Translanguaging as a communication resource for multilingual children: Focus on a family in France

Numerous studies have addressed the relationship between language and identity in multilingual settings and the various strategies multilinguals use to negotiate identities using language (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2004). Code-switching (Myers-Scotton, 1997), code-mixing (Bokamba, 1988) and recently, translanguaging (Canagarajah, 2012; García & Wei, 2013) have been established as some tools multilinguals use both for communication purposes and for negotiating their identities. Most studies on translingual practices however have focused on literate adult multilinguals, indicating that the latter employ these practices as a strategy to meet communication needs. However, studies on children in multilingual societies seem to be few.

This study is interested in multilingual language use among Nigerian migrant families in Europe, France in this case. We investigate how little children caught in the multilingual web negotiate with the languages at their disposal to forge their identity and achieve communication needs. Using a case study of a Nigerian family in Paris, I will discuss the discursive interactions of a Franco-Nigerian child, schooling in France, whose mother does not speak French and thus communicates with him in Hausa alone, and whose live-in uncle, who equally speaks neither French nor Hausa, communicates with him in English.

Through analysis of interviews with the adults, ethnographic observations, and excerpts of recorded everyday interactions, I explore the interactions between the participants and observe the role of multilingual exchanges as a communicative resource. This paper discusses how the child imbibes multiple dynamic language strategies in his communication both with immediate families and with third parties, and how he chooses and skilfully moves comfortably between the languages according to the situation at hand and according to his interlocutor. The specific research questions concentrate on whether these exchanges enable the child to evoke different stances and personalities in English, French and Hausa languages and how they allow him at the same time to forge his cultural identity as a Franco-Nigerian; we also inquire on the reasons for and the impact of his mother’s language choice.

REFERENCES