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**‘BRA, SƐN, YƐNKƆ... THAT IS ALL I KNOW IN AKAN’: HOW FEMALE MIGRANTS FROM RURAL NORTH SURVIVE WITH MINIMUM BILINGUALISM IN URBAN MARKETS IN GHANA**

*Gladys Nyarko Ansah, Jemima Asabea Anderson, Suleman Alhassan Anamzoya, Fidelia Ohemeng*

**Abstract**

In this paper, we explore the language-migration nexus among female migrants, *Kayayei*, in three urban markets in Accra, Ghana. We assume in this paper that first time migrants from northern Ghana will face linguistic challenges in these markets because the linguistic situation in urban centres in Ghana is very diverse and complex. Typically, first time migrants from northern Ghana may hardly speak the major languages that are spoken in Accra: Ga, Akan, Ewe and English. Nevertheless, they have to learn to negotiate fees with the clients (whose luggage they carry) as well as tax officers who chase them all over the market to collect the daily income taxes from them. How do the migrants cope in such complex linguistic situation of the host community? What strategies do these migrants resort to in coping with the linguistic challenges they face in their new (host) communities? We investigate the linguistic challenges that migrants face in their new environment, and identify the coping strategies the migrants employ to meet these linguistic challenges. We first identify the dominant language(s) of the markets to see if it is/they are indeed different from the languages spoken by the migrants. We then examine the language (s) migrants select for business transactions in these markets. Finally, we attempt to evaluate the level of competence the migrants have in the selected language for business and explore why migrants choose to do business in the particular language (s) irrespective of their level of competence in the selected language. Our investigation revealed Akan as the dominant language of all three markets. It also revealed that very minimum linguistic exchange is required in the line of business of the *Kayayei*. This implies that very little linguistic knowledge in the market language may be sufficient to conduct business in their line of business. Incipient bilingualism, learning the appropriate

registers (key vocabulary) needed to transact business in the markets, emerged as the most employed coping strategy among the migrants.

**Keywords:** Language and Migration, female migration, incipient bilingualism, Ghana

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, we employ ethnographic methods to explore the linguistic habits of *Kayayei*, female migrants who carry loads around for a fee in urban markets in Ghana. 205 *Kayayei* were studied across three urban markets in Accra, the capital of Ghana. Our objectives in this paper are: (i) to investigate the linguistic challenges that these female migrants face in their host communities; (ii) to identify the coping strategies the migrants employ to meet such linguistic challenges. We first identify the dominant language(s) of the markets where these migrants work in order to ascertain whether or not the languages spoken by the migrants are different from the language(s) of these markets. Secondly, we explore the language(s) that the migrants use for business transactions in the markets. We also try to understand the reasons why migrants do business in the particular language(s) they have chosen. Finally, we attempt to evaluate the level of competence the migrants have in the selected language for business.

Migration may be loosely defined as the movements of people either as individuals or groups from one place to another for various reasons. Aspects of this phenomenon, for instance, how to conceptualise such human movements and how to proffer scientific reasons behind such movements have attracted a lot of academic attention. The consensus in the literature appears to be that migrants are a group of people who have moved from their place of origin/birth or place of residence to another destination (Yaro et al 2011:45). Nevertheless, there does not seem to be any consensus on how long the movement must last to qualify to be described as migration. While some researchers argue that migration may be established only when such human movements last for a period of at least six months, others think that one year should be the defining parameter of migration in order to distinguish it from other movements. For instance, human movement from A to B is not usually considered to be 'migration' unless there is at least some indication of a shift in residence from A to B for a minimum period of time (UNDP, 2009 as cited in Awumbila et al. 2012). What constitutes a move in residence, or, what is the required minimum period to be spent at a destination in order for a movement to be classified as migration is still a matter of debate.

Defining a 'migrant' is as problematic as defining migration is. Harvey and Brand (1974) have categorised migrants into four movement groups based on the time spent at the new destination. They classify people who have moved to a new place (found a new residence) for less than one year as *neophytes*. People who have move for

one to five (1-5) years are described as *transitional migrants*; people who have moved for six to nineteen (6-19) years are known as *long-term migrants*; and those who have moved for twenty (20) or more are referred to as *permanent migrants*. We adopt this classification in this study. Also, the term 'migrant' should be understood as covering all cases where the decision to migrate is taken freely by the individual concerned, or encouraged by parents/guardians and friends.

Migration remains a topical issue both internationally and the locally. Recent studies on migration in Ghana have shown that migration has gender-differentiated causes and consequences (Awumbila et al, 2011; Ardayfio-Schandorf and Kwafo-Akoto, 1990). They also reveal that female migration is of much greater volume and complexity than was previously believed. According to the UN (1995), female migration is increasing despite the constraints of women's dependent position within the family and society, as households are in need of income, and more employment opportunities are available to women. For instance, in some towns and cities in Latin America, the Caribbean, and parts of South East Asia, rural out-migration is female selective. Urban sex ratios usually show more women than men and levels of female household headship are higher in urban areas than in rural areas (UN 1995).

Whilst the last two decades have witnessed considerable attention on international migration, poverty alleviation and development, (IOM 2005; Adams and Page 2005), internal migration which is even more important in terms of the number of people involved and perhaps even the amount of remittances they send back home (Deshinkar, 2005), has recently been recognised as an important motivation for migrating out of poverty (IOM, 2005). Indeed, the literature suggests that migratory movements are primarily dominated by economic motives and expectations (Connell, J., Dasgupta, B., Laishley, R., & Lipton, M., 1976; Rhoda, 1983; Massey et al. 1993; Portes 1994; Awumbilla et al., 2012).

In other words, many migrants move out of their places of origin in search of work. In Ghana, the last twenty years have seen the southward movement of relatively young female population from the northern parts of Ghana into the cities, e.g. Accra, Kumasi, Takoradi for long term or short term to engage in various activities of economic value (Anamzoya, 2001). The UN Convention on the Rights of Migrants defines a migrant worker as a person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a state of which he or she is not a national. Even though *Kayayei* are typically Ghanaian nationals, they are ethnically and linguistically not nationals in the states (urban markets) where they are engaged in a remunerated activity (carrying load around for a fee in urban markets in Ghana). What role does language play in the economic activity in which these migrants are engaged in their host communities?

### 1.1. Language in a migrant's life in his or her new home

Sociolinguistic literature point to a very important relationship between language and migration. The literature is replete with reports on how migration trajectories tend to influence or shape the heritage languages of both migrant communities and the host communities. For instance, Backhaus (2007) links the Frenchification of Brussels to the influx of French-speaking populations in the city.

This important relationship that holds between language and migration reflects in the lives of migrants even in intra-national migration situations. In multi-lingual communities especially, where migrants move from rural communities to urban and peri-urban communities, there is always a need for the newly arrived migrants to learn the language of the urban community to which they migrate. The levels of proficiency or acquisition may vary depending on the motivations for learning the new language, the functions/domains in which the second language is used, the length of stay of the migrant in the new community, and the frequency of use of this language. In this paper, we discuss the incipient bilingualism as a major coping strategy among female migrants from Northern Ghana who work as *Kayayei* in three urban markets in Accra. The *Kayayei* are popularly known as *head porters* in the literature on Ghanaian migration (GHAFUP 2010, Alvin 2012, Osei-Boateng 2012, Marie Stopes International 2014, CSIS 2015).

The linguistic situation in urban centres in Ghana poses a significant challenge to many female migrants, especially when they first arrive. Many of these migrants who come to Accra, for instance, can hardly speak the major languages that are spoken in Accra: Ga, Akan, Ewe and English. Consequently, they resort to different strategies to cope with the linguistic challenges they face in their new (host) communities. Since many of these migrants migrate for economic reasons, they have to learn the languages spoken in the urban centres in order to get jobs or function effectively. For instance, they have to learn to negotiate fees with the clients whose luggage they hope to carry. They also have to learn to communicate with the tax officers who chase them all over the market to collect the daily income taxes from them. Since the linguistic composition of Accra is so complex and diverse, they have to select the language(s) to use in this new context. How do the migrants cope in such complex linguistic situation of the host community?

Specifically, this paper addresses the following questions:

1. What linguistic challenges do the migrants face in their new environment?
  - a. What is/are the dominant language(s) of the selected markets?
  - b. What are the linguistic backgrounds of the female migrants?
  - c. Is/are dominant language(s) different from migrants' L1 or (an)other known language(s)
2. What coping strategies do the female migrants employ to meet these linguistic challenges?
  - a. What is/are the migrants' preferred language(s) for business?
  - b. Is/are the preferred language(s) different from their own L1?
  - c. Is/are the preferred language(s) the dominant language(s) of the market?
  - d. What is the motivation for selecting the preferred language for business?

Generally, this paper assumes that migration has long term linguistic consequences which have to be faithfully and carefully documented at every stage. For example, in this case, the female migrant porters may learn the dominant languages used in the host communities in the long term and shift from their mother-tongues to these languages or they may develop a form of bilingualism in which case they speak the dominant language of the host community when they go to work and thereby acquire a second language that they may use for functional purposes. Apart from this situation, even when they go back to their villages, especially for those of them who are seasonal migrants, they may still continue to use their newly acquired second languages to show that they have acquired a higher status because they have travelled to other parts of the country and are modernised or urbanised. In this situation, multilingualism may also develop in those communities where they migrate from. So, whichever angle we choose to look at it from, migration has very important consequences for individual bilingualism or societal bilingualism.

## 2. Bilingualism

There is a proliferation of definitions of the concept *bilingualism* in the literature (Mackey 1970:583). The phenomenon may generally be defined as the use of at least two languages by an individual. For example, the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA, 2004) has defined it as a fluctuating system in children and adults whereby the use of and proficiency in two languages may change depending on the opportunities to use the languages and exposure to other users of the languages, a dynamic and fluid process across a number of domains, including experience, tasks, topics, and time. However, Li Wei (2000) points out that defining bilingualism is a rather difficult thing to do because bilingualism is a complex phenomenon with many

different dimensions (see also Skutnabb-Kangas 1981). In this section, we provide an overview of common definitions of bilingualism in the literature in order to describe our respondents who have migrated to work in city markets where the language(s) of business is/are different from their home languages.

On the one hand, theoretical linguists tend to base their definitions of bilingualism on the linguistic competence of the bilingual, i.e., how an individual masters two languages. To this end, Bloomfield (1933) defined bilingualism as 'the native-like control of two or more languages'. Competence-based definitions of bilingualism have received several criticisms, principal among which are: (1) that they do not adequately discriminate between language knowledge and language use; (2) that they do not clearly explain the basis for comparison, i.e. who constitutes the normative (native) group; and (3) that they do not specify the required level of competence (Skutnabb-Kangas 1981). Baker (1993) has also described Bloomfield's definition above as extreme and maximalist as well as ambiguous. Baker (1993) advocates the need to distinguish between language ability (degree) and use (function) in defining bilingualism. He argues that the four language skills that are typically used as indices of a person's linguistic competence (listening, speaking, reading and writing) all emphasise language ability but not function.

Another major criticism of the competence-based definitions of bilingualism concerns the criteria for selecting a particular language ability as the basis for establishing bilingualism. Whereas some people have a speaking ability only in a second language, others have reading/writing ability only and cannot engage in any natural context-based spoken discourse in a second language. Again, how should the level of language ability or competence necessary to establish bilingualism be measured? For instance, are passive/receptive bilinguals who can only, but fully, understand a second language without speaking, reading or writing it, more or less bilingual than people who have less highly developed levels of more than one of the language abilities in a second language but who are nonetheless very functional in terms of actual natural language use? For instance, during the data exercise for this study, we came across several migrants who showed understanding of Akan, the dominant language of the markets, but who could not engage in any meaningful talk-exchange with us in the language; they used intermediaries/mediators (their colleagues who had the abilities of understanding and speaking) to either answer our questions or ask their own.

Sedlak (1983) describes a situation in Kenya where a handful of people across many towns learn enough Hindi just so they can describe the plot of Hindi-language films that were shown to their friends (for a fee - free entry ticket to watch the movies). Are any of these groups of people more or less bilingual than the others? Ansah (2011) enumerates the difficulty involved in selecting any one of the language abilities over the others or all the language abilities as a criterion for establishing bilingualism.

Other studies have also shown that people who grow up in multilingual communities may acquire bare functional competence in many additional languages, and may not worry about the level of ability required to be considered competent in a language (Van Herk 2012; Sridhar 1996). Against this backdrop, the maximalist definitions of bilingualism, indeed, appear vague.

On the other hand, Diebold (1964) proposed the minimalist approach to defining bilingualism. His concept of ‘incipient bilingualism’ allows people with minimum knowledge in a second language to be classified as bilinguals. Based on Diebold’s concept, Kroll and De Groot (1997:170) define bilingualism to include ‘all individuals who actively use, or attempt to use, more than one language (even if they have not achieved fluency in the second language)’. This approach allows people who know nothing beyond forms of greeting and response in a second language, but who use or attempt to use the form/forms of the language they know, to be categorised as bilinguals. This definition qualifies the majority of our respondents as bilinguals. 98 out of 114 (86%) of the respondents (who answered this particular question) self-reported to be bilinguals even though not all of them could engage in lengthy interactions in their reported second languages. The character of bilingualism among the group we studied and the factors affecting bilingualism among them is further discussed in section 5 below.

Unlike the competence-based definitions of bilingualism, function-based definitions focus on what languages are used for or may be used for in society. For instance, while Weinreich (1968) defined bilingualism as the practice of alternately using two languages, Mackey (1970:554) opines that ‘bilingualism is not a phenomenon of language; it is a characteristic of its use. It is not a feature of the code but of the message. It does not belong to the domain of *langue* but *parole*’. Mackey further suggests that the definition of bilingualism should be based on interconnections among the various language abilities where each language ability can be seen as a continuum in which speakers may have different competences for the respective languages at different levels and in different contexts. For example, our experiences from the field work we observed that even though some migrants appeared not to have a lot of competence to communicate fluently in Twi, the language of the markets, they showed a lot more competence in comprehension ability - they would explain the situation, e.g. their terms in negotiating price, to an intermediary in a way that suggested that they have understood our terms.

Function-based definitions seem to have become the basis for defining bilingualism among researchers who view bilingualism as a ‘spectrum or continuum’ which runs from relatively monolingual second language learners to highly proficient (near native) second language speakers or users (Dako 2001, Guerini 2006). According to Ansah (2011) this approach to defining bilingualism provides a better framework for

dealing with the complexities inherent in bilingualism as a phenomenon because it enables researchers to focus on a particular point within the continuum and to draw conclusions that are not over-generalised or oversimplified. From this perspective, we may describe a cline of bilingualism (from incipient bilinguals to highly fluent bilinguals) in the language of the market and the L1 of the female migrants we studied.

It has been established in both bilingualism and sociolinguistics literature that bilingualism is a by-product of language contact situations, which may arise from several factors including migration. In every language contact situation, some sociolinguistic groups appear more powerful, through political power, economic power or dominance in terms of sheer numbers. In this regard, immigrant communities tend to be less powerful in their new environment. Consequently, asymmetrical bilingualism is expected. In other words, we expect the less powerful linguistic group, e.g. immigrant community, to adopt the language of the powerful group in order to access education, government services or jobs (Van Herk 2012). Asymmetrical bilingualism may lead to language shift, especially in prolonged language contact situations (Bourhis and Giles 1977; Weinreich 1953). Nevertheless, under certain circumstances, minority language groups have maintained their language in the face of a more socio-politically, economically, or regionally dominant language. In other words, bilingualism can occur without language shift. We find this situation in this study where migrants from the Mole-Dagbane language group (who form the majority of our respondents) maintain their L1 in the face of urban multilingualism - they learn to use the language(s) of the market with clients but revert to their L1 with their friends and work colleagues.

According to Van Herk (2012), demography is one of the major factors that ensure language maintenance in the face of language dominance. For instance, Pendakur and Kralt (1991) have reported (based on census data) that living in a large linguistic enclave encourages the retention of immigrant languages. Again, Ogbu (1978) suggests that if large groups of immigrants believe or have hope that they will return to the country/town of origin, they maintain their home language. Again, migrants from the Mole-Dagbane language family appeared to form linguistic islands in their new communities and so do not shift from using their L1. The analysis of the data reveals the development of a form of bilingualism among many of the female migrants in the selected markets. Section 5 of the paper presents the analysis of the data, major findings and discussion of these findings. But before then, we present some background information about the study sites as well as an overview of our methods of data collection in the next two sections.

### **3. The Study Area**

Agbogboloshie, Madina and Dome are suburbs of Accra, the capital of Ghana, and one of the most linguistically complex cities in the country. It is a cosmopolitan city, the most urbanised city in the country, with a very high level of ethnolinguistic diversity. Although official reliable estimates do not exist, a rough extraction from the 2010 Housing and Population Census suggests that almost all the languages that are spoken in Ghana are represented in Accra. Four languages, Akan, English, Ga, and Hausa stand out as the most important languages of present-day Accra. According to Dakubu (1997) although the ethnic language of Accra is Ga, there are strong indications that the city's largest ethnolinguistic group is Akan and there are more Akan speakers in Accra than Ga speakers.

These three communities were selected as our research sites because they are common destinations for many migrants from all parts of the country, especially, the northern parts of Ghana. The strongest points of attraction in these market communities for migrants in Accra are the big markets that are located there. Unlike the other big market centres such as Makola, Malata and Kaneshie Markets (also in Accra), migrant communities have sprung up around Agbogboloshie, Dome and Madina Markets and so there is no need for the migrants to commute to the markets. Given that the migrants have moved out of their places of origin in search of better economic conditions, it makes economic sense that migrants would choose the study sites as their destinations. At least they do not have to have a budget for commuting to work; they live and work in these markets.

These markets are well-known as the hub of both wholesale and retail of major staples such as yam, plantain, maize, beans, and assorted vegetables from within Ghana and other West African countries such as Burkina Faso, Niger and Togo. The Agbogboloshie market, also known as the Old Fadama market, is located in the central business district of Accra. The Agbogboloshie community is of recent origin. It has a population of about 40,000 persons (2010 Housing and Population Census). It is also a well-known dumping ground for electronic waste (e-waste) from both Ghana and other nations. It is also known as the largest onion market in Ghana. In the 1960s Agbogboloshie was a wetland known as Old Fadama or Ayalolo<sup>1</sup>. In the early 1980s, it was populated by internally displaced persons from the Kokomba-Nanumba war in the Northern region of Ghana (Dakubu 1997), though migrants from other parts of Ghana can be found there. The market and the community itself overlap, making the boundaries between the two a bit blurred.

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<sup>1</sup> Ayalolo in Ga means 'we are still going'. This is perhaps due to the fact that the settlement was not supposed to be a permanent one, but a transient one.

The landscape of the Agbogboloshie community is characterized by wooden structures, thus, making the area prone to fire outbreaks, which is also partly due to the haphazard nature of electrical wiring. In addition, there are dormitories that have been constructed by Non-governmental and Christian organisations, as well as some individuals around the market which provide basic sleeping places for these migrants. Furthermore, the community is poorly demarcated; it has no running water and sanitation facilities. It is also known to be the hideout of drug peddlers, prostitutes and armed robbers. The area is heavily polluted with smoke coming from the burning of the e-waste. Perhaps, in recognition of the harsh living conditions of the area, the area has been nicknamed Sodom and Gomorrah. Many of the people who live at Agbogboloshie work around the market.

The Madina market, the second research site, is within the Madina community and is located on the North-eastern part of Accra, in the La Nkwantanang-Madina Municipal Assembly. The community was established by migrants on 14<sup>th</sup> June 1959 (Quarcoo et al 1967, Dakubu, 1997; Ntewusu 2005). The migrants, led by Alhaji Seidu Kardo were given the land by the Ga Mantse, the chief and land owner of the Ga people, the ethnolinguistic group who originate from Accra. The total initial population of this settlement was 849 persons (Dakubu, 1997: 7). Today, it is ranked the 12<sup>th</sup> most populous settlement in Ghana with a population of 137,162 persons (2010 Housing and Population Census). The market serves not only the Madina community but also outlying areas such as Legon, Adentan, Ashaley Botwe, East Legon, Abokobi etc. Unlike the Agbogboloshie community, the Madina community boasts of modern buildings.

The third research site, Dome market, is situated in the Ga East Municipal Assembly. With a population of 78,785, it is the 19<sup>th</sup> largest settlement in Ghana in terms of its population. Like Madina, the community boasts of modern facilities and is home to people from different ethnic groups. The Dome market serves other communities such as Kwabenya, Taifa, Ashongman, and the Ofankor area. There is a railway line that feeds the market with foodstuffs from other parts of the country. As such it is a destination for migrants from rural Ga as well as peri-urban towns outside Accra. The majority of the residents are traders and civil servants.

#### **4. Data Collection Methods**

The target population were *Kayayei* who work at the three markets. We identified specific spots at the markets where they congregate and interviewed those who were willing to take part in the study. In other cases, they were spotted when carrying goods to awaiting taxis, cars and *trotros* or to market stalls or when they were carrying the head pan, looking for customers. The main instruments used for gathering data were

interviews, questionnaires and observation. In all, 118 respondents provided information for the study. The *Kayayei* were interviewed on their demographic characteristics, reasons for migrating to Accra and the language used in their interactions with customers, family and friends, among other things. The questionnaires were both open-ended and closed-ended. The answers were written by the researchers due to the fact of the low levels of literacy among most of the respondents. The interviews lasted for between 30 minutes and one hour. The interviews were conducted mainly in Twi, a major dialect of Akan which emerged as the dominant language used in the three markets, and dialects of the Mole-Dagbane language family which emerged as the L1 or L2 of majority of our respondents. However, there were instances in situations where none of the researchers or research assistants spoke a respondent's language. In such instances, we had to rely on interpreters/translators (from other *Kayayei* or other workers in the markets) for the interview. Additional data were collected through the observation of the interactions between the *Kayayei* and their customers and also with their peers. The data obtained were analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively.

## 5. Findings and Discussion

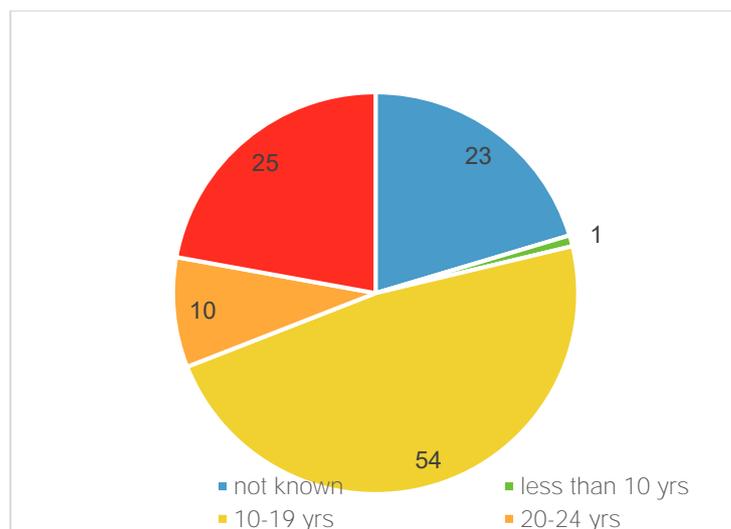
The analysis presented here originated from a multisite project that examined linguistic challenges and coping strategies among female migrants in three urban markets in Ghana. Data were collected from three very busy and popular markets in Accra: Agbogboloshie, Madina and Dome markets.

### 5.1 Characteristics of the Respondents

The youngest respondent was 10 years old with the oldest being 57 years. However, the majority of the respondents, fifty-four (54%) were between the ages of 10 and 24 years. Twenty percent (20%) of the respondents had no idea of their ages. Surprisingly, only one (1) of the 118 respondents was between the ages of 44 and 69. All the 118 female migrants were *Kayayei*, mostly engaged in head portering (carrying wares/goods around the markets for fees). Indeed, when we asked respondents to indicate their type of work, 96.5% indicated that they were *Kayayei*. The rest said they engaged in petty trading and dish washing mainly but also carried goods sometimes.

The age distribution of the respondents indicates that (47%) of the migrants are of school going age (10-19 years old). Under the Free, Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) policy (which Ghana purports to implement), children within the

age bracket indicated above are expected to be in school. The FCUBE makes it mandatory for every child in Ghana to begin primary school at age six (6), have six years of primary education and three years of Junior High education (where (free) basic education ends). However, the fact that usually the child is expected to continue school (three years of secondary education and four years of University/post-secondary education/training) in order to be fully equipped and positioned to be gainfully employed, further raises the percentage of the migrants/respondents who are supposed to be in school/training to more than half of the respondents (55%). Figure 1 below shows the age distribution of respondents.



**Figure 1: Age distribution of 118 respondents**

The fact that majority of our respondents are deprived formal education reflects in the level of education (and literacy) among our respondents - only 57.9 of the predominantly youthful migrants have received formal education. Even then the majority have had only primary education; only a few have had a full course of the FCUBE. The remaining 42.1% have had no education at all. Figure 2 below shows the level of education of the *Kayayei* in these urban markets.

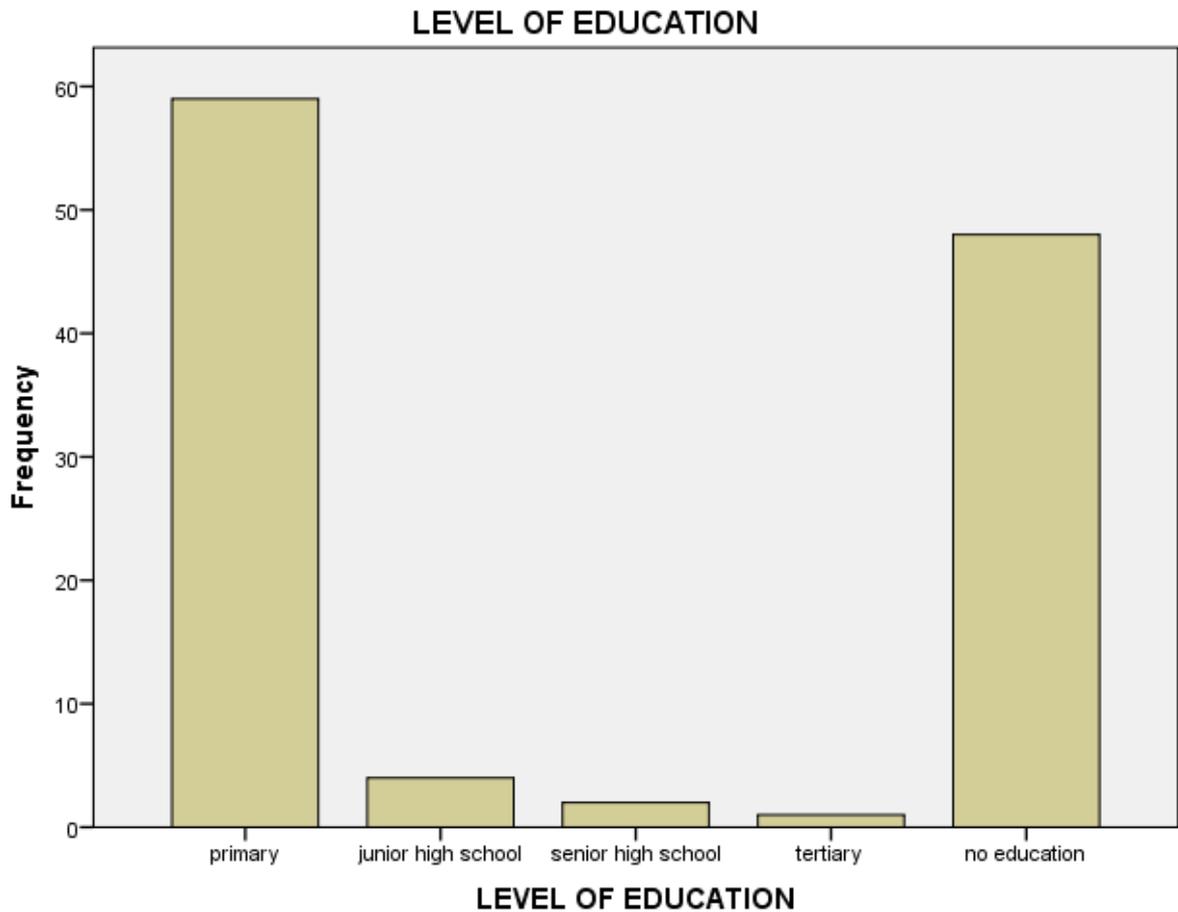
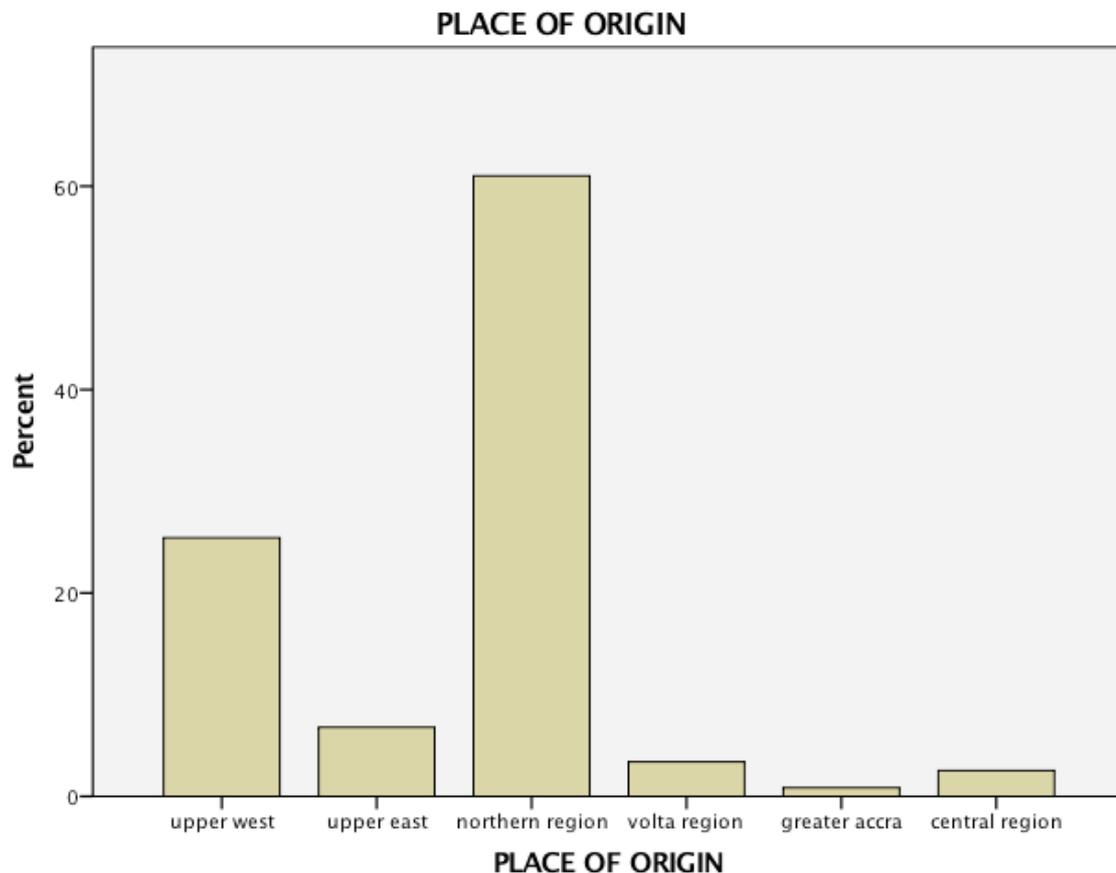


Figure 2: Level of education among respondents

In terms of where the migrants had moved to these markets, our respondents traced their places of origin to 6 geographical regions: Central Region (3), Greater Accra Region (1), Volta Region (4), Upper East Region (8), Upper West Region (30) and Northern Region (72). From these figures, it is obvious that an overwhelming majority of the female migrants in these markets (110, constituting 93.3%) originate from the northern part of the country. Figure 3 below shows the places of origin (in terms of geographical/administrative region) from where our respondents migrated to Accra.



**Figure 3: Place (geographical region) of origin among migrants**

A close examination of the information on the time respondents had spent in Accra (as of the time of the interview revealed that majority of the migrants 85 out of 118 (72%) were neophytes and transitional migrants - while 68 (57.6%) had spent between one and eleven (1-11) months in Accra, 17 (14.4%) had lived in Accra between one and five (1-5). When we combined information about the place of origin with other variables such as the time of arrival in Accra (as of the time of the interview), whether this was migrants' first time in Accra, the time spent in Accra, and whether or not migrants had intentions of returning to their places of origin, the data revealed three different categories of migrants, namely, *seasonal migrants*, *first time migrants* and long-

term to permanent migrants. Whereas 69 of the 118 indicated that it was not their first time in Accra, 34 were in Accra for the first time and 15 had either grown up in Accra or lived there for a long time.

In other words, out of the 85 neophyte/transitional migrants in our study, only 34 (40%) were first time migrants. This means that 60% of the neophyte/transitional migrants may be classified as seasonal migrants. Indeed, when respondents were asked whether or not they had intentions of returning to their places of origin, an overwhelming 93% of the respondents answered in the affirmative.

The geographical region from which more than 90 percent of the migrants come, when combined with information about the type of migrants we identified affords us insights into the nature and patterns of migration among the seasonal migrants. Northern Ghana which has been the major source region of urban Ghana's migrants, experiences different climatic conditions compared to the regions in the south of the country and those along the coast. In the three regions constituting northern Ghana, farming is the major source of livelihood. However, the annual rainfall season has always been short, covering only between April and August. This period is followed by a long dry season, from September to March. During the dry season, most farmers would have harvested their crops and basically will have nothing else to do.

## **5.2 Linguistic challenges of Kayayei in urban markets Accra**

The idea of the existence of possible linguistic challenges, especially among the seasonal and first-time migrants became very prominent during the fieldwork for the pilot data collection for this project. As we moved around in the market, we observed that the Twi dialect of Akan was the dominant language in the market. Our observation was confirmed by our respondents' self-report which indicated that 105 out of 118 (89%) of the respondents conducted business in Twi. However, as we interacted with the migrants, we observed that with the exception of the long-term to permanent migrants who spoke both their first language (L1) and a second languages (including Akan) fluently, all the others appeared to have linguistic challenges. Subsequently, during the fieldwork for the main data, we asked respondents directly whether they faced any particular linguistic challenges in their line of business. Out of the 118 participants, 63.2% answered in the affirmative while 36.8 said they had no particular linguistic challenges. Of those who had linguistic challenges, only 37.5% said they anticipated some linguistic challenge in their host community, 62.5% said they did not anticipate any such challenges.

As a way of verifying the information provided for this question, we elicited information about the L1s of migrants, any other language(s) they speak, and their preferred language for business in the markets. With regard to migrants’ L1 background, only 3 (2.5%) of the respondents across all three markets indicated a dialect of Akan, Fante, as their L1. The remaining respondents had L1s other than the dominant language of the markets. Figure 4 below provides the specific L1 distribution of our respondents. It is important to note that some respondents indicated more than one language as their first language. A slash is put between such languages.

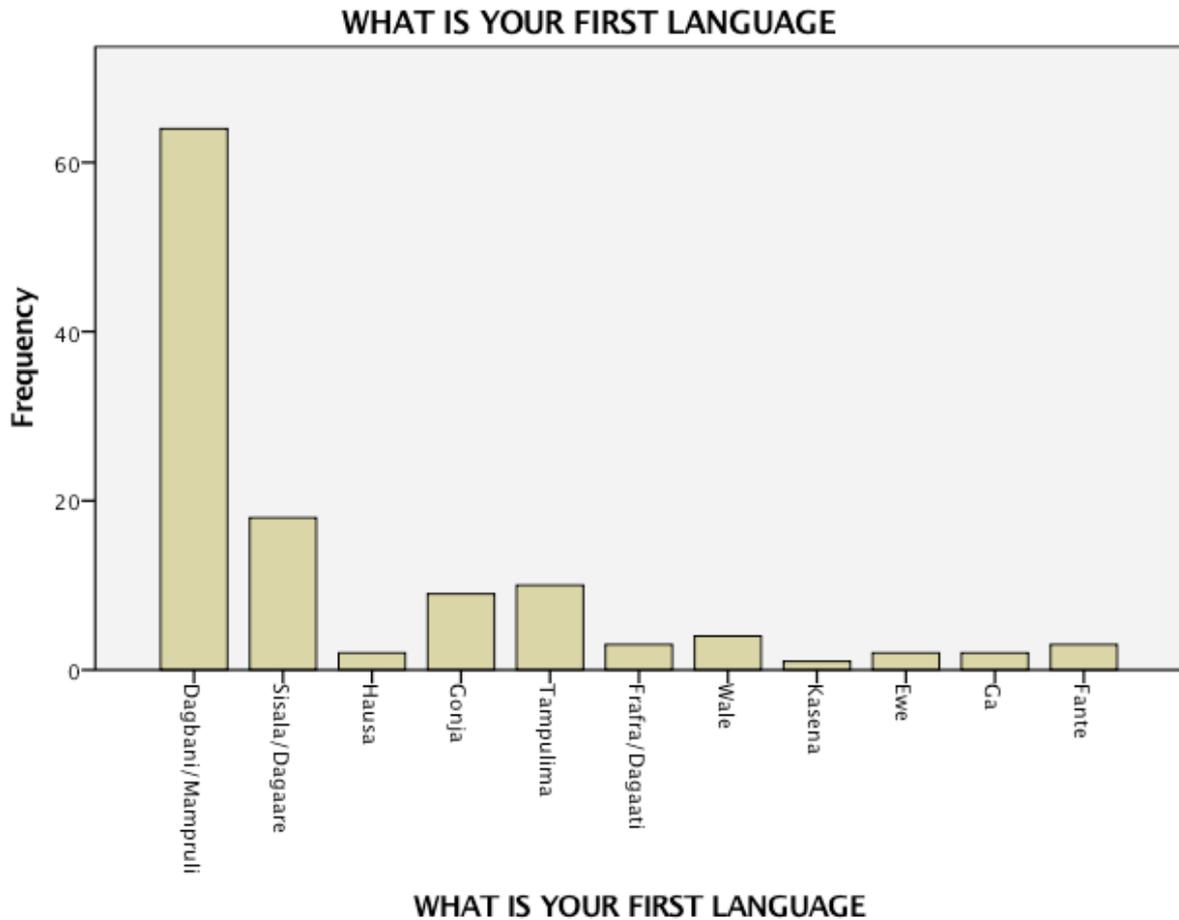


Figure 4: L1 distribution among *Kayayei* in urban markets in Accra.

Given the diversity of L1 backgrounds among the migrants, we may speculate that, one, not all of them get to do business in their L1, and two, at least, some of them are bilinguals. The data revealed that 83% of our respondents spoke a language other than their L1 in the markets for business purposes. Akan (Twi) was the dominant language spoken (77.1%) as L2 among the respondents. Table 1 below summarises migrants' responses to the question of additional language(s).

**Table 1: Other languages spoken by migrants**

| Language   | Frequency | Percent |
|------------|-----------|---------|
| Twi        | 91        | 77.1    |
| English    | 4         | 3.4     |
| None       | 16        | 13.6    |
| Tampulima  | 2         | 1.7     |
| Gonja      | 1         | .8      |
| Total      | 114       | 96.6    |
| Missing NR | 4         | 3.4     |
| Total      | 118       | 100.0   |

From Table 1 above, we can see that even though Akan is a popular or dominant L2 among majority of the migrants, 22.8% of the respondents did not consider Akan as their L2 or a language they spoke for that matter. Given that Akan is a dominant language in the markets, we tried to find out what language migrants, at least those who did not have command of Akan, the language of the market, employed in conducting business in the markets. When this question was posed to the respondents, again Akan (Twi) emerged as the dominant language of business among migrants. It is interesting to note that the frequencies and percentages were higher here than they were for Akan as L2. What this reveals is that there are migrants who do not speak Akan as L2 but who choose to conduct business in the language (see table 2 below).

**Table 2: The language migrants speak with clients**

| Language   | Frequency | Percent |
|------------|-----------|---------|
| Twi        | 105       | 89.0    |
| English    | 3         | 2.5     |
| Gestures   | 6         | 5.1     |
| None       | 1         | .8      |
| Total      | 115       | 97.5    |
| Missing NR | 3         | 2.5     |
| Total      | 118       | 100.0   |

When we asked respondents whether or not they already knew the language they speak with their clients before they migrated, 34.5% responded in the affirmative while 65.5% responded in the negative. Of the 68 migrants who had lived in Accra for less than one year, 47 indicated that they were bilingual in their L1 and Akan (Twi). Out of these 49 migrants, 42 (89%) reported to have learned it in Accra. The remaining 7 migrants were step-wise migrants, i.e. they had previously migrated to Kumasi, the capital of Ashanti Region where Twi is the native and dominant language. Again, out of the 17 transitional migrants, 13 (76%) indicated that they were bilingual in their L1 and Twi. Out of the thirteen (13), twelve (12) reported to have learned Twi from Accra while one (1) reported to have learned it from Kumasi. Finally, eighteen (18) out of the twenty-three (23) long-term to permanent migrants who reported being bilingual in Twi and their L1, 17 (94%) indicated that they learned Twi from Accra; only one of them reported as having learned it from Kumasi. Thus, we may argue that these markets appear to have become sites for learning Twi among these migrants, especially first-time migrants.

These notwithstanding, from our field experience with the *Kayayei*, the majority of those who claim to be bilingual in Akan and their L1 can only be described as incipient bilinguals – they appeared to know only essential phrases and formulaic language they needed to get by in the market. They could not sustain interaction in Akan outside core business discourse. However, it is worth noting the level of competence in Twi appeared to be constrained by the length of time a migrant had been in Accra or some other Twi-speaking community.

Finally, table 2 also reveals that migrants who do not speak Akan as L2 or L1 adopt some coping strategies in order to do business in these markets. The next section discusses these coping strategies.

### 5.3 Coping Strategies

From table 2 above, we can see that some migrants employ gestures in order to do business in the market. We also see the use of Akan (for business) by migrants who do not consider themselves as Akan speakers (compare tables 1 and 2). How is that possible? During the field work, we observed that many seasonal migrants who have been to the city once or twice have picked certain words, phrases, and sentences that pertain to their line of business (appropriate registers, e.g. come! let's go! how much?) to be able to engage in basic communication with customers (for business purposes) in the host communities.

Most migrants who do not speak Twi have found innovative ways of going around the problem. For instance, many first-time migrants who were new to both the physical and linguistic environment tend to move in groups, usually with someone who has some command of Akan, the main language of the markets. Such new migrants are

socialised into the working environment (including the language of business) in these groups. Even though there was little negotiation observed between porters and customers, on a few occasions, we observed some porters stepping in to offer linguistic assistance to colleagues (mostly first-time migrants) who were having a language problem with bargaining a price or understanding the destination the goods were to be carried to.

Again, during our fieldwork, we observed instances where a porter who spots a customer (but who could not speak Twi) would quickly call a Twi-speaking *Kayayei* to come and assist in interpretation. This is sometimes problematic as only few customers would allow such an arrangement. Most customers do not have the time and the patience for such arrangements. Consequently, most customers decide on porters who understand Twi. On other occasions, the porter who could speak Twi will rather jump at the opportunity to take up the job herself to the disadvantage of the non-Twi-speaking migrants. Thus, non-Twi-speaking porters in these markets appear to lose some business opportunities due to linguistic challenges.

Another coping strategy some migrants appeared to adopt to go around their linguistic challenges was to take whatever the customer says by nodding to avoid any linguistic interaction. This is how one respondent explained (through interpretation) how this strategy works for her:

anything the customer says I would nod. So, at the end of the day I can't complain about whatever the customer decides to give me.

Another respondent explained that her initial way of dealing with the linguistic challenges of her job was to charge one Ghanaian cedi (GHS1) no matter the items to be carried and the distance to be covered.

Whenever my services were needed, I would mention one cedi (GHS 1). My friends used to even call me One Cedi.

According to this respondent, there were instances when customers even felt pity for her and paid her more than the GHS1 she requested. At the time of the fieldwork, however, she was able to communicate with customers in Twi.

By far, the commonest procedure of getting work as a new porter who does not speak Twi was to always be with a *Kayayei* who was bilingual in one's L1 and Twi. A little over 30% of our respondents reported having stayed with their 'sisters' (biological or ethnic) upon first arrival. For such new porters, their 'sisters' become the medium of interaction between them and customers until they can operate on their own. However, we also observed that, not all customers at the market were Akan-speaking. For instance, in the Madina and Agbogboloshie Markets, some of the customers were themselves migrants from Ghana's north who are working in the formal economy especially as civil servants in government ministries and other state departments. Such customers

would usually speak their first languages which happened to be the L1 of some of the *Kayayei*, and thereby eliminate any linguistic challenge.

Whilst both seasonal and first-time migrants experience linguistic challenges, seasonal migrants, compared to first time migrants, had less linguistic challenges. Some of them (9%) are step-wise migrants. Before migrating to Accra, they had previously migrated to Kumasi, the second largest city in Ghana, and home to the Ashantis, with the largest number of speakers of the dominant dialect (Twi) of Akan. Such step-wise migratory practices enable migrants to learn some Akan before they arrive in Accra. Again, based on their previous migration to the city and their study of the market environment within which they work, the migrants reported that one needed very basic linguistic requirements to function in the informal economy of Accra.

For instance, it became obvious in our interaction with these migrants during the fieldwork that these female migrants do not need in-depth knowledge in the local language to have a successful business transaction with customers.

Per their main task of carrying goods from one point to another for a fee, the basic exchanges were first of all getting a customer (either by hand gestures) beckoning to a waiting porter, or calling out with the most popular and waiting-to-be-heard Akan word *bra* 'come'. Immediately, a porter approaches the customer who points out the goods to be carried and continued in Akan *sɛn?* 'How much' or *wobɛgye sɛn?* 'how much will you charge?'. At this juncture, the customer could quickly add the name of the destination to which the goods would be carried. Since these migrants have sufficient knowledge of the various lorry stations (bus terminals) and spots near and around the market, they are able to access the size of the goods and the distance to be covered, and negotiate the fees with the customer. Alternatively, the customer could just point to the goods, the porter carries them to the destination of the customer before fee negotiations commence. In either scenario, very minimal linguistic exchange is required and therefore, very little linguistic knowledge may be sufficient to conduct business (in their line of work).

It is of interest to note that while all the strategies discussed above were reported to be used by the *Kayayei*, the data revealed that learning the appropriate registers (key vocabulary) needed to transact business was the most employed strategy. Indeed, the data revealed that 91.3% of the migrants who used Akan to do business learned it in Accra. Combining this finding with the finding that an overwhelming majority of the migrants (72%) had lived in Accra for between one month and thirty-six months, we may conclude that the level of competence in Akan can barely go beyond that of incipient bilinguals.

In trying to explore why migrants chose to do business in a language they had very little competence in, we posed this question to them 'why did you learn this language?' Table 5 below summarises the responses of the migrants:

Table 5: why migrants learn language of the market

| Reason                                | Frequency | Percent |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| To communicate properly with clients  | 58        | 49.2    |
| To communicate with people in general | 25        | 21.2    |
| I just learnt it                      | 13        | 11.0    |
| It is prestigious to speak Twi        | 1         | .8      |
| Total                                 | 97        | 82.2    |
| Missing NR                            | 21        | 17.8    |
| Total                                 | 118       | 100.0   |

From Table 5 above, it is clear that the most obvious reason for learning Akan (Twi), the language of the market is economic (to communicate with clients). Indeed, during the fieldwork, we were told by one long-term migrant that some time ago, due to linguistic challenges, the *Kayayei* used to carry goods without any verbal communication or negotiation with customers and customers used to throw few coins at them when they got to their destinations. Some dissatisfied *Kayayei* resorted to insults in their first languages, most likely to the understanding of nobody except themselves and colleague *Kayayei* standing by whilst angry customers either insulted back in their own languages or beat the *Kayayei* up where they could. Thus, most *Kayayei* became dissatisfied with this exploitative situation and thus, decided to learn Akan, the dominant (working) language in urban Ghana.

One of our respondents sums up the main reason for their learning of Akan in the following submission (as captured by the field workers):

Sometimes when you are in a group and a customer approaches and speaks Twi, anyone who first responds is the one who is hired. So, you can be in a group of fellow other porters but only those who can speak a little [minimal] Twi get work always and this makes me think a lot.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed the language-migration nexus among female migrants (mainly from northern Ghana) in three urban markets in Accra. The study has revealed that an overwhelming majority of the migrants are from the three northern regions of Ghana, namely, Northern Region, Upper East Region and Upper West Region. Again, we found out that the majority of these migrants are between the ages of 10 and 29 years old, and that in spite of the Free, Compulsory, Universal Basic Education (from Primary to Junior High School) policy practiced in the country, 93.9% of these migrants have either had no formal education at all or at best, have had it up to

primary level, not completing Basic Education. Again, we found out that majority of the migrants we studied were seasonal migrants and transitional migrants from diverse ethnolinguistic backgrounds.

As anticipated, many of these migrants have linguistic challenges. But more interestingly, the study has revealed that while the majority of these migrants have linguistic challenges in the host communities (in the markets) because the dominant language of the market was not known to them prior to their migration, they have developed several strategies to cope with these challenges. The commonest of these coping strategies was incipient bilingualism. In all, 98 (86%) of the respondents self-reported being bilingual in their L1s and other Ghanaian languages as well as English. Of the 98, whereas 91 (93%) indicated that they were bilingual in their L1s and Twi, 4 reported being bilingual in their L1s and English and 3 in their L1s and other northern languages.

For those who reported being bilingual in their L1s and Akan, we realized that the level of competence in Akan depended on such factors as the time spent in Accra, and the type of migrant (step-wise, first-time, seasonal, long-term, etc.). It became apparent that the longer the period of stay in Accra, the more competent migrants tend to be in Twi. Again, step-wise and long-term to permanent migrants appeared to have more competence than seasonal and first-time migrants. Nevertheless, majority of our respondents (who are seasonal, neophytes or transitional) appeared to have learned key vocabulary that is needed to do business in Twi, the language of the markets.

The main motivation for becoming incipient bilinguals, the data revealed, is economic. According to Choi (2014:123), immigrants would normally pursue social mobility or assimilate into host societies by means of educational achievement but in 'order to effectuate such upward social mobility into host society, second language acquisition is usually necessary'. Nevertheless, questions regarding first language retention and second language acquisition and the extent to which migrants achieve either, is contingent upon whether or not migrants intend to make the place of destination their home. Since majority of our respondents are seasonal, and therefore temporary migrants, this is expected - their linguistic habits in the host communities are consistent with their status as temporary migrants.

In other words, it is this seasonal/temporary nature of their stay in the host communities which explains their attitude to the second language, which they speak only at work. Outside of work, the migrants form linguistic islands and communicate with colleague migrants in their L1s. Indeed, within the first few months of arrival in the markets, we were told, first time migrants walk with seasonal migrants or those who have been there for long time not only to understand the working environment in terms of the names of places such as certain popular buildings, government establishments, restaurants and drinking spots, and lorry stations, but also to know the pricing of goods, to

pick up essential words, phrases and sentences in preparation towards engaging in independent head portering. Most, if not all these female head porters depend on other porters upon their first arrival for assistance in language and other matters such as financial, accommodation and company during the day.

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