

‘We have our own small one inside’ hidden languages of the Ngasic group

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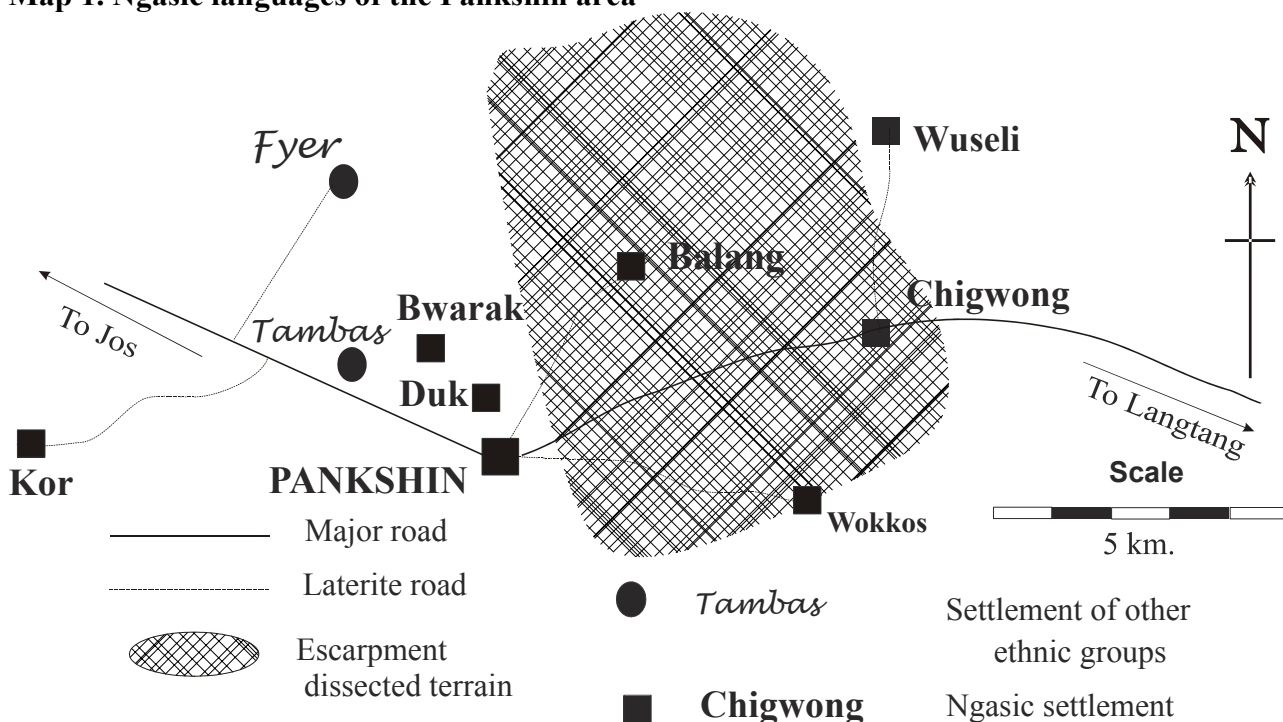
R. M. Blench 2003. ‘We have our own small one inside’ hidden languages of the Ngasic group. *Ogmios*,

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Minority languages are threatened by the processes of globalisation on a large scale; speakers are fearful of acknowledging they speak a small language and often try and encourage their children to become fluent in the regional lingua franca. However, interestingly, these processes may be replicated on a more local scale; minorities inside minorities may also be encouraged to hide their language.

Recent discoveries in the Ngas-speaking area of Central Nigeria give an illustration of how this process works. Ngas [=Angas] is a relatively large language, with perhaps 250,000 speakers, centred on the town of Pankshin, which is about 120 km. SE of Jos on the Langtang road. Ngas is generally classified as West Chadic in the Afroasiatic phylum and most closely related to Mwaghavul and the Kofyar cluster (see Burquest 1971 for further references). Ngas is barely written and has a low profile on broadcast media, so it is itself hardly given enthusiastic official support. Nonetheless, it appears to be generally spoken and not under threat from Hausa. Ngas is divided into dialects, notably the ‘Hills and ‘Plains’ groups, which divide broadly between those on the Plateau and those below the escarpment (i.e. east of Pankshin) (see Map 1). Shimizu (1974) constitutes a preliminary survey of these. Ngochal (2001) recounts the mythic history of these divisions, but interestingly glosses over the small communities apparently resident in the area at the time of the Ngas expansion.

Map 1. Ngasic languages of the Pankshin area



Roger Blench, June 2003

However, there have been persistent reports that there are ‘other’ speech forms in various Ngas-speaking villages so a brief survey was mounted to explore this possibility in June 2003. We were travelling with Mr. Bala Dimlong, who first alerted us to these possible languages and who is himself a native Ngas-speaker. The two villages we were able to visit were Kor and Bwarak. We first visited the Village Head of Kor, who informed us that there was no difference between Kor and standard Ngas. Despite this, Mr. Dimlong overheard people speaking to one another in a lect very different from his own. We were unable to move the chief from his statement, but later we were able to find an informant to give us a brief list of Kor, consisting of body parts and numerals. The terms for body parts were apparently very similar to mainstream Ngas although the vowels were distinctive, but the numeral system appears to have marked variations. We then went on to Bwarak, where we met the chief and again met a similar denial. In this case, we had very positive information of the existence of a distinctive speech-form and so we pressed him harder. Finally he admitted that ‘We have our own small one inside’.

Bwarak also turned out to be similar but distinct from Ngas, with the same variations in vowels and numerals. It was also highly noticeable that as we began the elicitation session the women in the compound actually seemed more fluent in the language than the men, presumably because the men travel out more and have become accustomed to speaking central Ngas. Bwarak is spoken in two villages, and it was said that the village further in the hills spoke a ‘purer’ form of the language. Each of these languages may have 1000-1500 speakers. Kor and Bwarak are not the only two settlements reputed to have a distinctive speech. Duk, Balang, Wuseli, Chigwong and perhaps Wokkos may also have their own lects. Longer lists of Kor and Bwarak are required as well as preliminary material from these other settlements.

Are these simply dialects? Taken on lexicostatistic counts this would clearly be the usual categorisation. In sociolinguistic terms, however, it seems more likely that these were originally quite distinct languages, perhaps not even part of the Ngas group proper, but related to Ronic languages such as Fyer and Tambas, whose speakers are also virtually engulfed in the Ngas-speaking area. A long period of cultural dominance and bilingualism in central Ngas has relexified these languages so extensively that they now seem more like variant forms of Ngas. Moreover, Pankshin Ngas is very much the prestige language, as seen by the difficulty of getting those in authority to admit that another speech-form exists. Nonetheless, the fact that central Ngas speakers find these variants difficult or impossible to understand, suggest that they should be treated as separate languages in reality.

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