

When an Endangered Language Goes Global: Documenting Chimiini

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Chimiini was once spoken only in the port city of Brava on the coast of southern Somalia, the northernmost and most isolated of the Swahili “dialects.” Though spoken in Brava for a millenium, the horrors of the ongoing civil war in Somali have caused nearly all speakers of the language to become refugees now living in large international cities like Atlanta, London, and Mombasa. As a result, the unique language and culture of the Bravanese is quickly disappearing. In a multi-year project (now in year three) funded by the NEH through the NSF/NEH program Documenting Endangered Languages program, I am working with Bravanese communities, as well as other scholars, to further document the Chimiini language. This includes writing a reference grammar and dictionary of Chimiini, archiving digital recordings of the language, publishing tra-

ditional stories, personal narratives, and other ethnolinguistic material, and developing web-based materials useful to the community and heritage speakers. It also includes exploring the language from a scientific perspective and bringing out insights that might be interesting for theoretical linguistics.

Last summer I spent seven weeks in Mombasa, Kenya meeting many of the hundreds of Bravanese who live there and talking with them about their language. Together, we collected oral stories, specialized vocabulary about fishing, agriculture, and traditional medicine, and dozens of Chimiini proverbs. I was also able to introduce the orthography we have developed for Chimiini so that hopefully people will be encouraged to write the language more. Though it isn't home, Mombasa is much closer culturally and linguistically to Brava than London or Atlanta. I

was glad to see this has enabled the Wantu wa Miini to maintain their language to a greater extent, even though many of the youths freely mix Chimiini with Swahili in their speech.

The project is now entering a phase of consolidating and finalizing data so that it can be made available to the community. This year we will be depositing the data we have collected into a digital archive for endangered languages and working to complete drafts of a grammar, dictionary, and book of proverbs.

Brent Henderson is assistant professor of linguistics and affiliate faculty in the Center for African Studies. Funding for this project is through the NSF/NEH joint program for Documenting Endangered Languages.