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Language, immigration and employment: the case of the Ghanaian community in Johannesburg

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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the Ghanaian community in Johannesburg. The study explores the relationship between language and employment among the Ghanaian immigrants on the one hand, and their access to the South African economy in relation to their language profiles, on the other. The study aims at answering the following questions: What are the factors that promote or prevent the learning of a destination language among Ghanaian immigrants living in Johannesburg? What is the relationship between language and employment among Ghanaian immigrants residing in Johannesburg? How do Ghanaian immigrants living in Johannesburg learn the languages of their host countries? How do Ghanaian immigrants adapt linguistically in the social and cultural domains?

The data was collected through a survey of a hundred participants and in-depth interviews involving 15 participants. However, one participant was involved in both the in-depth interviews and the survey. Thus, there were 114 participants in all who were selected from five Johannesburg suburbs namely Braamfontein, Berea, Hillbrow, Yeoville and the Central Business District or inner city.

I draw on an ecological perspective of second language acquisition. I will argue that since English is an official in Ghana, Ghanaians learn English and mostly migrate to destination countries where English is an official language. However, they tend to experience language difficulties in destination countries where English is not an official language and also in countries where English is used alongside other languages. Whilst some immigrants choose to learn a destination language to facilitate communication, others stick to the use of English.

The study significantly confirms the view in the literature of immigrants and destination language learning, that immigrants are mostly motivated to learn the languages of their host countries for economic imperatives. However, the study reveals further that the need for acceptance in the host communities and a sense of belonging and appreciation are equally important motivations for the Ghanaian immigrants to learn their destination languages.

There are four main findings in relation to the research questions. Firstly, the attitudes of the established members of the host speech community either promote or prevent language learning. Secondly, the study showed that the use of English creates communication difficulties for Ghanaians in the workplace. However, the knowledge of South African indigenous languages is also important in order to satisfy certain South African customers. Thirdly, the Ghanaian immigrants mainly learn the languages of their host countries informally both in the workplace and in the community. Fourthly, the Ghanaians in this study adapt socially and linguistically in their host countries in relation to their motives for migration.

The analysis of the data with regard to the conceptual framework revealed six key findings. Firstly, the contexts of use of language of the Ghanaians in this study are complex, dynamic and emergent. Secondly, both social and economic considerations 'push' and 'pull' them to learn the languages of their host countries. Thirdly, there are two major 'germination' factors that nurture the knowledge and improve the language proficiency of the Ghanaians in this study. The first one is the intended length of residence in the destination countries. The second one is the use of destination languages in the micro-context of the workplace as well as in the macro-context of the wider community.

Fourthly, two main 'germination' inhibitors adversely affect the desire of the respondents to learn destination languages. The first one is the respondents' social class and family motivation for learning English and African languages. The second one is their dependence on the knowledge of English and its frequent use for communication. Fifthly, the study found also that proficiency in a destination language enables social and economic integration of the Ghanaian immigrants in this study. Lastly, the immigrants, who were studied, are also inspired to invest a part of their identity into learning destination languages in order to increase the hybridity of their existing identities.