

NOTES ON THE LINGUISTIC SITUATION ON THE COAST  
OF GHANA DURING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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In the following notes I attempt to address two questions that are basic to a consideration of the conduct of verbal communication within and between communities. The first one is, what languages were spoken, and what were their home territories? Or, more specifically, have the boundaries between language communities shifted, before, during or after the nineteenth century? The second question is, what language or languages were used for communication between linguistic communities, and at what level? In approaching these questions I shall take the term "coast" very literally, considering boundaries only where they meet the sea.

1. Linguistic boundaries

Today, the languages spoken along the coast from west to east are: Nzema, Ahanta, Fante, Awutu, Ga, Dangme, Ewe. This has been the general picture at least since the eighteenth century. Protten (1764) listed the languages of the coast west of the Volta as "Fante", "Hanta", "Obutu", "Acra" and "Adampe", and beyond the Volta, "Crepe". Bowdich (1819) gives the same list, but distinguishes Nzema from Ahanta. His list is "Amanashea" (Nzema), Ahanta, "Fantee", "Affoctoo", Accra, "Adampe".

The locations of the boundaries between these languages do not seem to have changed radically during the past two hundred years, at least on the coast, but there has been a certain amount of shifting, which seems to reflect a gradual expansion of the territories of the languages of the major centres of commerce and politics, i.e. of Fante and Ga, as the languages of Elmina and Cape Coast and of Accra respectively. It would seem that this expansion

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proceeded very slowly if at all during the first part of the nineteenth century, but picked up considerably during the second half, and is perhaps still proceeding today.

Although this is I think a fair picture of the general trend, it is difficult to be precise about where the boundaries actually were (or even are) at any given time. There are several reasons for this. Most writers, whether their main interest was trade or evangelization, were most interested in the languages that were most generally useful. So when Christaller says (1881, Introduction) that Akan is spoken from the Tano to the Volta he does not mean that it is the only language, or even necessarily that it is the first language of the majority, at any given spot between those boundaries.

Another reason why it is difficult to be precise about boundaries is that they do not generally occur at the major centres, about which everybody wrote, but at obscure villages between major centres. Even today, I find, although the general picture is common knowledge, precision requires field work.

There is also a problem of time lag in observations. When I speak here of shift of a language boundary, or expansion of the territory of a language, I mean a change in the language that children learn first in life and continue to use as their primary language within their native community, in the same geographical location. Such a change would not likely be noted by observers until the children in whose generation it occurred were fully adult, and possibly not even then if their reports were second hand, as they often were in the case of more isolated places. There is also the fact that the name of a state may also be the name of a language, but the territories of the language and of the state do not invariably coincide.

With these problems in mind I now remark on what is known of particular boundaries shortly before, during and after the nineteenth century.

Bowdich (1819) said that the people of Axim speak a dialect of Ahanta. He definitely distinguished Ahanta from the Nzema or "Amanahia" language, which he implied was spoken on the other side of the Ankobra. I gather from Van Dantzig (1977:64) that in the eighteenth century, Prince's Town was regarded as Ahanta. According to Mock (1969) the traditional ethnic or political boundary is the Ankobra, but the language of Axim, known as Evalue, is quite definitely a dialect of Nzema. She also mentions Ajemra as a transitional dialect between Nzema and Ahanta, but more like Nzema. I am told that Prince's Town is Nzema-speaking today (F.A. Dolphyne, personal communication), but I have no information on places between there and Dixcove, which is still Ahanta-speaking. It would seem then that Nzema has expanded eastward at the expense of Ahanta since the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The eastern boundary of Ahanta, with Fante, has probably moved westward, so that the portion of the coast where Ahanta is spoken has contracted on both sides. In his chapter on Language, Bowdich mentioned Sekondi as the first town in Ahanta country, moving east to west, and also mentioned Takoradi, Butri, Busua and Dixcove. According to Mock the territory of Ahanta extends as far east as the Pra, and she mentions Dixcove, Sekondi and Egyam but not Shama, but does not commit herself as to whether Ahanta is still spoken there. I am informed (J.B. Abban, personal communication) that although Ahanta traditional territory extends as far as the Pra, the most easterly Ahanta-speaking town is now Apowa, four or five miles west of Takoradi. This has apparently been the case for at least fifty years, but it is possible that Sekondi was Ahanta-speaking throughout the nineteenth century. Migeod (1911:38) spoke of "Ahanta, extending from between Sekondi and Chama as far as and including Axim". Migeod is not always entirely reliable, but in 1900 he was working in Sekondi and may have had first hand information.

The eastern boundary of Fante, with Awutu, seems to have been stationary since the eighteenth century. Protten mentioned Obutu without saying where it was spoken, and listed "Ymba" (Winneba) and "Afutu breku" among the states where Fante was the mother tongue. Since it is hardly likely that Winneba and Senya shifted from Fante to Awutu during the following two centuries, I interpret this to mean that in the mid-eighteenth century those towns were already strongly bilingual. Perhaps Winneba had a Fante-speaking section. Bowdich specified that the people of Simpah or Winnebah were "Fantees", but that their language was called "Affootoo". He then mentioned Senya, but not its language. There are intimations, which I find convincing, that a Guang language, possibly Awutu, was spoken all along the Fante-speaking coast in earlier times, but plainly before the nineteenth century it had disappeared west of Winneba. Winneba and Senya are of course Awutu-speaking today, as is the village of Awutu or Obutu just inland about eight miles to the north-east, but Fete and Nyanyano, on the coast immediately east of Senya, are Fante-speaking (G.P. Hagan, personal communication).

Traditionally, Ga extends westwards to the Sakumofio lagoon, at the mouth of the Densu, but today it apparently extends to the Nyanya lagoon. The eastern boundary of Ga, with Dangme, is relatively well documented, and has certainly shifted eastwards. Writers up to and including Zimmermann (1858) regarded Tema as Dangme-speaking. P. de M (arees) (1602) gave numbers from 1 to 10 in what is evidently an early form of Dangme collected from "Chinke", probably Kinka, a vanished settlement near Tema. On the other hand, Protten (1764) claimed that Ga was spoken as far as "Tema, and perhaps Ningo or Lay". Since the latter two are in country that is now Dangme-speaking, and since Protten does not seem to be speaking from first-hand observation, it is likely that he meant that that was as far as Ga was known as either first or second language, in contrast to Fante, which was known much further. Bowdich's information is all quoted from Isert (1788), and does not mention Tema or any other town west of Ningo, which Isert said was

Dangme speaking, but Isert himself gave one word, the name of a fish "hardis" i.e. adi which appears to be Dangme, not Ga, and apparently came from Kpone (see Dakubu 1969).

Zimmermann claimed that Dangme was the language as far west as Nungua, which of course was originally founded by Ningo people. He first stated (1858: VIII) that Ga was spoken in Ga, Kinka i.e. Dutch Accra, Osu, Laa and Teshie, and that Adangme was the language of Nungua, Tema, Kpone, Gbugbla, Ningo and Ada. Later however (385) he omitted Nungua, which may already have become Ga-speaking, since it is much closer to Teshie than to Tema, but he is quite definite about Tema. He goes on to say (386) that "the difference between the Adangme of Tema til Nungua on the one and Krobo on the other hand is nearly as great as that between the former and Ga proper, the limits of both being uncertain....." But Field (1936) stated unequivocally that Kpone was Ga-speaking in daily life, and regarded Tema as Ga without questioning it.

The way in which this shift from Dangme to Ga in Nungua and Tema came about can be deduced from the situation in Kpone today. Kpone has two main sections, one (Jo Shi) that is traditionally of Dangme origin, and still uses Dangme for some customary observances, and another, much larger section (Alata) which has no Dangme tradition, but is said to have been founded later than the first, by Gas and other non-Dangmes, and has always been Ga-speaking. The two sections have intermarried a great deal. Evidently there must have been a time when Dangme was the first language in Jo Shi, Ga the first language in Alata, and communication between the two took place more often in Ga than in Dangme. Under the combined pressure of the greater number of Ga speakers in Alata and the economic and cultural dynamism of the Accra orbit, the Dangme-speakers of the town became totally bilingual in Ga, and eventually came to use it as the home language, so that now it is Dangme that is the second language. Something like this must have happened earlier in Nungua and

Tema. It may even already have been far advanced in Zimmermann's time, although he and his informants were not aware of it. Field (1936:10) refers to Tema as "This isolated little town...." In Kpone however it seems that the shift was not complete until sometime in the second half of the nineteenth century, or even early in the twentieth. Field (1936:77) spoke of Adangme having been "spoken generally in Kpong till within fairly recent years".

Isert said that Adangme was spoken as far as Ada, and gave a phrase he collected in Ada that is indeed in Dangme (1788:44, see also Dakubu op.cit.). It is thought that Ewe-speaking people preceded the Dangme on the western side of the Volta, but throughout the nineteenth century they were apparently not permanently on the coast itself in any numbers, or if they were they were soon linguistically assimilated to the Dangme.

Sources are unanimous that the language east of the Volta was Ewe, usually referred to by some version of the name "Krepe". Isert noted that much Dangme was also to be heard in Aflao, due to much Dangme migration eastwards. There are still linguistic traces of these migrations farther inland, for example in Se-Zogbadji in Togo, but they seem to have ceased during the nineteenth century and any Dangmes that settled along the Ewe-speaking coast have been assimilated.

One or more Guang languages have also been spoken in the past on the Ga and Dangme sections of the coast. There is very strong evidence for this. The people of Larteh, according to tradition, were earlier established along with their language at Labadi. Field (1962) reported an Awutu tradition of earlier residence near Ningo, and mentioned good place-name evidence in support of it. Today, any southern Guang-speaking communities have either moved out or been assimilated linguistically, and it would seem that in general this had already happened before the nineteenth century. However, Bowdich (1819) published a short "Adampe" word list, which I have shown

elsewhere (Dakubu 1969) to be at least partly Guang, and which apparently came from somewhere between Ningo and Ada. This is evidence that early in the century some Guang speakers were still to be found there, but the fact that Bowdich's "Adampe" numbers were indeed the modern Dangme ones is evidence that the shift to Dangme was in progress.

There is no doubt that in the nineteenth century Fante was the largest coastal language, both as a first and as a second language, as it is today. Zimmermann (1858: VIII) estimated the numbers of speakers of Ga as 40 to 50,000, and of Dangme as 50 to 60,000. The latter figure was probably based primarily on the inland Krobo and Shai areas, with which he was more familiar than the coast. A few years later, Christaller and others (quoted in Trutnan 1973) estimated Ga at somewhat less, thirty to forty thousand, Dangme at rather more, over eighty thousand, and Akan, including Asante, Akyem and Akwapem as well as Fante, at three or four million. The relatively high figure for Dangme was surely based on Krobo. It may be noted that the coastal towns where the shift from Dangme to Ga occurred are (or were) quite isolated geographically from the bulk of the Dangme-speaking population. Today, Ga and Dangme are both estimated at around half a million, and Akan at five or six, a proportional increase for Ga that is probably due to accelerated development of the area after the close of the nineteenth century.

## 2. Multilingualism

From the seventeenth century onwards, the coast of Ghana displayed the trilingual pattern that has come to dominate modern Africa, whereby one finds the local language used at home and within the community; an African language of wider communication used with neighbouring peoples who do not speak the local language; and a "world" language for communication over an even wider radius but in this case specifically for commercial and diplomatic dealings with visiting Europeans. The African language of more than local application may be used locally for special purposes, and where the wider African language

is also the local language, the two functions are filled by one language.

In the preceding section I sought to establish the territorial extent along the coast of the seven locally used languages. There is abundant evidence that well before the nineteenth century, Fante was established in the function of the language of external communication at an intermediate range. Protten, for example, stated that Fante was known from Axim to the Volta and "Crepe or Popo", and Christaller said essentially the same thing. Today, Fante is apparently universally known as a second language in the Awutu area, and in Ahanta and most of Nzema too, but in the Ga-Dangme speaking areas, although Akan is widely known as a second language it is not so nearly universal as in the areas that immediately border the local Fante area, and there appears to have been a shift in the predominant dialect, to those of Akyem and Akwapem. This shift probably occurred in the latter half of the nineteenth century, with the development of trade between the Ga coast and the country immediately north of it, and the decline of the sea-borne trade based on forts dotted along the coast.

The lower degree of acquaintance with Fante or other varieties of Akan is undoubtedly also related to the fact that the language of Accra gave it some competition. Protten stressed the greater spread of Fante, but admitted that Ga was known as far as Ningo or even Lay. The fact that Tema and Kpone switched to Ga as first language is also evidence of a wide knowledge of Ga as a second language in those places during the nineteenth century. Today it is the major second language at least as far as Ada. Its spread was no doubt given additional impetus by the decision of the Basel Mission in the middle of the nineteenth century to use Ga for evangelism and education in Dangme-speaking territory.

The <sup>major</sup> language of overseas trade today of course is English, but in the eighteenth century it was Pidgin Portuguese, as it had been since the beginnings of this trade. Protten refers to it as "Neger-Portugisisk", known

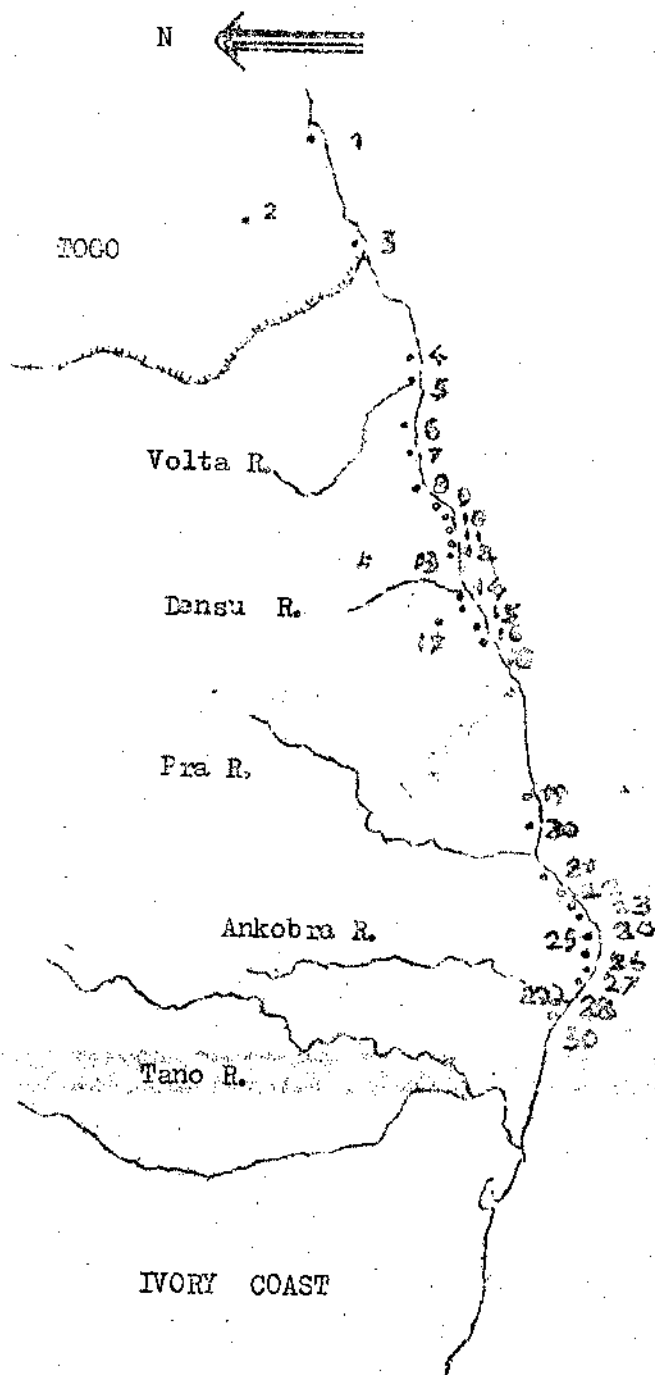


like Fante all the way to Popo, and does not mention English at all, although that language must have been in use to some degree where there were English forts. Bowdich, on the other hand, does not mention Pidgin Portuguese. This does not of course mean that it was not spoken, but it may be an indication that in the Cape Coast area at least it was by then not important. During the first half of the century the Basel missionaries plainly regarded English as the language of the future, and by the end of the century Pidgin Portuguese had completely disappeared.

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1. Popo
2. Se-Zogbadji
3. Aflao
4. Ada
5. Le-Kpongano
6. Ningbo
7. Prampram
8. Kpone
9. Tema
10. Nungua
11. Laa (Labadi)
12. Osu
13. Accra
14. Nyanyano
15. Fete
16. Senya Bereku
17. Obutu
18. Winneba
19. Cape Coast
20. Elmina
21. Shama
22. Sekondi
23. Takoradi
24. Apowa
25. Butri
26. Busua
27. Dixcove
28. Prince's Town
29. Ajemra
30. Axim

THE GOLD COAST  
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