

Documenting Endangered Languages in Africa

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The world's languages are disappearing at an alarming rate and it has been estimated that between 60 to 90 percent of them may be at risk of extinction within the next hundred years. Since the 1990's linguists and anthropologists, assisted by various funding agencies, have been galvanized into working towards documenting these languages before they disappear. I continue to work on the documentation of Nyagbo, a language spoken in the South Eastern part of Ghana, which the people themselves call Tutrugbu.

A crucial ingredient for successful documentation on the continent is equipping people with the necessary skills to carry out documentation. In summer 2010, I was a resource person for the Summer School on Documentary Linguistics in West Africa, which was held at the University of Education in Winneba, Ghana. The school was organized by Dr. Felix Ameka from Leiden University, the Netherlands, and funded by the Endangered Languages Documentation Program (ELDP) at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. It aimed at providing further training and skills in the theory and practice of language documentation to 20 participants in universities in Ghana, Benin

Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria and Senegal, who were selected from participants from an earlier school held in the summer of 2008. They received training in documentation of specialized vocabulary and cultural knowledge as well as audio and video recording.

One issue that keeps coming up among Africanists working on language documentation is whether the situation in Africa is so different from other regions as to warrant an Africa-specific strategies for documenting languages on the continent. For instance, do colonial languages play as central a role in language endangerment as they do in places like Australia and the Americas? Some researchers have argued that in the African context, endangerment is caused by regional rather than colonial languages. Another issue concerns what to represent in the writing system. For instance, should one represent inflections on words even when speakers no longer do so in speech?

In order to address these and other issues, we organized a workshop on Africa's Response to Language Endangerment at the University of Florida in December 2010. The workshop was sponsored by the Center for African Studies with additional support from the Office of Research, France-Florida Research Institute, Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures, and the Linguistics Department. Invited participants included 12 specialists from Africa, Europe, Australia, Canada, and the United States working on various aspects of language documentation in Africa.

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