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Speaking French without an Accent: Ideologies About Phonetic Accommodation among Cameroonian Immigrants in Paris

Suzie Telep, Paris Descartes University, suzielaetitia@hotmail.fr

“Speaking French without an accent”: ideologies about phonetic accommodation among Cameroonian immigrants in Paris

Suzie Telep, Paris Descartes University, suzielaetitia@hotmail.fr

Abstract

This article describes some of the social issues of phonetic accommodation among Cameroonian immigrants in Paris, through the analysis of their ideologies about the practice of *whitisage*, a neologism which refers, according to the subjects, to the act of "speaking like a White person" or in other words, "speaking French without an accent". This practice is a form of accommodation which consists in adapting one's way of speaking toward a non-Cameroonian interlocutor by imitating his or her accent. By describing both the social functions and the ambivalent meanings of this language practice, I show that if it can be valued as a form of adaptation and a sign of open-mindedness to others in a new socio-cultural environment, it can also be perceived, in some contexts, as a form of assimilation and rejection of one's identity. I argue that the negative values associated with *whitisage* must be related to the socio-historical circumstances in which this social practice appeared as a psychological and cultural consequence of the power relationship between the Black colonized and the White colonizer.

Keywords *language ideologies, language and migration, accent, style-shifting, language and colonization, race and ethnicity.*

1. Introduction

Migration is a key moment in the life of an individual, since it causes the subject to be confronted by new spaces of socialization and thus to incorporate new social and linguistic habits, which has consequences on the organization of his or her language repertoire. Thus, I studied the case of thirteen 25-year-old French-speaking Cameroonian immigrants, who have lived in France for about ten years. Confronted by a new “linguistic market” (Bourdieu 1982) when they arrived in France, where the standard Parisian accent is the legitimate accent, they had to adapt to their new sociocultural environment by modifying their ways of speaking. In this paper, I describe some of the social issues of their practice of accent accommodation through the analysis of their ideologies¹ about the practice of *whitisage*. This neologism refers, according to Cameroonian people, to the act of “speaking like a White person”, which subjects in this study interpret as “speaking French without an accent” -- or more precisely, approximating the Standard French accent (see Telep 2015). My paper presents data which has been extracted from interviews based on ethnographic fieldwork in a panafrican association. First, I define the practice of *whitisage* as a form of phonetic accommodation as well as its main social functions. Secondly, I present my hypothesis on the

¹ As “sets of beliefs about languages and linguistic practices” (Silverstein 1979, p. 193), language ideologies constitute “a mediating link between social structures and forms of talk”, enabling us to reflect upon the ways actors organize their social life and interact with others through language (Woolard and Schiefflin 1994, p. 55).

socio-historical and political origin of this practice, which must be a psychological and cultural consequence of the power relationship between the Black colonized and the White colonizer. Finally, I describe the ambivalent pragmatic values speakers can attribute to this practice in the migration context, in relation to its historical background, and the ambivalent positionings they can adopt towards their own practice of *whitisation*.

2. “Whitiser, c’est parler comme un Blanc²”: definition of the practice of whitisation and description of its social functions

The practice of *whitisation* can be defined as a form of accommodation which consists of adapting one’s way of speaking toward a non-Cameroonian interlocutor by imitating his or her accent and thus erasing one’s own foreign accent (cf. Giles et al. 1991). Therefore, it can be perceived not only as a necessary language strategy in order to be integrated in the host society, but also as a strategy to hide the “stigma³” (Goffman 1963) of a foreign accent, which can be socially unfavorable for the speaker. It is a strategy of convergence, “whereby individuals adapt to each other’s communicative behaviors in terms of a wide range of linguistic-prosodic-nonverbal features including speech rate, pausal phenomena and utterance length, phonological variants, smiling, gaze, and so on” (Giles, et al 1991, p. 8). Communicative acts of convergence aim to reduce interpersonal differences between the interlocutors while reducing their language differences. In other words, they show the speaker’s desire for social integration or identification with the others (cf. Giles, et al 1991).

Thus Yohan, one of the speakers I interviewed, described his own practice of *whitisation*:

1. « “Yohan : whitiser c’est forcément parler comme un Blanc on parle tous avec notre accent + + on parle tous avec notre accent moi je parle avec mon accent + mais quand tu parles avec les Français et que tu veux être dans la même longueur d’ondes + c’est-à-dire quand il parle avec ses aigus et ses trucs tu veux aussi parler comme lui

Suzie : [rires]

Yohan : [rires] obligé + c’est systématique + si tu veux avoir une conversation avec lui

² Whitiser means “speaking like a White person”.

³ Goffman (1963) defines stigma as “the phenomenon whereby an individual with an attribute which is deeply discredited by his/her society is rejected as a result of the attribute.” This attribute can be a physical, psychological or moral characteristic, or any other attribute such as “race, nationality or religion” (Goffman 1963, 6). Stigma is not an *essential* attribute, but a *relational* one, because it stems from a social *process* of differentiation and stigmatization by the others: “stigma is a process by which the reaction of others spoils normal identity”.

Suzie : se mettre au même niveau

Yohan : se mettre au même niveau + comme tu ne pourras jamais parler comme un Chinois + ou comme tu pourras jamais parler comme un Anglais + mais quand tu vas vouloir discuter avec lui + tu vas vouloir t'aligner à sa façon c'est-à-dire euh + s'il marque des pauses tu vas vouloir faire les mêmes pauses que lui pour que il te comprenne tu vois [...]

Suzie : mais du coup pour toi whitiser ça : + ça veut dire modifier l'accent enfin :

Yohan : oui + c'est modifier l'accent + là tu peux plus + tu peux pas avoir forcément ton accent + quand tu veux essayer de parler comme l'autre + voilà + c'est comme un commercial + tu t'imagines un Camerounais il arrive il quitte le Cameroun il arrive ici il est commercial il va se mettre à parler le français + et ben il est obligé d'adapter sa voix

Suzie : mmh

Yohan : sinon tu vas voir que comment + les gars vont pas te comprendre + puisque si tu entends un Camer + va au pays + tu entends un Camer parler + ben je suis pas sûr que + je te dis + c'est-à-dire enregistre + et tu viens tu fais parler ça à un Français + et tu lui demandes si il comprend.”

Translation: “Yohan: « whitiser » means necessarily speaking like a white person people speak with their own accent + they speak with their own accent I speak with my accent + but when you speak with French people and you want to be on the same wavelength + that is to say when they speak with their high pitched voices and their things you also want to talk like them

Suzie: [laugh]

Yohan: [laugh] that's inevitable + systematic + if you want to talk with them

Suzie: to put yourself on the same level

Yohan: to put yourself on the same level + you will never be able to talk like a Chinese + you will never be able to talk like an English man + but when you want to talk with them + you want to align yourself to their ways that is to say euh + if they do pause in the conversation you want to do the same so that they can understand you you see?

Suzie: then for you « whitiser » means changing your accent

Yohan: yes + it means changing your accent + then you can't anymore + that's inevitable you can't have your accent + when you want to try to speak like French people + that's it + it's like a salesman + can you imagine a Cameronian coming then he's leaving Cameroon

he's coming here he's a salesman he's getting to speak French + so he has to adapt his voice

Suzie: mmh

Yohan: otherwise you will see that's how + guys won't understand you + because if you hear a Cameroonian + go to Cameroon + I am not sure that + I'm telling you + that is to say record that + and then come and make a French person listen to it + and ask him if he or her can understand.”

The subject describes here the practice of *whitisation* as a necessary behaviour, a social constraint for the speaker: the use of the adverb *forcément* ('necessarily') and of the adjective *obligé* ('inevitable') expresses here at the same time the necessity of this behaviour and the high degree of certainty by the subject; the use of the adjective *systématique* indexes a generalized behaviour among the community, which is part of the group's interactional norms. First, the speaker utters a definition which is equivalent to a behavioral maxim for the community (“*whitiser*⁴ necessarily means speaking like a White person”), and proposes a justification for this behaviour: indeed, he describes this practice as a form of mimetism of the interlocutor's language (“speaking like the others”) and as a way to identify with the others. The repetition of the verb *vouloir* (“to want”) shows that this identification is also presented as a speaker's wish and therefore, as a personal choice. Then, the subject describes the practice of *whitisation* as a form of alignment towards the interlocutor's way of speaking, whatever his nationality, French, Chinese or English. This alignment is not a perfect imitation of the others' ways of speaking, but it has a social function: it enables speakers to “be on the same level” as their interlocutors. The reference to the Chinese speaker indexes that the subject, who is responsible for computer production in a famous French bank, conceives the practice of *whitisation* as a necessary communication strategy in a globalized space in which business relationships with China are crucial. This social and strategic dimension of the practice of *whitisation* is, after that, more explicitly conjured up with the salesman who arrives in Cameroon. Thanks to this example, the subject draws an implicit link between the social position of the speaker who, as a salesman, practices a profession characterized by a strong relational dimension, and the need to adapt his or her language. After this example, the subject explains the fact that this person has to *whitiser* by giving another argument: language accommodation is the key for a successful communication between French and Cameroonian speakers. Indeed, French people may have difficulties understanding the Cameroonian accent.

⁴ This French verb is a neologism derived from the noun *whitisation*.

In this extract, we can find the two main motives described by Giles, et al. (1991) to explain the strategy of accommodation:

- Speakers seeking “communication efficiency”: like Yohan, every speaker said many times, that when they arrived in France, their interlocutors had difficulties understanding their accent, so they had to modify it in order to be understood and to communicate efficiently. Here, Yohan explained that he had to “adapt” his Cameroonian accent in order to be understood by his interlocutors and to imitate their intonation (“high pitched voices”) and pauses.
- Speakers seeking “social attractiveness”: the practice of *whitisation* enables the speakers to align themselves with the others and to put themselves on the same level, to be their equals. Thus, by speaking “French without an accent”, the speakers can erase the stigma of their foreign accent, which can be socially unfavourable to them in some contexts.

If most of the speakers, like Yohan, insisted upon the necessity of “speaking white” with non-Cameroonian people in some contexts, they often assigned ambivalent pragmatic values to this practice. Nevertheless, in order to understand the meanings assigned to this practice by its speakers, it is necessary to take into account not only the social and historical circumstances in which this practice appeared, but also the meaning of the reference to the racial category “White” in the name and in the definition of the practice of *whitisation*.

3. Hypothesis on the appearance of the practice of *whitisation*: a psychological and cultural consequence of the colonial power relationship

Because of the reference to the racial category “White” in the speeches of the speakers, I have been led to assume that this practice must be a psychological and cultural consequence of the power relationship between the Black colonized and the White colonizer. Like every racial category, “whiteness” (and its opposite, “blackness”) is a historical and social construction, which was created in order to legitimize and maintain power structures and socio-economical systems based on the exploitation of the labour force during slavery and colonization (cf. Ndiaye 2008, p. 35). Thus, the sociologist Albert Memmi, in his *Portrait of the colonized* (1973), described the attitude of the colonized who tried to imitate the White colonizers’ behaviour, their way of dressing and their way of speaking, in order to escape from their lower social position (Memmi 1973, p. 152). This process of imitation resulted from the colonial ideology, which constructed a “mythical portrait of the colonized” totally opposed to the idealized portrait of the colonizer, in a dialectical

relationship “ennoblement of the colonizer – lowering of the colonized” (Memmi 1973, p. 109; my translation).

Frantz Fanon (1952) described a similar attitude among people from Martinique: “In a group of young West Indians, those who speak well and have a good command of the French language, are extremely feared; you have to beware of them, they are almost a White person. In France, we say: speaking like a book. In Martinique: speaking like a White person” (Fanon 1952, p. 34; my translation). Here, we can find the exact definition of the word *whitiser* which is used among the Cameroonian community. According to Frantz Fanon, “speaking like a White person” for someone coming from Martinique to France consisted in imitating the pronunciation of the French [r]. Fanon explained that this imitation of the “White” resulted from an “inferiority complex” among the Black colonized people, urging them to take the French language and culture as a model. Imitating the language of the “White” allowed the colonized to rise up the social ladder and get a privileged position among the community. According to Fanon, whose analysis deals with the situation in the French West Indies (Antilles), this behaviour could be seen in every population who had been colonized (Fanon 1952, pp. 38–39; my translation).

Thus, different indexical values are ideologically associated with the racial category “White”: modernity, superiority, civilization and social success, are some of the most important. Therefore, the social meanings of the practice of *whitisation* are deeply related to the historical construction of the “White” and to power relationships. Nevertheless, the relationship between the category “White” and the practice of *whitisation* is not a direct one but an indirect one: indeed, linguistic “variables are associated not with the categories themselves, but with stances and characteristics that constitute those categories” (Eckert 2008, p. 453). That is to say, linguistic choices index attitudes, stances, activities and attributes that in turn are associated with particular social categories (cf. Ochs 1991). Thus, if the practice of *whitisation* can allow speakers to express their identification with their white-skinned interlocutors, it also allows them to index various interactional positionings. Indeed, speakers do not “speak white” only with people who have a white skin: the racial category “White” does not index only the skin colour of the interlocutor, but also social attributes and stances which are ideologically associated with this category. Therefore, people can “speak white” with a person who has not a white skin but who has, according to them, at least one attribute ideologically associated with the “Whites”, whatever his or her skin colour. Thus, many speakers explicitly told me that they “speak white” with me, despite my Cameroonian origins and my black skin, because I speak with a standard French accent due to the fact that I was

born and raised in the suburb of Paris. My academic position, as a Ph D student in linguistics, which associates me with the norm of academic language, may also contribute to their choice. Moreover, the practice of *whitisation* among Cameroonian people is another good example of this indirect indexicality: it is judged highly pejoratively by Cameroonians because it creates an unequal relationship between the interlocutors, which evokes indirectly the unequal power relationship between the White colonizer and the Black colonized. Thus, it can be perceived by the interlocutors as a lack of respect toward them or as a form of contempt from the speakers.

4. The ambivalent pragmatic values of *whitisation*: adaptation or assimilation?

As Bourdieu (1977) explained, “[t]he structure of the linguistic production relation depends on the symbolic power relation between the two speakers, i.e. on the size of their respective capitals of authority (which cannot be reduced to specifically linguistic capital)” (p. 22). Thus, power relationships between social groups partly frame interactions and have to be taken into account for the analysis of language practices. In the case of *whitisation*, the knowledge of the historical context when the practice of imitating the Whites’ language appeared can help us gain a better understanding of the reasons why speakers assign ambivalent values to this practice. Indeed, if it can be valued as a form of adaptation and a sign of open-mindedness to the others in a new socio-cultural environment, it can also be perceived, in some contexts, as a form of assimilation and rejection of one's identity. Therefore, because of its pejorative values, some speakers refuse to give the name *whitisation* to their own practice of phonetic accommodation. This is the case for Christian:

2. “Christian: [...] à l'école c'est différent parce que quand je suis avec mes potes + bon moi mon habitude c'est que je garde ma voix et tout + mais quand je suis seulement avec mon prof + parce que tout est c'est à mon avantage qu'il me comprenne en fait + s'il me comprend pas on peut pas échanger tu vois + donc je ne change pas ma voix enfin je me mets pas à whitiser + mais soit je baisse mon débit de parole + soit carrément je change ma façon de parler tu vois

Suzie: donc tu whitises + est-ce que tu considères que tu whitises quand tu fais ça ou pas ?

Christian : non + non whitiser c'est vraiment profond hein c'est parler comme EUX + moi je parle pas comme eux je baisse ma voix ++ avec toi j'aurais pu whitiser + me dire que bon voilà je suis j'essaie de parler comme les Français mais tu vois non + ça c'est whitiser + tu vois + je vais baisser mon débit de parole je vais garder mon accent.”

Translation: “Christian: at school it's different because when I'm with my mates + my habit is to keep my voice and so on + but when I am alone with my teacher + because everything is + it is in my advantage that he understands me in fact + if he doesn't understand we can't discuss you see + so I don't change my voice I mean I don't start “speaking white” + but either I lower my speech rate + either I totally change my way of speaking you see
 Suzie: so you speak white + do you consider that you speak white when you do that or not ?
 Christian: no + no speaking white is really deep huh it means speaking like THEM + I don't speak like them I lower my voice ++ with you I could have spoken white + I could have thought well I am I am trying to speak like the French people + but no you see + that is speaking white + you see + I will lower my speech rate I will keep my accent.”

Christian describes how he can adapt to his interlocutors and change his way of speaking, and especially his accent, depending on his interlocutors: the baker, his teacher, his friends or myself. Nevertheless, while other respondents categorized this stylistic versatility as a form of *whitisation*, Christian refused to categorize his own practice like this: three times, he denied the fact that he “speaks white”, while recognizing that he is used to significantly changing the way he speaks according to his interlocutor, especially by modulating its “speed”, making it faster when he speaks with his friends than when he speaks with me for example. Then, he adopted a contradictory positioning: while denying that he “speaks white”, defining the practice of *whitisation* as the act of “changing [his] voice”, he admitted that he could change radically the way he talks (the adverb “completely” indicates the radical nature of this change). Then, this apparent contradiction was thrown away by the more precise definition of “whitisation” which he proposed to explain his refusal to classify these practices as forms of “whitisation”: “no + no ‘speaking white’ (‘whitiser’) is really deep huh + it means speaking like **THEM** + I don't speak like them I lower my voice.” The extreme change in his way of speaking would be to “lower his voice”, which means for him, to speak in a deeper and softer voice (he performed this act of “lowering his voice” while uttering this part of the sentence). By refusing to “speak white” (*whitiser*), he takes up an identity positioning: he expressed his refusal to be identified with the «“White” or with the “French” people. Thus, he indirectly identified himself as a foreigner or at least as an “other”, and opposed an implied “We”, that of his ethnic group, to “Them”, that is to say, to the “White” people or to the “French” people, social groups from which he wants to distinguish himself. This extract shows that depending on the different interactional positionings and on the multiple identifications that the subject takes on in

the course of the interview, the definition of *whitisation* and the choice of categorizing one's practice of accommodation as a form of *whitisation* will vary from one subject to another.

Besides the refusal to categorize their own practice of language accommodation as a form of *whitisation*, many speakers pejoratively judged the practice of *whitisation* among the Cameroonian community. For instance, Daniel angrily criticized the behaviour of Cameroonians who « spoke white » with him when he went back to Cameroon during the holidays:

3. “Daniel : après aussi moi ce qui me dérange des fois + [à Corinne] peut-être que toi tu as aussi vu ça + c'est quand tu rentres au Cameroun + y en a parce que ils savent que tu viens d'Europe

Corinne : ouais ils changent leur façon de parler

Daniel : ils + ils essayent de prendre l'accent français + tu dis mais mais + toi tu :

Corinne⁵ : on se calme

Daniel : toi tu es : + tu as quel problème en fait + [...] tu es chez toi tu t'adaptes à quoi à qui + tu t'adaptes à quoi + hein tu t'adaptes à quoi + moi gars j'ai vécu ici hein tu veux t'adapter à moi ? + tu as des problèmes toi tu es fou ou quoi?”

Translation: “Daniel: and then me too what bothers me sometimes + [to Corinne] maybe you have also seen that + it is when you go back to Cameroon + there are some people because they know that you're coming from Europe

Corinne: yes + they change the way they speak

Daniel: they + they try to have the French accent + and you say but + you you :

Corinne: take it easy

Daniel: you are : + which problem do you have actually + [...] you are at home what and who do you want to adapt to + huh what do you adapt to + guy I used to live here do you want to adapt to me ? + do you have problems are you crazy or what?”

The insistent repetition of the question “What do you adapt to? ”, of its variants (“What and who do you want to adapt to?”; “Do you want to adapt to me?”) and the use of the other rhetorical questions introduce a dialogic speech featuring the confrontational discussion with “the Other”. These questions also express the pejorative judgment that Daniel made about these practices:

⁵ Corinne is a friend of Daniel. She is also Cameroonian, and at the time of this interview she was still a member of the panafrikan association in which I carried out my fieldwork.

indeed, he pointed out their absurdity and he interpreted them as a symptom of a psychological problem among his interlocutor (“Do you have problems? Are you crazy or what?”). Through this example, we can understand that the category “White” and the practice of *whitisage* which is associated with it do not index the interlocutor's skin colour but his knowledge of Europe, which stems from his long stay in France and confers a high symbolic capital on him.⁶ Because he went to Europe, Daniel was identified by his interlocutor as an “Other” to whom a privileged social position was assigned. This position, which made him equal to the “Whites” and excluded him from his peer group, created an asymmetrical relationship between the two speakers.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to describe language ideologies about the phonetic accommodation of French-speaking Cameroonian immigrants in Paris. Drawing on a discourse analysis of three excerpts taken from my corpus of interviews, I argued that the definitions and the values assigned to the practice of *whitisage* by these immigrants depend largely on many different factors, such as the subject's own practice of accommodation or the different groups he or she wishes to identify with. Moreover, the subjects describe themselves as competent speakers who can use their language resources actively in order to adapt to their interlocutor without “assimilating” with “the other”. Thus, they lay the emphasis on their agency and their capacity to switch purposefully into different accent varieties. Nevertheless, if speakers have some latitude in their practice of accommodation, their agency is partly constrained by socio-historical power relationships between African people and French people, and by the value hierarchies of language varieties in the French linguistic market.

⁶ According to the anthropologist Zambo Belinga (2003), who describes an “obsession with Europe” among his interviewees, going to Europe, and particularly to Paris, is highly valuable for many Cameroonians and is perceived as an index of social success (Zambo Belinga 2003, p. 31): in Cameroonian people's representations, “travelling to Paris is analyzed as an achievement” (ibid, p. 23; my translation).

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