

**DRAFT INTRODUCTION FOR A VOLUME NEAR PRESS ON
CURRENT RESEARCH IN NIGERIAN MINORITY LANGUAGES**

PLEASE DON'T QUOTE WITHOUT ASKING ME

Roger Blench
Kay Williamson Educational Foundation

1. Introduction

After the island of New Guinea, Nigeria is one of the most linguistically diverse countries on earth. There are nearly five hundred languages, and some of those have a considerable range of dialects. It is the meeting place of three of Africa's four language phyla, Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan and Afroasiatic. Nigeria has one of the most widely spoken languages in Sub-Saharan Africa, Hausa, and severely endangered languages whose last speakers are now very old. Yet its languages remain very poorly researched; compared with the effort that has gone into the indigenous languages of Europe, the Americas or Australia, Nigeria is barely known. The papers in this book serve to report on some aspects of current research into minority languages; and this general introduction is intended to provide an overview of the situation in the country as a whole.

2. The research agenda

According to the most recent surveys (Blench 2011), Nigeria has some four hundred and eighty-eight languages. Of these, perhaps twenty are severely endangered and as many as two hundred are threatened. There are as few as ten reference dictionaries for major languages, and many of these are now very out of date. Dictionaries for Igbo and Yoruba tend to recycle the same material with variations in orthography rather than bringing new research to the table. The only dictionary of Nupe available was published nearly a century ago (Banfield 1914-1916) and that of Efik is even older (Goldie 1862). There are more grammars, perhaps fifty, but many of these are written in outmoded theoretical frameworks and of little use. The initiative of the Yobe language project¹, to make available dictionaries, grammars and oral literature online and in print in an accessible format is to be strongly welcomed and provides a model worth reproducing.

Given these lacunae, it would be logical for research to concentrate on survey, establishing what languages are spoken where and the basic sociolinguistics of the speech communities, as well as descriptive work, creating grammars and

¹ URL <http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/aflang/Yobe/yobe.html>

dictionaries that are technically accurate but also locally usable. This would create an evidence base for language development, working to elaborate orthographies, prepare literacy materials, publish texts and work out how to link these with new technologies, the internet and mobile phone text messaging.

What is the problem? Nigeria is a relatively wealthy country with a large number of universities and even sporadically funded government research institutes concerned with language. Nonetheless, the Nigerian research system could be described as virtually moribund. Nigerian universities are in decay and staff morale is very low, in part because of uncertain pay and conditions, but also because of a lack of support for research. The other bodies with a prior record of interest, the SIL (formerly the Summer Institute of Linguistics) and its sister-body, the Nigerian Bible Translation Trust, currently regard academic publication as a low priority and little has appeared in recent years. There is some evidence for a turnaround, with the establishment of a Linguistics and Bible Translation degree course at TCNN (Theological College of Northern Nigeria), which has certainly acted to focus on minority languages. The Euro-American research establishment has also had a limited impact for different reasons. Much of the research uses expatriate and out-of-context informants, despite the oft-publicised dangers of this approach. The economic slowdown in Nigeria has meant that many fewer speakers of minority languages are visiting or studying in Europe and America, and thus opportunities for new insights into optimality theory or WH-drop are significantly reduced. This exemplifies the neo-colonial nature of fashionable linguistics, which takes no interest in the languages for themselves, but values them merely for their contribution to passing seminar-room fashion. Despite a great deal of talk, Endangered Languages research has made a very limited contribution, to judge by its profile in Nigeria, which has by far the largest number of endangered languages in Africa². Although fieldwork in Africa *is* still supported, the negative image of Nigeria deters many fieldworkers and for a country that has more than one-quarter of all African languages, research is at vanishingly low levels.

3. Language endangerment

3.1 Talk, talk

Linguistics is subject to waves of fashion, and one of those has taken up residence in recent years is a concern for endangered languages. Globally, all types of field linguistics only constitute a tiny fraction of linguistic effort, and descriptive linguistics occasionally seems to be in danger of disappearing altogether in favour of high theory. So a renewed emphasis on fieldwork in order to record ‘endangered

² To be fair, there has been a recent expansion of doctoral students working on minority languages since 2004, but this amounts to some 3-4 individuals.

languages' before they die is to be welcomed. The result has been a plethora of well-funded initiatives intended to support students and projects in many parts of the world.

The problem has been the capture of the agenda by administrators determined to slice overheads from grants, academics who see this as a route to advancement in the seminar room, and technical enthusiasts who demand improbably high standards of data recording. The costs of some of the equipment included in a typical grant application would keep many local literacy committees in Nigeria active for several years. Bizarre, developed world notions of secrecy have meant that much of the data is only available on websites protected by passwords, if at all. So there is almost an inverse relationship between the money spent and the actual useable record of endangered languages. In addition, priorities are highly skewed. In a rational evaluation of the global situation, Nigeria would be placed very high, because of the overall number of languages and the percentage which are endangered. But in fact a very small number of projects have been initiated, and even fewer have had any discernible impact, compared with the Amazon or Oceania.

3.2 The Nigerian situation

The actual state of affairs in Nigeria is hard to analyse because of an absence of reliable data. It has been decades since national censuses recorded ethnolinguistic affiliation and we have no idea of the numbers of speakers of individual languages. For smaller languages, where villages can be counted, it is possible to make credible estimates, but that is all they are. We know that access to modern medicines has increased survival rates among children and thus speakers of languages have increased. On the other hand urban migration accelerates language loss. But numbers are also politics; speakers wish to exaggerate numbers to support claims for indigenous status or new local governments. Blench (1998, 2007) has a more extended discussion of these issues, although inevitably these assessments go rapidly out of date.

Given these caveats, a rough assessment of the situation in Nigeria is shown in Table 1;

Table 1. Status of Nigerian languages

Category	Number	Comment
Total number of languages	489	Excludes languages known to be extinct
Languages of wider communication	6	Widely used as second languages. Does not mean particular dialects are not threatened
Moribund languages	15	The language has only rememberers, and no more fluent speakers exist
Endangered languages	~200	The language has a small speech community (<500) or is known to be undergoing language shift to another language
Languages for which there is no reliable information	~25	

Source: Blench (2011)

Given this, a clear priority is simply to establish basic data on languages for which there is no reliable information. this essentially requires painstaking survey work, especially in remote areas. As an example, a survey of reported or poorly documented Kainji languages was undertaken in February 2011³. As a consequence it was discovered that;

- a. The Laru language, last surveyed in the 1920s, is correctly named Shen, and is still spoken in some twelve settlements on the west side of Lake Kainji
- b. The Lopa language is actually two mutually unintelligible lects, Rop and ? Tsupamini
- c. The tiWəgə language, almost certainly a relative of tiRĩ (i.e. Pongu) was once spoken in villages east of Zungeru, but is now moribund
- d. The Gwamhi-Wuri languages of the literature consist of a cluster of three languages, Gwamhyu, Wuri and Mba.
- e. The town of Igwama has speakers of three Kamuku cluster lects. The language recorded as tuZubazuba is the same as the ‘Sagamuk’ of the literature, correctly tiSəgə̌muk. The other two, for which there is no direct linguistic data, are tuShyabe and tuRubaruba
- f. The language recorded as Makici, likely also to be a Kamuku-type language, is still spoken by a few elders in villages east of Igwama.

³ The survey was conducted by the co-editors of this volume with funding from KWEF.

These results are given here in summary form to illustrate the relative ease with which more accurate data can be collected by survey in rural areas, to show that there are likely to be many languages still to be recorded for the first time, and to underline the urgency of collecting material from rememberers of moribund languages before they die.

A concrete example is the tiWəgə language, long recorded as an unusual dialect of Pongu (tiRĩ). Photo 1 shows Mr. Agwagwa Mahago, one of the few remaining individuals to remember this language. He was able to record a relatively lengthy wordlist, but without noun-plurals. Whether the similarities to Pongu are because he used Pongu to fill in gaps for words he was unable to recall will need to be checked. It appears there may be one old couple who still speak the language to one another in a very remote compound. Again, to be certain of this, we need to be able to reach this area, which is something of a logistical challenge. TiWəgə cannot be revived, but it can be recorded before it disappears forever.

Photo 1. Agwagwa Mahago, former Tiwəgə speaker



Source: Author photo

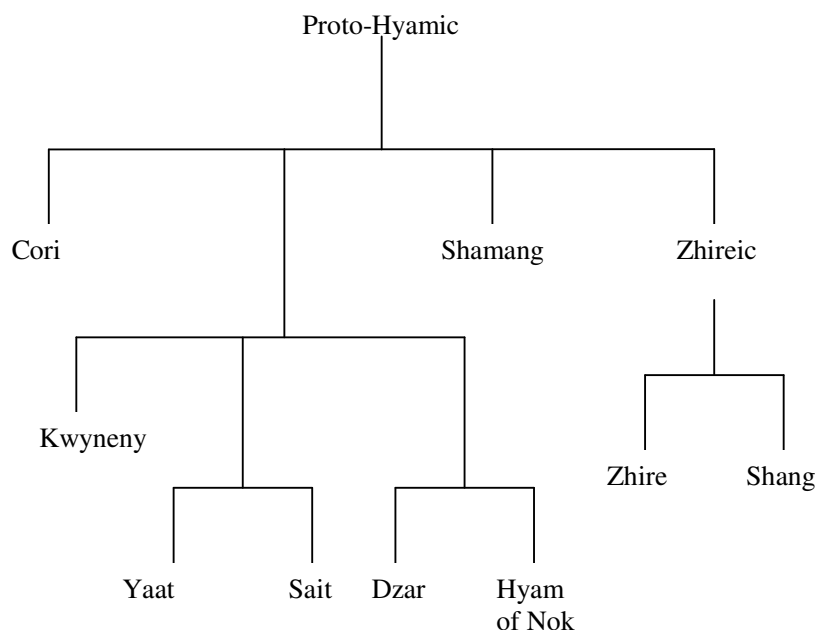
Nigeria has not historically shown any interest in its linguistic heritage. Few languages are taught in primary schools, government is unable to find the money to pay for the printing of textbooks, and radio and television are a poor reflection of the linguistic diversity of the country. In many ways, this is not surprising, and is mirrored in other African countries. Africa is seeking modernity and many in government explicitly see the multiplicity of languages as a brake on development. The choice is rather between former colonial languages and widespread languages of intercommunication such as Hausa, Swahili, Sango or Central African Arabic. This situation can be turned around, and without very significant costs; what is required is the political will.

4. Changing language patterns and continuing survey

Nigeria is a large and complex country and the linguistic situation in many areas remains poorly known. Every year, the existence several new languages or dialects are recorded for the first time and there is every reason to think this will continue. Sadly but inevitably, each probably also sees the death of the last speaker or remember of a language. The issue is not only remoteness, although some areas of

the country remain very inaccessible, but also changing perceptions of ethnolinguistic affiliation. Many peoples who were previously content to be classified with one, often inappropriate, ethnic label, now wish to establish their own identity. An example is the changing perceptions of the ‘Jaba’ or Hyamic languages, spoken in the south of Kaduna State between Kwoi and Nok. Although the name ‘Jaba’ is found in all the earlier sources, it is a Hausaism which has been rejected by the speakers. The first record of Hyam is Castelnau (1851) who gives a wordlist in the rather unfortunate context of ‘*une nation d’hommes à queue*’ and three years later Koelle (1854) gives another wordlist. Over the years it has become clear that they constitute a complex of languages and the name ‘Hyamic’ has been given to them. The most recent Hyamic language to come to light was in 2008, with a first record of the Shang language, spoken in the village of Kushemfa, south of Kurmin Jibrin on the Kubacha road. Figure 1 shows a preliminary tree of the relationships of the Hyamic languages.

Figure 1. The Hyamic languages



Despite this area being apparently well-known, there is no published record of some of these languages, no certainty that there are not more languages still to be documented, and no functioning literacy programme based on a secure description of even one of these many lects. Clearly if this is the situation in a relatively accessible region with an articulate local community, then it will be substantially

worse in many remoter places. As communities become more aware of their ethnolinguistic identity, they define their boundaries and categories collapse and fragment. We should not imagine that with enough survey work we can somehow reach a definitive index of the language situation; it will remain in flux.

Identity politics and inaccessibility are one aspect of the language situation. But urbanisation, trade and economic development constitute a separate pathway of change. Languages of wider communication (LWCs) existed in the precolonial era, but there is no doubt they have been given an immense boost since the colonial increased mobility through roads and railways. For example, at the beginning of the colonial era, Fulfulde and Kanuri were of almost equal importance with Hausa as languages of wide communication. Fulfulde was spoken in communities around the Yola Lamidate and into adjacent Cameroun.

Kanuri was spoken by all the minority Chadic communities south of Borno proper. The promotion of Hausa as an administrative language began a process of retreat for these languages and they are now threatened even in their core areas and have virtually disappeared as *linguae francae*. Even in Maiduguri, a core Kanuri area, Hausa has begun to displace it (Broß 2002). Yoruba has spread among the many communities north and east of the Yoruba area. Finally, Pidgin English is beginning to displace all minority languages in towns of the south. These observations seem to be credible but they remain anecdotal. We have no quantitative or qualitative studies documented this process, nor the types of mixed speech that evolve as one language gives way to another.

Rural-rural migration is another source of language change. As human populations increase, especially in the semi-arid regions, farming communities seek to migrate to unoccupied areas where the soil is more fertile. Before 1900, this would have been more difficult, because they would have to survey potentially hostile territory and rebuild their lives effectively from scratch. But modern transport makes it possible to survey an area, perhaps test it out for some years and if it seems to have potential to move a community as a unit. This type of transplanting carries language along with it; unlike slow processes of assimilation, this simply enlarges the area where a language is spoken. An example of this is the expansion of the Duka (correctly tHun-sSaare) language over the decades since the 1980s. When Duka was first studied, for the Ethnographic Survey of Africa (Gunn & Conant 1960) and the anthropologist Prazan (1977) it was confined to a coherent geographical area around Rijau (Map 1).

Map 1. Duka-speaking area prior to 1960

Source: Re-edited from Gunn & Conant (1960)

However, the distribution of Duka-speaking communities in 2011 was as shown in Map 2. Whether these language islands will be absorbed by the surrounding communities, switch to an LWC or develop through creolisation processes remains to be seen. But this emphasises the importance of continuing to update the language map and to survey speakers of minority languages.

Map 2. Duka-speaking communities in 2011



Source: Based on a map in Tungan Magajiya Duka literacy project office with additional research

5. The evolution of orthography development

5.1 Local initiatives

In contrast to the generally downbeat picture on research, since 2004 there has been a significant expansion of interest in literacy and Bible translation, especially across the Nigerian Middle Belt. Projects that were previously moribund or inactive have been revived by a new generation of enthusiastic young speakers. A good example is Rigwe (see anon. 2006) and Eda [=Kadara] where a locally designed orthography and literacy project was launched in 2008 (Photo 2). NBTT has initiated workshops for locally funded groups as is the 'Luke Partnership' a twice-annual workshop for Bible translation and literacy. At the same time, communities are supporting the initiative to hold workshops on dictionary development. Photo 3 shows a team at a Berom dictionary workshop in 2009; the final dictionary is close to being sent to press. Local publishing in Nigeria is gradually expanding, but mostly in the popular arena, focusing on proverbs, oral literature and reading and writing. Publications include Gochal (1994) on Ngas, Nwolu-Obele (1998) on Eleme, Lar & Dandam (2002) on Tarok and Nyako (2000) on Izere, Udoh (2004) on Leggbo. This type of publishing will probably continue to increase and take in more ethnolinguistic groups.

Also encouraging is the revival of survey work; a team active since 2006 linked to Wycliffe has circulated a number of studies of poorly-known language areas, including Ahwai (the Ndunic languages), the Koro cluster, the Obanliku languages, Ekoid, Kambari and Eda.

Photo 2. Launching the Eda alphabet chart, April 2009



Photo 3. Berom dictionary workshop, Jos, April 2009



5.2 Script issues

Non-Roman scripts have not had much attention in Nigeria until recently. They fall into two categories, Arabic and its adaptations and individual inventions, mostly products of the twentieth century. The history and current use of Arabic script to write Hausa and other northern languages is described in Warren (this volume). Although far behind the use of the Roman alphabet, Islamic revivalism has led to a renewed interest in Arabic script, something also encouraged, ironically, by the Arabic Script initiative supported by Christian organisations. Currently, the following indigenous Nigerian languages are written in Arabic script (**Table 2**);

Table 2. Nigerian languages written in Arabic script

Language	Current	Comment
Hausa	Yes	Widely seen on signs as well as in religious publications
Fulfulde	Yes	No longer common
Kanuri	Yes	Has almost disappeared
Nupe	No	No longer in use

Adapted Arabic script, commonly known as Ajami, is found across West Africa, being used to write Wolof, Mandinka, Fulfulde and some Berber dialects (Mumin 2009). The Arabic language is also used itself for signs and documents, although it is unclear how many proficient readers there are in Northern Nigeria.

Apart from this, there are scripts of twentieth century origin invented by inspired individuals which have had more or less currency. These are described in some detail in Kootz & Pasch (2009). For Hausa, for example, there is the Bagobiri script, invented in Niger (Awagana 2009).

5.3 Deaf and sign languages

Another area which has been poorly documented until recently are sign languages, spoken typically by deaf communities but in some case also by hearing individuals. There is a Nigerian sign language, taught in deaf schools, but this derives from American Sign Language (ASL). Information about numbers of users and their competence is extremely sparse. At least one indigenous sign language has been documented, that used by the Bura people in NE Nigeria (Blench 2003). However, by virtue of sheer numbers, there must be many more waiting to be recorded. Photo 4 shows three deaf persons who make use of the indigenous sign language among the Bura of Kukurpu.

Photo 4. Sign language users in Kukurpu, Bura land



6. New technologies and their significance for language development

Until recently, a standard model of language development obtained for more than a century. A language was first analysed linguistically, a draft orthography was developed, primers to teach the language were printed, and as literacy initiatives were undertaken, bible translations were very often begun. Wherever literacy took off, in major languages such as Hausa and Yoruba, this would ‘leak’ into the secular sphere. Books, newspapers and advertising would pick up on the possibility of targeting specific ethnic audiences. Of course, not all orthographies were really designed in such a consultative way, many were simply imposed top-down. Even so, they were sometimes successful in spite of problematic design. Similarly, popular publications did not always follow the official orthographic rules developed for a language, especially in the matter of vowel-length or tone-marking. Nonetheless, the aspect of literacy driven by external agendas, following the canons of writing culture and linked to world religions was very uniform. This was encouraged, more or less proactively, both in the colonial era and through the publications of the Nigerian Language Centre.

However, since the early 2000s, modern communications technologies have spread very rapidly in Nigeria. Internet access is increasingly common and mobile phones have been widely available since 2004. Mobile plug-ins for laptops have meant that the internet can be accessed even in remote areas. 3G-enabled phones and even tablet computers are now seen in larger cities. As a consequence, speakers of minority languages will increasingly use these technologies to write their language and the design of orthographies should certainly include consideration of both the internet and the constraints of SMS text-messaging. Indeed, texting and email in minority languages may turn out to be crucial to their acceptance among the next generation of speakers. In addition, the written word is now only one aspect of the larger universe of communication in minority languages. As speakers can exchange MP3 and other digital files it becomes possible to diffuse oral texts and music directly. All these different channels become part of the strategy for preserving and extending the use of minority languages.

At the same time, the link with world religions is beginning to fracture. More and more, associations and committees formed to promote language development are mixed in religious composition and see literacy and language promotion as ends in themselves rather than as a prelude to translation of scripture or homiletics. The consequence is likely to be the development of language through modern communications technologies, the creation of films, radio and internet broadcasts for relatively small audiences, and probably a turning away from the literacy primer. This is a brave new world and its endpoint is hard to foresee. But there is no doubt that new projects in language development must incorporate strategies to explore their implications.

7. Conclusions: what can and should be done?

Nigeria is a country of considerable importance on the global language map. It has a very large number of languages, many of which are severely endangered. A notable feature of these turns out to be remarkable and in some cases unique phonological and morphological features (Harley this volume). Despite lip service to the importance of this linguistic heritage, official support has been minimal. However, the energy of communities in seeking ways to develop their own languages is paradoxically very encouraging and probably more sustainable than any number of official initiatives. The research community should be seeking to capitalise on this enthusiasm rather than bypassing it in pursuit of somewhat ephemeral academic goals. Nigeria is a high priority because the sheer number of endangered languages. Whether the universities can be engaged is a moot point, but there is no doubt that local literacy committees and individual enthusiasts have considerable energy which has so far been barely tapped.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people have contributed to the observations in this paper over the years, including many of those contributing to the current volume. My thanks to all of them for data, comment and discussion.

References

- Anon. 2006. *How to read and write Irigwe*. Irigwe Language and Bible Translation Project & Nigeria Bible Translation Trust: Jos.
- Awagana, Ari 2009. Die Hausa-Schrift. In: 5000 Jahre Schrift in Afrika. Anja Kootz & Helma Pasch eds. 123-126. Köln: Universitäts- und Stadtbibliothek.
- Banfield, A.W. 1914 & 1916. *Dictionary of the Nupe Language*. Vols. I & II. Shonga: The Niger Press. [Reprinted by Gregg Press, 1969]
- Blench, Roger M. 2003. *An unknown sign language among the Bura*. Conference presentation⁴, CALL, Leiden.
- Blench, Roger M. 1998. The status of the languages of Central Nigeria. In: *Endangered Languages in Africa*. M. Brenzinger (ed.) 187-205. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe.
- Blench, Roger M. 2007. Endangered languages in West Africa. In: *Language Diversity Endangered*. M. Brenzinger ed. 140-162. The Hague: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Blench, Roger M. 2011. *Atlas of Nigerian languages, Edition III*.⁵ (electronic ms.).
- Broß, Michael 2002. Gud ivininku – Hausa in Maiduguri. In: *Aktuelle Forschungen zu afrikanischen Sprachen*. Theda Schumann et al. eds. 9-25. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe.
- Castelnau, F. de 1851. *Renseignements sur l'Afrique centrale et sur une nation d'hommes à queue qui s'y trouverait*. Paris: Imprimerie L. Martinet.
- Gochal, Golar 1994. *A look at Shik Ngas*. Jos: Jos University Press.
- Goldie, Hugh 1862. *Dictionary of the Efik language*. Edinburgh: United Presbyterian College Buildings. [Reprint: Gregg International Publishers Ltd. 1964, Glasgow]
- Gunn, H.D. and F.P. Conant, 1960. *Peoples of the Middle Niger Region of Northern Nigeria*. London: International African Institute.
- Koelle, S.W. 1854. *Polyglotta Africana*. London: CMS.

⁴ URL

<http://www.rogerblench.info/Language%20data/Afroasiatic/Chadic/Central/Bura/Bura%20opening%20page.htm>

⁵ URL

<http://www.rogerblench.info/Language%20data/Africa/Nigeria/Atlas%20of%20Nigerian%20Languages-%20ed.%20III.pdf>

- Kootz, Anja & Helma Pasch eds. 2009. *5000 Jahre Schrift in Afrika*. Köln: Universitäts- und Stadtbibliothek.
- Lar, Isaac B. & G.G. Dandam 2002. *Tarok proverbs in context*. Jos: Jos University Press.
- Mumin, Meikal 2009. Ajami: Die arabischen Schrift für afrikanischen Sprachen. In: *5000 Jahre Schrift in Afrika*. Anja Kootz & Helma Pasch eds. 71-78. Köln: Universitäts- und Stadtbibliothek.
- Nwolu-Obele, Dada 1998. *Foundation studies in Eleme*. Port Harcourt: Outreach publications.
- Nyako, Joseph Azi 2000. *Nareer Rife Nizere: Proverbs and idioms in Izere language*. Jos: Kanyek Been Aweng [Multi-purpose co-operative society].
- Prazan, Ceslaus 1977. *The Dukkawa of Northwest Nigeria*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Udoh, I.I.L. 2004. *Leggbo lexicon*. Port Harcourt: Emhai publications.