better word to use here because when we are together- like we are sitting the
family, the family's sitting, and you try to sound differently, [SE: Mhm.] it might mean
that you are kind of um... you are looking down upon others and saying 'well, you don't
know anything.' So as much as possible we try to, you know, go the- the hard way
*laughter*<of speaking Dagbani instead of, yeah> but when we are together as students,
you know, you can just speak the Dagbani that you guys think- you learned in school
[SE: Right.] than- as long as you try to kind create that balance so that you don't seem to
be somebody who is trying to prove that, you know, to <????> it doesn't help sometimes
and we know that, [SE: *laughter*] yeah *laughter*. Yeah.

312  SE:  That's pretty familiar to me, like when I go home and I try to talk to my mom like the
way I talk to like people at school, she'll be like- she'll get really annoyed [MS:
*laughter*<Yeah.>] and say 'oh, you think that you're smarter than me' [MS:
*laughter*] *laughter*.

316  MS:  We also try to do that sometimes but it does sound weird somehow *laughter*...
SE: Um... Do you think you have like strong opinions about English or like opinions about Dagbani or like one over the other?

MS: Yeah, I think um, that’s one interesting thing: people who have not, here in this part of the country- people who have not been to school have their opinions about people- some opinion about people who have been to school, the way they speak Dagbani. They think that they speak weird Dagbani. That the one you speak does not look like what they speak and that’s what I just talked about [SE: Mhm.] and also um... Some of them think that when you have the opportunity of going to school, somebody who is a Dagomba, there’s a point that when they ask you to speak Dagbani without mixing English language into it. Some people cannot just do that. So you cannot speak Dagbani for fifteen minutes without saying ‘time’ instead of ‘saha.’

MR: Mhm.

SE: *laughter*

MS: Yeah. *laughter* So, uh ‘saha-<???>’ that is ‘this time’ and most of the time people will say ‘ta-<???>’ so instead of ‘saha-<???>’ they say ‘ta-<???>’ and ‘time’ is English, it’s not Dagbani. So, they accuse some of us who- *laughter* who have been to school that we are spoiling the language because we cannot say it without putting English words into it. So that is the opinion on some of the- some of our people who have been to school. And for others, I think those of us who have been to school, we feel that the language should be *laughter* flexible [SE: *laughter*] you should be allowed to speak Dagbani the way you are comfortable with- but some people will not really buy into that because they feel- when you come home, you have to act like you are in the house. When you go to school, be a student and, you know, that’s it. So, there’s this kind of friction sometimes, people accuse you that you don’t- ‘you cannot speak Dagbani again’, ‘you are a very bad Dagbani speaker because you’ve been to school,’ and things like that. Somebody uh... at a point someone can even abuse you because they feel you’re not- you’re spoiling the language. Yes... so...

SE: <???> Do people have like a specific name for that type of Dagbani language use? If that makes sense-

MS: The Dagbani I speak- in Dagbon, we have different types of Dagbani.

SE: Mmm.

MS: So, from Tamale and its environments, up here, we speak a different Dagbani. Some accents. And when somebody speaks it’s different from somebody who is from Yendi and it’s different from somebody from <???>. We all speak Dagbani but when we speak there are differences in- especially, there are names of things that we say different, even when you are not <???> you will not even know what they’re talking about. For example, we call this ‘lega’ [SE: Mhm.] or ‘kwale’ but in Yendi they call it ‘daliya’. It’s too different from one another. And sometimes when they even pronounce it you might have to ask them to explain it to you if- if the person does not point to it or hold it and say ‘daliya,’ you will not know what they’re talking about. So they will also have to learn to <???> the same Dagbani we speak. So, it’s apparent, when I go to Yendi and I talk, they
know I’m from the part of Tamale <????> and when someone from Yendi also talks, I
know this guy’s from Yendi. He’s not from this part of the- of Dalum. So, yeah, it
happens and it’s still the same- it’s different from people who speak like Mampruli.
Mampruli is akin to Dagbani but it’s a different language so- but when they speak, if you
are Dagomba, you understand 95% of it. But maybe 5% you might be lost somehow. So
we say that’s a different language. But the Dagbani I’m talking about is just purely
Dagbani, just that some… the- the accent is different and then the… the names of certain
things also varies and uh it looks so different from one another that you have to explain
so you- before you even get what they’re talking about.

SE: Do you think in certain places people mix English in more than they do here?

MS: Yeah. Even those who have not been to school now they try to mix more English into
Dagbani.

SE: How does that happen?

MS: Um… I don’t know how it happens, actually.

All: *laughter*

MS: And I think, why it’s so is because… For example, in my household, now we have over
80% of us who have been to school in the house. Compared to when I was growing up
were like 34%.[MR: Mmm.] So, there are more students in the houses which are to
speak English so those who have not been to school also *laughter*<try to get the words
and they use it wrongly sometimes because they just take things and fix it somewhere
that it does not even have a place> but they feel like they understand what they are
talking about it. So, a lot of- it’s really true that some of the students when we are talking-
like when we are speaking in Dagbani… um… 40% of it will be English. At least 40% of
it will be English, instead of Dagbani. But you are- you are cool with it because the one
you’re talking to is uh… you know, it feels the same way you feel so the language is
flexible so you just do it somehow. But… yeah, it’s always- it’s even more this time than
it used to be, people you know mixing Dagbani- English into Dagbani. Yeah.

SE: So that actually brings up something I’m really curious about which is like a lot of small
kids [MS: Mhm.] will greet us with ‘silinginga, hello’ [MS: Mhm.] but I can’t tell if they
know what they’re saying or if they know what that means [MS: Yes.] and I’m just
wondering like- do you think they know what they’re saying? Or like how old are they
when they learn that phrase?

MS: That phrase, the ‘silinginga, hello’?

SE: Yeah.

MS: Uh, I think as- as early as they start learning how to talk.

SE: Mmm.

MS: From maybe one and half years, two years [SE: Mmm.] … I think at that age I could also
say ‘silinginga, hello.’ [MR: *laughter*] *laughter*
How do they learn that?

Um... People say it always everywhere. When they see a white person they say 'silimminga, hello.' *laughter*

But like they also- they also say it to us.

Yes. I mean, when they see you... even sometime they say it to me. Do you know why?

No, why?

*laughter*<Because most of the time I work with white people.>

*laughter*

Sometimes they say it to me and they still know who I am. I'm with them always but they still say 'silimminga, hello.' At the point- <???> they see you with a white person, the just consider you to be the same so>... when- it's not offensive in anyway because we all used to say that so they feel that they are just trying to catch your attention and when you respond, they feel so happy about it and they start running around and stuff [SE: *laughter*] so... They start learning at a very, very tender age. As soon as they start to talk they also start- um my- my- my son, who is like 13 months, amazingly he can say 'silimminga, hello.' [MR & SE: *laughter*] He's just 13 months.

*laughter*<So when do you think> they learn the meaning of it?

About the- about the meaning of it? Most- most of them don't really care about the meaning. You might start learning about the meaning when you're like> five, six years. You just say it because everybody's saying it and then you don't care about what it means [MR: *laughter*] all- all you know is 'silimminga' is 'a white person,' 'hello': whatever 'hello' means, *laughter*<you don't care.> You- you try to get somebody's attention and when you succeed in getting that person's attention well you *laughter*<feel happy about it. 'Silimminga, hello.' That's it.>

So, do you... so, what do you think they like, when they're around five and six, and they're starting to realize what the word itself means- it means 'white person' [MS: Yeah, 'hello.'] and foreigner?

Hello' could- I mean some of us thought it was like greeting somebody- [SE: Mhm.] yes. Um, 'good afternoon,' 'good morning,' if you cannot say it in English, then you say 'hello' and it also means greeting, because we greet a lot around here [SE: Right.] everybody you see, you greet. So when you say 'silimminga, hello' you think that you are greeting that person and when the person responds by waving or even, you know, saying something that you don't understand, you feel that they've responded to whatever you said. [SE: Mmm.] And then you feel good about it.
So, do you think - *laugh* - Do you think if like Maurice or I... yeah
*laugh*<Maurice or I> respond to like an older kid, who's like saying 'silimminga, hello,' do you think we're confusing them? Do you think we're like telling them 'yes, we are white'? Or like, what do you think that interaction is?

Um, I think... I don't know, the feeling might be different from one child to the other but, um... when I was also growing up, there were people- I have um a family grandfather here, and he was- he was always with the white people when they traveled from Denmark uh 25 years ago um, and any time I met him I would say 'silimminga, hello' and he would also wave back. So, it was until I got to the age of, you know, 10, 15 that I learned that this guy was not silimminga, he was only walking *laugh*<with the silimmingas>. So, um... my... the reaction might be different from one child to the other when you respond to him in a different way than he or she will feel you respond to him. Like, if- if he expected just waving or saying 'hello' if he says 'silimminga, hello,' and then you say dif- something different, it might also depend on whether he understands what you've said to him or not. When they don't understand, they believe that you've just responded to whatever they are saying and they wouldn't, you know, say anything else... yeah. That's how I feel because if you cannot speak the English language when I was growing up, even though you're trying to learn, but mostly when the white people talk, you don't get what they're saying. So, all you say is 'silimminga, hello,' and any other thing they say you would take it to still be a response to whatever you have said to them. Like, they are greeting you back and responding to your greetings like that. Just let it go.

So, do you think like- in terms of the white people that they see in town, is it usually Americans and Danish people?

Mostly, it's Danish people.

Mostly, it's Danish people. [MS: Yes.] So, do you think they can tell the difference between Danish and English or is it all [MS: They cannot.] sort of the same?

They simply cannot.

So, it's all silimensi.

Yes. You are a silimminga, even though you are Black and you are working with silimingas, you are also silimminga at that point in time. *laugh*

*laugh*<Oh, my god> [MS: Yeah.]

*laugh*<It's interesting, right? I've experienced this all my life so I know how it is.>

So, do you think they recognize that like... people like visit and then leave, and then different people are visiting more than once? I'm just trying to figure out like what age like do you recognize that people are coming and leaving... and like who those people are.
468  MS:  Um... I think you have to get to the age of uh... between 12 and 15... to be able to
469     recognize somebody when they go and they come back. Yes, at the age... between 12 I
470     think some people are able to recognize that.
471  SE:  And why do you think that age?
472  MS:  Hm?
473  SE:  Like what- why do you think that age?
474  MS:  Well, I think, uh- yeah. When you are the age of 10, there are some things that they’l
475     force you to do in the house. [SE: Mhm.] They force you to pray. They force you to read.
476     They force you to do wash, so many things they’l force you, so you also force yourself
477     to understand certain things. [MR: Mmm.] So, from 10 when you’re growing up there
478     are certain things you also try to get yourself into though they might not force you to do
479     that. So, people I believe from the age of 12 <???> will be able to recognize people when
480     they see them first and then they see them again after some time.
481     *Five second pause*
482  SE:  Do you think kids in the neighborhood recognize Alice?
483  MS:  Yes, a lot. Some a lot, because she just kind of going and coming, going and coming for
484     so many years. Yeah, a lot of kids...
485  SE:  And you have five kids? Four kids?
486  MS:  Yeah.
487  SE:  And... how old is the oldest?
488  MS:  The oldest is almost 11 and a half now.
489  SE:  Ok. And do you- [MS: He’s past 11.] [MR: *laughter*] And how do you feel about um
490     your kid learning English?
491  MS:  Um, for me, I- maybe other parents might think but- I don’t- I don’t really care... if he’s
492     able to speak English at this age. I know, at a point, he will learn how to master the
493     English language but for me, whether he speaks English or not doesn’t really bother me.
494     What I- what- what bothers me is looking at his, you know, exercises and how he
495     writes and stuff like that but... speaking English- I don’t really sit him down to speak
496     English to him to be able to, you know, learn how he does it because... if he’s good in
497     Dagbani, somehow he’ll also be better in English language. Yeah.
498  SE:  Do you think that- [MS: So, so this I don’t-] <???> pretty familiar.
499  MR:  *laughter*
500  MS:  That is the second. [SE: Um...] She’s now six.
501  SE:  She’s what?
I think she’s almost six now.

Oh, wow... *laughter* Cute.

About to go to primary school?

Yeah, uh, the primary school... [MR: Mmm.] Yeah.

Do you think there are gonna be more um program for schools that kind of incorporate more Dagbani? Like Titagya’s taught in both English and Dagbani [MS: Yeah.] right?

Do you see that as like a... possibility for other schools?

Yes, I think that’s the way to go and um... Teachers should be encouraged to use both mediums when they are teaching. And it’s very possible that things can change that way because at Titagya Schools I think we’ve- we’ve had some workshops on that previously um... over the last 3, 4 years we’ve organized workshops and um most of them have centered toward child-centered method of education and um as much as possible at the very tender age you should try to use um more Dagbani than English to teach the kids because that’s how they can learn and learn better. So, I think if teachers adopt that method, somehow kids in their day to day learning activities.

*Eight second pause*

Thank you! [MS: You’re welcome.] That was like really great. *laughter*
References


EVANS, SABEA, BENJAMIN KWASI KUMI, CAROL LEE DIALLO, NORA DELL, 2017a. Mother-Tongue Literacy and Education.

EVANS, SABEA, BENJAMIN KWASI KUMI, MOHAMMED GAUSU YUSSIF, 2017b. Interview with School for Life.

EVANS, SABEA, ALIDU ABDUL RAHAMAN, 2017. Interview with Alidu Abdul Rahaman.

EVANS, SABEA, MAHAMA SAFIANU, 2017. Interview with Mahama Safianu.


OPOKU-AMANKWA, KWASI, ABA BREW-HAMMOND. 2011. ‘Literacy is the ability to read and write English’: defining and developing literacy in basic schools in Ghana. International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism 14.89–106.


